Abstract: The paper presents at the beginning a series of aspects on program evaluation, especially of programs belonging to the social sphere which impose the use of qualitative research methods and techniques with a view to surprise certain program effects or results that cannot be emphasized through quantitative methods. The paper also shows the importance of the individualisation, flexibility and adaptability of the services offered within educational and social work programs, fact that justifies the use of a wide range of qualitative research methods and techniques in order to obtain information and data on the qualitative characteristics useful for their improvement from the point of view of beneficiaries, of the implementer, and of other persons interested in the program. This paper is a point of view based on a series of observations concerning various practical activities developed in the social work field. These activities were carried out within a program founded by the European Union, The Operational Sector Programme for the Human Resources Development, financed by The European Social Fund, which allows the financing of certain occupational activities. A partnership between three universities in Romania (George Bacovia University of Bacău, The North University of Baia Mare and The Study Centre Brăila of Constantin Brancoveanu University) initiated a project. In the period 01.04.2009 – 31.03.2011, the three partners implement the project “European Qualifications and Standardization within the Social Work Field – Acronym Eur- As”. (PERSEUS: POSDRU/18/1.2/G/11966).

Keywords: evaluation, program evaluation, qualitative sampling, goal-free evaluation, participative survey

Introduction

Since the beginning the man included in his activities an evaluation or self-evaluation activity concerning both the obtained results and the activity itself, as the existent living conditions imposed taking some decisions according to some assessments of the information they had access to. In the modern sense, evaluation means a complex process which starts by collecting the necessary information, by using the appropriate evaluation tools; based on these tools there can be issued arguments (value judgements), reported to certain pre-established criteria and finalised by conclusions (assessments) which allow (underlie) the decision taking for achieving the set purpose.

The evaluation of social programs

The diversification of activities and of the human reasoning complexity has led to a specialisation of the evaluation process in accordance with the field where it is used. The evaluation term designates various activities, being subject of different interpretations, according to the purpose, nature, specific characteristics of the activities to be evaluated. Therefore, the evaluation principles and the criteria used are set in accordance with the purpose of the evaluation applicant.

The principles and criteria used in evaluation have to be in accordance with those used for the researched field and pre-established by the team of evaluators. There are established intermediary indicators and the essential information necessary for obtaining them in order to draw up a plan for information collection. Evaluators use the obtained data and information in order to determine the indicators allowing them to issue a series of assessments, as a result of certain value judgements based on pre-established rules and criteria, which can be used by applicants or other decision factors in taking decisions on the evaluation activity or object.

The social work field requires a series of specialised evaluations of the various constituent elements and activities. The creation of social programs has led to the necessity of their evaluation for the identification of the best practices and the measuring of their results. There have appeared models,
theories, research methods and specific data collection techniques that are used for social program evaluations.

The evaluation of social work programs represents a stage in the program, being realised at the applicant’s requirement (financers, beneficiaries, implementer, state etc) by reference to the essential elements in the program: purposes, objectives and indicators, activities, resources, beneficiaries, used intervention methodologies, monitoring, expected results. The most often solicited evaluations are for the objective meeting degree, the process of program services, the way of using resources, the efficiency and efficacy of the program, the impact of the program both at individual and at macro social level.

In the case of social work programs, an important objective is to support the improvement of the services offered in the program, to offer information based on analysis and which directs the program to more sensible areas and which were not taken into consideration, to strengthen by scientific arguments based on data and field information the efficient practices that offered quality services during the program development.

In the scientific research, besides the quantitative methods, there are used various qualitative techniques and methods in order to discover what people feel, know, think or how they wish to act according to the data obtained through observation, interviewing or through the analysis of program documents.

The qualitative methods can contribute to the issue of new science theories, to the validation and invalidation of already existing theories, to the realisation of evaluation useful for the program and for future programs with similar themes, to the solving of practical problems that can appear both during the program development and for taking good decisions in real conditions.

These techniques and methods can be used for the community development and within organisations, for the analysis of organisational policies by answering exact questions that can lead to program improvement concerning both their implementation and the results expressing the benefits and changes produced at the level of individuals and the target groups after attending the program activities, and also of the results for other interested categories (financers, local responsibility factors etc.).

Qualitative methods are not appropriate for every research as, for various purposes, questions or problems to be solved, the quantitative methods are more adequate. The strategies of a qualitative research are adequate and offer extremely useful results for solving some evaluation issues due to the fact that qualitative methods and techniques can be used for a wide range of applications.

At the beginning of 20th century, there appeared the notions of program evaluation and quality assurance. Each of them had its own objectives, methods and applications, but there was a high degree of superposition between the two domains.

Initially, program evaluation focused on the measuring of the achieved objectives and purposes, answering to questions concerning the efficiency of the program, being a summative evaluation based on experimental designs and quantitative measures of the program results. At present, the improvement of programs uses a formative evaluation, based on quantitative and qualitative methods.

Traditionally, program evaluation insisted on the results and processes of the program, used aggregate data and value judgements convenient for the chosen criteria, so that it corresponded to the aimed purposes, being useful for decision factors. On the other hand, quality assurance was centred on the individual results and processes, used individual cases and strictly-professional arguments, being useful to the involved staff.

These differences between program evaluation and quality assistance lost their importance while the functions of the two domains have extended. Quality assistance has started to pay greater attention to the results, aggregated data and information gathered in time. At the same time, program evaluation is more and more interested in the processes within the program, in aspects concerning the implementation of the information and qualitative data program.

At the beginning, program evaluation used a series of summative arguments (value judgements) in order to determine whether a program is or not efficient, and then it changed, having as purpose the improvement of program efficacy and efficiency based on formative arguments. Quality assurance and program evaluation have common ground, at present as well, due to their common purpose that of gathering useful information to be used for program improvement.
Many of the aspects concerning program operations, including implementation activities and the results for beneficiaries, can be measured in quantitative terms: it is worth while numbering the persons who enter or leave the program or other numeric aspects of the program.

However, many of the program characteristics cannot be numbered or quantified. Sometimes, it is inappropriate to use a quantitative scale of some qualitative characteristics in order to evaluate the quality of a program or the effects of a program on a beneficiary’s life quality both during the program development period and after its conclusion.

**Methods and techniques used in qualitative research**

The qualitative attributes imply a series of nuances, details and some unique facts that make a standardised measuring scale be interpreted differently by two different persons. For example, in the case of a standardised scale with levels from 1 to 5, two different persons can catalogue the effects of the participation to the same program activities on the life quality of each one, one of level 1 and the other of level 5.

The fact that there can not be determined significant differences from a statistical point of view for the comparison of effects on persons by measuring the obtained results does not mean that there are no important differences between those persons concerning these results. These results are just qualitative and not quantitative.

In order to judge the efficacy and efficiency of a program so as to take decisions on its future, it is as important to understand the stories behind the numbers, as well as the statistics represented by numbers.

The study of detailed cases can be extremely important when the obtaining of aimed results for the program improvement is evaluated. The fact that a target indicator was or was not reached provides little information that can lead to the improvement of the program. A detailed analysis can offer information on the activities which brought the aimed result and which didn’t, type of program information useful for its improvement.

Within social programs there is an individualisation concerning the beneficiaries of these programs. Individualisation means the adaptation of the services and treatments in the program activities to the individual clients’ needs. Successful educational and social programs adapted their activities and interventions to the individuals’ and/or families’ needs or specific situations.

Flexibility, adaptability and individualisation are important for education and social work programs to be effective and efficient. Strongly individualised programs function according to the assumption that results will be different in the case of different clients. Results will be different not only under the aspect of specific dimensions, but especially under the qualitative aspect, that is they will imply different qualitative dimensions for different clients. For example, open education is a model of educational processes which assumes that the results of education for each child are unique.

The qualitative research is appropriate for most common evaluation problems: the quality assurance and improvement, documentation concerning the results based on the study of individual cases, the determination of individual results, the research of program processes, the comparison of various processes, the documentation concerning the development in time and the investigation of discontinuities regarding the indicators in the information management system.

The qualitative methods are used for the improvement of the program, being directly connected to real problems, which makes them useful in the foundation and adoption of concrete solution, contributing less to the theory of social sciences and the generation of new ideas and theories. Most evaluations concerning social work programs or the social work intervention techniques and methods require qualitative research.

**Extreme or deflective cases**

A strategy for the identification of qualitative study cases is represented by the selection of extreme or deflective cases that are rich in information, being unusual or special in a certain way that offers the possibility of analysis and evaluation for the identification of good-practice models or of failures and of factors having caused these results. It is important to analyse exceptions as an explanation of extreme and unexpected cases will lead to a stronger trust in the identified central tendency.

This type of strategy has an important role in improving similar future programs offering information on the unusual conditions and the extreme results that can be relevant for the improvement of programs. The selection modality for these cases can be used both at the level of a single location where the program develops, and for programs developing in more places or geographical areas at the
same time. In order to choose extreme and deflective cases from different locations, it is necessary to establish their selection criteria.

For example, for the evaluation of children’s abandon prevention programs at a national level, there can be chosen extreme counties, those having the largest or the smallest number of entries in the children’s protection system. According to this criterion, by consulting official statistics, there can be identified the counties with the highest or the lowest rate of institutionalisation of children or of placement in the maternal assistance system. The evaluation can have as purpose the identification of the abandon prevention strategies that were followed in each of the two selected counties, the analysis of factors that influenced the obtaining of extreme results and the answers offered by the protection system to the demands of the respective social cases.

If it is difficult to select extreme cases, deflective cases are sometimes used for the evaluation of the program. These are cases that greatly vary from the average of cases and represent some unusual cases; the study of these cases is limited as there are taken into consideration unusual limits which need special conditions to manifest.

**Intensive cases**

Another sampling qualitative strategy is that of specific cases that can offer qualitative data necessary for this evaluation. It uses cases rich in interesting information, but they are extreme cases. There can be selected intensive cases, specific cases that can offer us more relevant information for the evaluated program. This sampling requires a detailed knowledge of the problems to be evaluated and an explorative documentation in the program to be evaluated, both through discussions and comprehensive interviews realised with the staff involved in the program implementation, and through observations of beneficiaries and their interaction with the staff that offer them services, interviews and even focus groups.

**Maximum variation sampling**

Some programs have a high degree of heterogeneity for various reasons, case when the best research method is the maximum variation sampling strategy that has as purpose the identification and description of good practice models that are not influenced by the great variation of the studied distribution, in order to use these positive experiences in future similar programs and in the analysis of new intervention techniques or practices. It is used in the evaluation of social programs developing in more geographical areas having a large implementation diversity.

This method is based on a matrix which needs to contain the program characteristics in accordance with the approached theme. For example, for the evaluation of programs which offer home services for disabled children, there will be created a matrix combining the possibilities existing in the development of the program in different areas, such as: rural/urban environment, type of disability, categories of services offered to children and families, the service costs, the frequency of services, the age of the children – beneficiaries etc.; then, the different cases are selected according to the achievement of the selection criteria.

It offers the possibility of an in-depth analysis of positive or negative practices or results in order to identify and describe the significant aspects of the models that are not influenced by their diversity and the differences between the development models, being very useful in the evaluation of pilot programs or social work programs where services are offered to various categories of beneficiaries, for which there are no standards for checking the quality of these services, for example in the case of home services for the elderly which have a great diversity in various geographical areas, many of them developing according to the existent resources, to the program vision and philosophy, to community needs and to the level of knowledge of the staff involved. The qualitative research based on the maximum variation sampling strategy together with the analysis of the existing practices by using the case study method can represent an important documentation stage in the approach of identifying the good practice models necessary for the elaboration of minimum working standards.

**Homogeneous sampling**

Another sampling technique used in qualitative research is that of homogeneous samples, which include similar cases in order to obtain a detailed characterisation of qualitative subgroups from the structure of the investigated population, being useful for the programs destined to various categories of beneficiaries. It can be used in evaluating an appreciative parental education program intended for various categories of parents by creating a sample made up of more homogeneous subgroups.

In this case, there can be selected subjects from each category of beneficiaries which will allow the organisation of focus groups to catch the perceptions of those taking part in the activities of
appreciative parental education groups for each category of beneficiary, the analysis of similar and
different aspects in the practice of developed courses, the emphasis of the preparation effects on
parents participating at these training and personal development programs.

**Typical cases**

Another type of qualitative sampling is that using typical cases. Their selection is done
according to the distribution of cases, in order to describe the characteristics of normal studied cases.
The typical selected cases are characterised by a high frequency in the studied population. The
selection can be done according to the data offered by surveys, demographic analysis of environments
or other statistical analysis which allow the identification of average cases or by using the consent in
choosing them according to the recommendations of the persons involved in the program
implementation or of the key persons who know the program. These cases offer rich information on
the opportunities to describe and explain what happens in the program.

**Critical cases**

or qualitative evaluations of social programs there can be used samples formed of critical cases
as they can identify a dramatic situation, its causes and importance. This sampling strategy can be used
when there are not enough resources to evaluate the program, opting for the study of a single critical
case, considering that it offers enough information on the program development.

The evaluation results based on critical cases may represent the basis of major changes of the
proposed interventions and their argumentation. This analysis model can reveal a series of causes that
can explain the failures of some social programs since the beginning of their implementation. The
information obtained by identifying and analysing some critical cases allow the evaluation of
practices, contexts and processes that condition and favour the appearance of these critical cases
which can lead to changes in the program in order to counteract the negative causes and effects
emphasised by the analysis of other cases.

**Chain sampling (the snow ball technique)**

Another sampling technique used in qualitative research is the chain sampling, the selection
method of cases based on the recommendations of previously investigated subjects; each investigated
person recommends other persons - potential clients. This technique is used when there are no data bases
with the names of the persons from the target population, when the studied phenomenon has a great
variability or when the researched behaviour requires a certain strategy
of avoiding the identity display.

**Cases that confirm or infirm hypotheses**

A characteristic is represented by the cases that confirm or infirm the evaluation hypotheses
and appear unexpectedly during data collection. The qualitative sampling strategies based on these
cases represent an opportunity to acquire new information that can strengthen the credibility of
evaluation results.

In the practice of project implementation there are different interpretations of the way the
program functions, of the objectives meeting degree and the identified needs meeting degree, expressed
by different opinions of the various categories of persons involved in the project development. The
choice, analysis and presentation of cases that confirm and infirm hypotheses are extremely important as
they are used for the application of the evaluation conformity criterion, to check whether the program
performances are in accordance with the standards established in the initial proposal of the intervention
plan allowing the check-out of the information supplied by beneficiaries, key-informants or by the
specialists involved in the program by the triangulation of data sources and the analysis of sample cases.

**Other methods and techniques used in qualitative research**

The classical evaluation model is based on judgements (arguments) based on the aimed
purposes, that is it measures the degree to which the program or intervention clearly and explicitly
achieved the objective. The modern alternative is represented by the goal-free evaluation.

The classical model focused on the objectives of the program - services that should be
supplied and the results of the program. Through the modern approach that does not follow strictly the
program purposes there can be obtained a series of interesting results concerning the program itself,
the used interventions and the implementation of the program.

On principle, an evaluation that is not based on the program purposes means the carrying out
of field and data collection work aiming at a large area of present effects or results, by comparison the
results to the actual needs of the program participants. The evaluator needs to avoid any contact with
the program purposes, any discussions on these purposes, any leaflets, information and proposals on
the program, having as purpose the research of observable results and the effects of participants’ needs.

A reason justifying the use of qualitative methods for program evaluation refers to the fact that these strategies can be directly perceived and experimented both by those implementing and running the program and by those participating to it. The personal nature of qualitative research is strongly connected to their openness, which is to a closer contact of the evaluator with the program, with the program staff, but also with its beneficiaries.

The most used qualitative research is the appreciative survey which is noticed even within the organisational development where it is centred on the importance of the goods and relations in the organisation to the detriment of the problem solving. The appreciative survey is a particular process in the qualitative research, inside an organisation, which implies a dialogue between participants based on the interviewing of each person by the other person, fact that will lead to a better knowledge and collaboration in the organisation.

This survey has been criticised as being unbalanced through the emphasis only of positive aspects discouraging all criticism, including the constructive one. The appreciative survey includes aspects and actions in particular development framework that guides the evolution and analysis of the interaction group.

The qualitative questionnaire is itself a form of intervention due to its questions and the guide frame used for running the analysis. Thus, research and action are completely integrated. Generally, the forms of participative surveys seek to integrate research and action.

The popularity of interviews brings into discussion this method as a credible qualitative research method due to the fact that many interviews are extremely badly realised. Moreover, due to the avalanche of mass media interviews, the majority of population is not capable of making a distinction between an interview made by a specialist in social sciences and an interview realised by the host of a TV or radio or other media talk show, fact that leads to inconclusive answers to the specialised interviews.

The interviewing of persons aims at getting information that cannot be obtained by simple observation. It has no importance if the observation data are desirable or credible; what matters is the fact that no feelings, thoughts, intentions or behaviours manifesting at a certain moment can be observed. The asked questions need to refer to aspects concerning the questioned person.

The main purpose of interviews is to allow us to know and look at the aspects that have some interest for us from the other’s perspective. All qualitative interviews need to begin from the assumption that the others’ perspective has meaning, can be known and explicitly described.

The interviews used in evaluating programs aim at catching the perspectives of the participants in the program, of its staff and of other persons associated in different ways with the program (financers, local authorities etc.). Evaluators can amplify the use of data and qualitative information generating certain results of a high quality and extremely relevant. For this, evaluators need to learn to listen carefully when well informed persons (who can offer useful information) speak.

Any evaluator or interviewer must handle the challenge to make it possible for the interviewed person to introduce him in his world to better understand his thoughts, feelings, intentions and behaviours. This aspect is extremely important as the quality of the obtained information greatly depends on how the interviewer integrates into the world of the interviewed.

There are three common ways of obtaining qualitative information by using the interview method:

- The informal conversational interview, which consists in a series of spontaneous questions generated by the natural course of the interaction. It offers a maximum of flexibility to follow information in any direction that seems appropriate according to what comes from the discussion.
- The directed interview implies a series of aspects that are previously examined with each respondent in order to assure the integral browsing of the relevant topics list.
- The standardised interview consists in a set of questions carefully ordered and arranged so that each respondent read the set of questions exactly in the same order, and the questions are expressed as similarly as possible. This type of interview is used when the lightest variation in the questions is important.

These three types of design for an interview are different in the questions that are chosen and standardised before the interview. Each type of interview has both advantages and disadvantages. Thus, the informal conversation has the advantage of flexibility and spontaneity, but depends on the
interviewer’s conversation skills and more time is necessary to obtain systematic information. The advantage of the directed interview is the maximum use of the limited time in order to obtain useful information, thus this type of interview is extremely useful in leading focus groups. The weakness of standardised interviews is the fact that it does not allow evaluator to follow topics or subjects that were not foreseen in the initial interview; even more a structured interview does not allow the extension of the research to all the observed differences and circumstances.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, much useful information for program evaluation cannot be obtained by using only simple and/or aggregate quantitative information or data. Therefore, it is necessary to use methods and techniques specific for the qualitative research (surveys, interviews etc) in order to gather information and knowledge concerning the qualitative attributes of programs, but also the points of view (perspectives) of participants, implementators and of the other persons connected to the program.

**Supplementary Recommended Readings**