

**Organizing and evaluating  
collaborative research. An  
anonymised case study of broken  
chains of agency**

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# Purpose of study

- Reasons for studying evaluation:
  - desire to engage reflexively with our own position / status as ‘evaluators’
  - ethnomethodological / pragmatic claim that evaluation is an indivisible component of the configuration of a joint action domain
- We argue that:
  - the two levels of evaluation can never be completely separated in practice
  - dynamics of how they interact give a window on organising more generally and enable assessment of the ‘value’ of formal evaluation

# Joint action domains

- Collaboration as a form of coping with inherent uncertainty of social action
- Social actors construct scripts that governs their joint action domain
  - more fluid and provisional than rules governing organisational domains
  - configured by negotiating orders of worth to evaluate ongoing affairs
- Tendency for collaboration to drift towards collusion as foundational crisis recedes into memory
  - tacit accords replace explicit agreements
  - tendency for criticism to degenerate into ceremony

# Evaluation

- Powerful tool for configuring joint action domains
  - Evaluation as formalised meta-practice, including critical research
  - Evaluation as formative, including routinely emerging criticism
- Subjects scripts to ‘truth tests’ and ‘reality tests’
  - *from rules to action*: conformity to rules, norms, standards, categories; test = workability (auditing and performance monitoring)
  - *from action to rules*: interpretation and revision of rules, norms, standards, categories; test = legitimacy (reviewing and (un)learning)
- Operates at different levels of reflexivity, e.g.
  - *How to accomplish present task?* (practical register)
  - *What’s the meaning of what’s happening to us?* (metapragmatic register)
    - *So you call that collaboration!?* (critical register)
    - *A collaboration is a collaboration!* (confirmatory register)

# Case description

- Internal evaluation of a collaborative research programme in UK local health services
- Part of a national programme whose ethos was 'adaptive design' in an action space between organisational and professional cultures
  - important role assigned to evaluation for organisational learning
- Proposed several 'coorientation objects' (Cooren) to open a reflexive space
  - a logic model, two facilitated workshops, two reports based on interviews and observation
- *Aimed to help configure script of a joint action domain*

# Evaluation or research?

- Contested framing of process – an evaluation or a piece of research? Process or outcomes?
  - Differently framed in different project documents
  - Differently interpreted by different members of collaboration
  - Tensions over evaluation timescale
  - Became an evaluation by convention
  - Became a piece of research by position

# Partners' positioning of evaluator

- Research leader wants to name problems in collaboration
- Other partners unclear what the purpose is
- Disagreement among partners how to use findings to shape action, due to different attitudes towards rules of joint action domains
- Long invisible in project documentation
- Evaluator appeared as interloper who couldn't see how we *really* work
- Evaluation outputs most controversial reality test

# Evaluator's positioning of self

- Early efforts to gain credibility by appearing open, flexible and useful
  - Inspiring examples from elsewhere
  - Early discoveries
  - Showing 'how it can be done'
- Resisting the tendency to get 'too academic'
- Asserting autonomy from the research leader

# Attachments to other things

- Evaluation *not* attached to official indicators
  - Evaluator chose to try to make model *self*-authorising
- Workshop discussions *detached* from project reality
  - “groups were thinking in a more abstract way”
  - “the discussion remained more general”
- Workshops attached to project management meetings to improve attendance
- Belated attachment to formal reporting procedures
- Narrow *interface* (loose coupling) between evaluator and partners

# Overall summary

- *Symbolic struggle over definition and scope of 'evaluation'*
  - *resolved by progressive decoupling of meta-practice from practice, or externalisation / de-authorisation of evaluation*
- Marginal influence on joint action domain configuration
- Partners did not attach the model to their programmes of action
- Detachment allowed evaluator to be critical
  - more critical in tone, less critical as a 'reality test'
- Detachment also liberated project managers to remain adaptive – 'liberal' in their interpretation of rules
  - some partners wanted stronger 'reality tests' – epistemological disputes and temporary strategic alliances with evaluators as parties in routinely emerging criticism
- *A form of collusion that suited most parties?*
  - *'we(you) can be more academic if you(we) don't have to react'*

# Conclusions

- The critical evaluator's dilemmas
  - What level of reflexivity is possible or permissible?
    - evaluation as practice v. meta-practice of evaluation?
  - How to make criticism actionable?
    - acceptable representations or a grasp on reality?
  - When is critical research not critical?
    - trade-off between internal and external publics?
  - What is the value of evaluation?
    - how to ensure/apportion collaborative advantages?