The Consideration of a Constructivist Evaluation Framework in Adult Guidance Practice

Dr. Lucy Hearne  
University of Limerick
Abstract

This paper explores the findings of a doctoral study that examined the measurement of individual progression in the Irish Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The critical constructivist stance of the study challenges the prevalence of the positivist paradigm to evaluate longterm outcomes in adult guidance. The research highlights the divergence in the discourse of clients and practitioners with that of policymakers on the concept of progression. The outcome is the proposition of a constructivist evaluation framework for future practice (Hearne, 2010).
Introduction

This Irish study is strongly positioned within the wider international discourse on outcome evaluation in career guidance practice. The overall aim of the research was to consider the development of a best practice framework for the longitudinal tracking of individual progression in the Irish Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The AEGI was established in 2000 by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2000). Currently, there are 40 services supporting adults in their pursuit of education, training and employment (Philips & Eustace, 2009). While the sector is still relatively new, the need for appropriate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the long-term outcomes of guidance interventions for clients is paramount (National Guidance Forum [NGF], 2007a).

In the study a critical analysis of the discourse on the measurement of progression within policy, practice and research unpacked some of the prevailing issues in the field (Kincheloe, 2008). One key concern is the need for quality assurance activities to be inclusive, democratic and reflect the realities and needs of individuals and society in rapidly changing economic contexts (Killeen, 1996; Plant, 2005; Wannan & McCarthy, 2005; Young, 2000). The outcome of the research has been the proposal of a constructivist evaluation framework for adult guidance practice which recommends the involvement of all key stakeholders, including clients, to determine the range of outcomes for long-term measurement (Guba & Lincoln). Although the primary focus of this paper is the methodology and results, a synopsis of the literature will contextualise the research study.
Literature

Public policy is critical to the development of career guidance services (Watts, Sultana & McCarthy, 2010). The consolidation of lifelong guidance into lifelong learning and employment policies is viewed as a major achievement in the delivery of guidance to individuals (Council of the European Union Resolution, 2008). Lifelong guidance refers to the provision of guidance throughout the lifespan to help citizens manage transitions between education, training and work as a consequence of the changing nature of labour markets (Sultana, 2008). Adult guidance in Ireland is now firmly embedded within European and international socio-political discourses on the role of guidance to achieve lifelong learning, labour market and social equity goal. The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI), as both an object and an instrument of Irish public policy, is viewed as a support measure for Ireland’s economic development, labour market efficiency and occupational mobility (DES, 2000; NGF, 2007a; Watts, 1996).

The issue of quality assurance and quality standards in guidance has gained considerable momentum in recent years (NGF, 2007a; Sultana, 2008). Quality is measured for a number of reasons which include political motivations, securing funding, measuring learner progression, service improvement, monitoring and regulation of outcomes, strategic planning, practice/policy development and the efficient use of public funds (Plant, 2004; Scheerens, Glas & Thomas, 2003; Sultana, 2008; Watt, 1998). Recommendations to address the diffuseness of quality standard approaches include the introduction of monitoring and feedback mechanisms, criteria for the establishment of performance targets, and the involvement of users in the design, implementation and evaluation of quality assurance systems (Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2004). In addressing some of the gaps identified by the
OECD (2002) the development of an integrated framework for lifelong guidance in Ireland has been an important development, but the emergence of formal structures has so far been limited (NGF, 2007a). Although the AEGI has adopted the NGF’s Quality in Guidance (2007b) standards for its services, the Initiative still needs to move beyond the pursuit of purely tangible outcomes as a measure of individual progression and quality of provision. For example, the NGF framework is underpinned by the four outcomes of emotional, social, learning and career across the lifespan but the focus of measurement in the AEGI is overwhelmingly on indicators related to learning and career.

The issue of appropriate outcome measures reflects the current critical discourse on impact measurement and the need for consensus on specific performance indicators that reflect the progressive impact of interventions over time (Kidd, 2006; Hughes & Gration, 2006). Whilst evidence-based research, such as longitudinal studies, is viewed as crucial for evaluating effectiveness, divergence occurs in relation to the rationale for measuring outcomes and the ability to measure them adequately from the perspective of the client, practitioner and policymaker. However, current economic conditions have highlighted issues of accountability, cost and the value of publicly funded career guidance services (Hughes & Gration, 2009; Mayston, 2002; Sampson, 2009; Scheerens et al, 2003). Implicit in this is the need for career guidance services to prove their economic worth despite the lack of evidence that the effectiveness of guidance interventions has an eventual impact on labour market processes (Kidd, 2006).

Methodologically, evaluating the longterm impact for clients is challenging, costly, time consuming and may be reliant on the motivations of those involved. Progression as an outcome itself is difficult to define and measure. Even though logical-positivist models may provide
reliable quantitative indicators; the use of constructivist approaches to capture the change process in evaluation contexts is strongly advocated (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009; Killeen, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The measurement of progression requires more broad minded, bottom-up approaches that eliminate structures of domination and value democratic decision-making (Plant, 2005; Ravenhall, Hutchinson, & Neary-Booth, 2009; Young, 2000). Therefore it is necessary to dispute the dominance of the technicist, positivist production of knowledge in relation to the types of outcomes for measurement (Kincheloe, 2003). This is reflected in the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in policy discourse that only hard outcomes are relevant and meaningful in evaluation terms. The subtle, intangible outcomes such as personal development and distance travelled by individuals is largely ignored (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2008; Reid, 2006). It is strongly argued that longitudinal studies can deepen understanding of the multi-faceted and subjective nature of progression, external influences in the career development process, and the barriers that hinder adults’ education and employment progression (Bimrose et al., 2008; Bujold, 2004; Duffy & Dik, 2009; Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009). However, the methodological stance taken in this research is that in order to capture such complexities and provide a fuller account of individual progression softer outcome measures need to be included in longitudinal studies for evaluation purposes (Maguire, 2004).

**Methodological stance of research study: critical constructivism**

A critical constructivist methodology was employed to examine the dominant discourses on the meaning of progression as a construct for measurement within evaluation contexts (Foucault, 1982). This approach supports contemporary thinking on the integration of modern and post-modern theories in career guidance such as that of constructivism. Constructivism
emphasises how people construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their education and career experiences over time (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Young & Collin (2004) identify four dominant discourses in career guidance, namely the dispositions discourse, the contextualising discourse, the subjective discourse and the process discourse. The critical dimension of the study stresses the need for career practitioners and researchers to be more reflexively aware of their own and other powerful discursive practices (McIlveen & Patton, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2007; Sampson, 2009; Stead & Bakker, 2008). Critical research rejects naturalism, rationality, neutrality and individualism and argues for a dialectic between individual agency and structural determinism (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997; Rogers, 2004). Therefore, the critical tasks for the guidance researcher include identifying and challenging dominant ideology, unmasking power, contesting hegemony and practising democracy (Brookfield, 2005). In evaluation practice, power is secured through meaning as it legitimises some discursive practices, positivist, over others, constructivist (Edwards, 2008; Kincheloe, 2008). This type of political theory “consists in too often assuming as given institutional structures that ought to be brought under normative evaluation” (Young, 1990, p.3). For example, one of the prevailing assumptions in Irish adult guidance policy is that only quantitative methods can elicit data that is relevant and meaningful to demonstrate the outcomes of guidance intervention for clients. However, the conventional paradigm ignores the subjectivity and agency of clients, neglects contextual factors and presumes that progression is a linear and vertical process for all individuals. This in effect objectifies clients and reduces them to a unity that values commonness or sameness over specificity and difference (Foucault, 1982, Young, 1990). In relation to this study the undertaking has been to advance understanding by illuminating the particular phenomenon of progression from the
standpoint of clients, practitioners and policymakers within the wider social and political contexts of outcome evaluation.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Multiple methods were used for the primary and secondary data collection and the analytical phase in the study. The study was undertaken as a longitudinal single-case study situated in one AEGI service, the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults (REGSA). It is argued that case studies in guidance research can develop new theories on outcome measurement, help explain causal links in real-life interventions and illustrate certain topics in a descriptive mode through thick description (Bimrose et al., 2008; DePoy & Gilson, 2008; Yin, 2003). The three main sources of data were clients, practitioners and policymakers. As the primary source was the clients, a longitudinal dimension involved repeated measurements of the behaviour of clients from an earlier quantitative study (Hearne, 2005) during different phases in 2005, 2006 and 2009 (Taris, 2000). Following the 2005 study, five clients (two male, three female) were purposively sampled for qualitative interviews during 2006 and 2009. Four of the clients had received one-to-one guidance in 2001, the remainder in 2003. Through the use of ‘time waves’ (2005, 2006, 2009 the study captured the behaviour and attitudes of the five clients at different stages in their progression (Taris, 2000). The five clients were interviewed face-to-face in 2006 and four agreed to a follow-up telephone interview in 2009. In addition, two focus group interviews with UK adult guidance practitioners in 2006 and content analysis of a representative sample of Irish policy documents produced between 1997 and 2008 was carried out to capture multiple perspectives within the discourse. Furthermore, the fieldwork involved observation visits to two national public employment services to enlighten the researcher on
alternative tracking systems within a closely related sector. The organisations were in Ireland (i.e. FÁS) in 2006 and in Finland (Public Employment Service [PES] in 2008.

Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional discourse analytic framework was used to critically analyse the discourse of the clients, practitioners and policymakers. Postmodernist approaches such as discourse analysis enable career practitioners to expose the value systems and power relations implicit in client, practitioner and public policy discourses (Stead and Bakker, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). However, Wodak & Meyer (2009) argue that as discourses produce subjects and reality, discourse cannot be reduced to an idea of ‘ideology critique’ alone. The rationale for using discourse analysis in this study was, in suspending realism, the focus was on the constructive nature of accounts to show how the same phenomenon ‘progression’ can be described, or created, in a number of different ways in current discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The study specifically concentrated on Foucault’s (1982) theory of scientific classification to expose how government monitoring systems can decentre the subjectivities of citizens making them objects of knowledge through such regulatory practices. Nonetheless, Foucault has been criticised for his lack of clarity on how discourse actually works through individuals and his underestimation of the importance of individual agency and responsibility which are central elements in the career decision-making process (Butler, 2002; Watson, 2006).

The analytical framework involved a combination of two approaches. Initially, textually oriented discourse analysis, which is concerned with the way various forms of language work, was used on the text of the clients, practitioners, policymakers in a thematic format. Later, at the interpretative stage, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used for a synthesis of the findings from the textual data analysis and the literature review to critically analyse the discursive and social practices in the field (Fairclough, 2003: Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The discursive practices
relate to the various dissemination channels used in adult guidance such as expert groups, international policy centres, policy publications, conferences, and symposiums. The social practices relate to ideologies and hegemonic practices in current adult guidance policy and practice. Fairclough (2003:2) states that the contrast between the two analytical approaches is that textually oriented approaches are concerned with the way various forms of language work; whereas critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines the ways in which these forms of language serve social, ideological and political interests.

**Discussion of findings: constructivist evaluation framework in adult guidance**

The purpose of this study was to consider the development of a best practice framework for the longitudinal measurement of individual progression in the AEGI. This required a critical analysis of the construction of progression and the current methodological issues involved in its measurement. In the study the construction of meaning on the measurement of client progression in tracking systems highlights significant tensions in the different discourses on the longterm evaluation of outcomes in adult guidance. The overall finding of this single-case study was that greater value is placed on measuring progression into education, training and employment at the exclusion of measuring the personal development and distance travelled by the client.

From a constructivist perspective, the four dominant discourses identified by Young & Collin (2004) emerged in the study. The dispositions discourse, based on a positivist epistemology, is the dominant discourse used by Irish policy-makers to objectively quantify outcomes in adult guidance practice. In contrast, the contextualizing discourse, the discourse of subjectivity, and the process discourse were evident in the discourses of the clients and
practitioners. Specifically, in terms of the primary focus of this study, the career narratives of the five clients demonstrate how adults’ education and career progression experiences are located within the broader social, economic, historical and temporal contexts of their everyday lives. The case vignettes brought to light the subjective issues of identity, agency, and purpose in the clients’ constructions of self over time. From a critical standpoint, the individual interviews allowed for a co-construction of meaning and mutual agreements on working definitions of reality in the five clients’ career stories. The clients’ life stories verified the range of complex processes involved in an individual’s career progression that adult guidance counsellors attend to on a daily basis with clients. Bujold (2004) claims such processes include decision-making, risk-taking, overcoming obstacles, chance, and inner conflicts. As one client in the study stated regarding making a career change it involved “a fearful decision…making that change…and that change brings with it a rollercoaster of emotion, doubts and questioning”. Subjective factors such as this are neglected by evaluators and policymakers who favour objective measures of individual progression.

In definitional terms, this study clearly illustrates that progression is a subjective and context-specific construction which is extremely difficult to define, measure and capture through the conventional paradigm. Specifically, the particularity and uniqueness of the five client cases underline the difficulty of quantifying the intangible elements of personal progression. The findings corroborate McGivney’s (2002) claim that the process aspect of learning, and guidance, is overlooked in the drive for standardised and measurable parameters. In this study, progression as an individual experience was found to be non-linear, cyclical and retrospective which is in opposition to the linear and vertical process espoused by Irish policymakers and educators. From a methodological perspective, the pursuit of quantitative data in evaluation research denotes
taken-for-granted assumptions about outcomes in the discourse of funders, service providers and policymakers in adult guidance. This is indicative of the need to prove that hard outcomes are more valuable in a sector where there may be greater competition for resources and higher levels of accountability. The findings from the practitioners’ discourse indicates that the effects of cost-benefit analysis have a palpable effect on provision as practitioners need to achieve targets and prove the economic worth of guidance interventions to managers, funders and policymakers. On the issue, responses from the practitioners in the study included “outcomes are required to be tangible and linear which are related to learning goals, retention rates, achieved qualifications or employment” and government policy is “often perceived to be more to do with measurable economic benefits”. In Ireland, despite the proposals by the NGF (2007a) to include interpretive methods, quantitative data supersedes qualitative data in the AEGI. Nonetheless, observation of the Finnish PES suggests that methodological pluralism is attainable if sophisticated systems, funding and human resources are available in the sector.

One of the main objectives of this research was to use a bottom-up, democratic approach to address one of the key quality assurance issues in the AEGI, namely the longitudinal tracking of individual progression. This practice aligns itself to the model put forward in Guba & Lincoln’s (1989) constructivist evaluation framework. A comparison between the conventional (positivist) and constructivist methodology applicable to evaluation contexts is displayed in Table 1 below.

[insert Table 1]
Concerning the five items listed in Table 1 this research study ascertained the following:

1: The discourse of the clients and practitioners show that the attribution of meaning on progression is subjective and value-laden, and therefore generalisability is problematic. Specifically, the particularity and uniqueness of client’s experiences underline the difficulty of quantifying the various elements of personal progression through the conventional paradigm.

2: The conventional methodology seeks to determine what went wrong, why and who is to blame (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Guba & Lincoln argue that the conventional methodology can be an instrument for maintaining the status quo of those already in power. In adult guidance, the equation of hard outcomes with specific targets places pressure on practitioners to be accountable for their provision at the expense of all other types of softer outcomes. A constructivist methodology could help to re-dress this hegemonic practice through a democratic inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the design of evaluation methods that measure a broader range of outcomes.

3: With regard to objectivity the adoption of the constructivist paradigm in the study has shown that it is possible to create empirical data on outcomes with two of the key stakeholders (client and practitioner) for the purposes of evaluation. This empirical data can help to create both hard and soft constructs for long-term evaluation methods such as longitudinal tracking.

4: In terms of the function of evaluators, the co-construction of meaning in the dialogues with the five clients in particular elucidated the possibility for consensus on better informed and more sophisticated constructions on the meaning of progression for individuals. These constructions allow for a better understanding of the variables that need to be measured in guidance evaluation systems such as tracking mechanisms.
5: Finally, in contrast to the conventional approach where evaluation data is prescriptive, the constructivist data in this study is not to be viewed as having any special power or legitimacy. Instead, the data represents the voices of two key stakeholders which can be fed into the negotiation process in the design of evaluation systems in adult guidance practice.

Study Limitations, Contributions and Implications for Policy and Practice

Although case studies are critiqued, Yin (2003) contends that a single-case study design can be representative and revelatory in its uniqueness on a particular topic and context. In terms of generalisability, the findings of the study are not idiosyncratic and may be typical and transferable to other AEGI settings. In relation to a methodological contribution, the constructivist evaluation framework put forward in this study challenges the logical-positivist approach currently favoured by Irish policymakers. However, there are important issues to be considered in the design of longitudinal tracking systems. In Ireland, longitudinal studies may be costly, time-consuming and not a priority for guidance services stretched to cope with increasing numbers of unemployed, disaffected clients. Two limitations of longitudinal tracking that emerged in this study, and found in a similar study carried about by Bimrose et al. (2008), were the issue of human memory and client attrition. In spite of this, the range of outcomes that emerged from the primary data consolidates the need for greater intellectual and financial investment in the design and delivery of such systems in the adult guidance sector.

Conclusion

The strengths and challenges of measuring individual progression in an Irish longitudinal tracking system in adult guidance have been explicated in this paper. The study provides an
insight into the transformative processes of personal development, change and transition for clients which are neglected in current technical systems used to measure longterm outcomes. The outcome of this research has been the proposal of a constructivist evaluation framework that would involve the democratic inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the design of evaluation methods to measure a broad range of outcomes.
References


CONSTRUCTIVIST EVALUATION FRAMEWORK


CONSTRUCTIVIST EVALUATION FRAMEWORK


Author

Dr. Lucy Hearne is Co-Director of the Graduate Diploma in Guidance Counselling and the MA in Guidance Counselling, University of Limerick, Republic of Ireland. Her doctoral research was supported by an Irish Research Council Scholarship for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). Contact: lucy.hearne@ul.ie, http://www.ul.ie/education
### Table 1: Comparison of Evaluation Methodologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Positivist Methodology</th>
<th>Constructivist Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) Values and Evaluation</td>
<td>Evaluation produces data untainted by values. Values distort scientific data.</td>
<td>Evaluation produces reconstructions where ‘facts’ and ‘values’ are linked. Valuing provides basis for attributed meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Accountability</td>
<td>Accountability can always be assigned as it is determinable by cause and effect.</td>
<td>Accountability characteristic of a conglomerate of mutual and simultaneous shapers which limits possibility of praise or blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Objectivity of Evaluation Findings</td>
<td>Evaluators can position themselves to support the objective pursuit of evaluation activities</td>
<td>Evaluators are subjective partners with stakeholders in the literal creation of evaluation data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) Function of Evaluators</td>
<td>Evaluators function as communication channels through which data are passed to the relevant audiences of reports</td>
<td>Evaluators are negotiators aiming for consensus on better informed and more sophisticated constructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v) Legitimacy of Evaluation Findings</td>
<td>Scientific evaluation data have special legitimacy and special status that confer on them priority over all other considerations</td>
<td>Constructivist evaluation data have neither special status nor legitimation; they represent simply another construction in move toward consensus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Guba & Lincoln, 1989:109/110)