Evaluation as a Multi-Ontological Endeavour: A Case from the English National Program for IT in Healthcare

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Agenda: I will be discussing

• Our evaluation of electronic patients records (EHRs)
• Why evaluation is of vital importance for new IS initiatives
• How researchers informed by two theoretical perspectives - social constructionism and critical realism - might approach evaluation
• Using examples from our evaluation, I will contrast the contributions made by social constructionism and critical realism and present arguments for multi-ontological evaluation
Critical Realism (CR)

Researchers, observe and interpret the empirical, try to generalize to the actual and make inferences on the real (one a subset of the other); they report back (on outcomes, mechanisms, and structures) to the commissioners.
CR: Implications for evaluation

• Evaluation intends to reveal the reality (or rather produce best approximation of it).
• Evaluation aims to observe empirical events, form hypotheses concerning the causal powers that produce them and identify and explain the mechanisms that support such causal powers.
• Evaluation should explain technology in terms of its properties or features and how these are interpreted and used.
• Evaluation needs to seek to produce the best representation possible. Evaluators need to judge representations according to their reliability.
People engaged in the IS program of change (IS implementation, healthcare work) co-construct their reality. Researchers approach the object of study and come to share it, and therefore themselves co-construct it. They convey their interpretation of this to the commissioners.
Social Constructionism: Implications for evaluation

• Evaluation cannot “reveal” reality. The process and outcomes of evaluating co-construct reality.
• Evaluation needs to focus on how realities are brought into being, through interpretations and enactments.
• Evaluation explores technology-in-use (i.e., technology as it is performed through practices).
• There cannot be truly “independent” evaluation and “objective” evaluator positioned outside the subject of evaluation.
Conclusions

• SC and CR each sensitize evaluators to different aspects under study and invite different evaluation questions.
• An evaluation based on SC and one based on CR are significantly different in the kind of evidence and recommendations that they can provide for policy makers.
• Outputs underpinned by different ontological perspectives can offer varied ways of understanding the same phenomena. Tensions between such outputs may lead to new insights.
• Evaluators should reflect on their own philosophical positions and the role they play in their work.
• A dialogue between different positions is useful for the outcomes of evaluations and for evaluators’ processes of learning.
Thank you for listening

Please ask questions now or email me later:
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