

The democratic potential of realist evaluation: examples of social work research and interventions to overcome the non-take-up of rights

Didier Boost, Elien Mathys & Peter Raeymaeckers

SESSION - B.1. Social work and justice.

Welfare states are built on the notion of social rights related to social security, employment protection, housing, education, health and social care (Dean, 2015). By safeguarding these aspects of human life, an acceptable standard of living is considered non-negotiable and guaranteeably through social policies and social work practice (Hasenfeld and Garrow, 2012). In reality, however, there is a clear discrepancy between the promise of social rights and the degree to which these are realized for everyone. This situation, where individuals do not receive the rights they are entitled to, is defined as non-take-up (Van Oorschot, 1998). Non-take-up creates unjustifiable disparities between citizens and strongly undermines the ambition to provide a safety net for those in need (Van Oorschot, 1998). Meanwhile, the architecture of contemporary welfare states is changing. On the one hand, to better adapt to local challenges and communities, the responsibilities of social policy are increasingly transferred to the lower scales of government (Kazepov, 2010). On the other hand, there is an increasing emphasis on collaboration and networks between social workers and professionals from both non-profit and public organizations in order to provide answers to complex needs of vulnerable target groups (Allen, 2003).

In this presentation, we present results of evaluation research conducted in social work interventions at the local level oriented at increasing the non-take up of rights. Through discovering 'mechanisms' and developing a 'theory of change' this approach aims to underpin practice with a more theoretical language on how change comes about (Houston, 2010). Combined with a multi-stakeholder design that consciously includes vulnerable citizens, who are seldomly heard in non-take-up research (Cortis, 2012), we argue that realist evaluation holds an important democratic potential to discuss how social justice can be realized in practice.

More specifically, we present the main findings of two research projects adopting this approach. We discuss the mechanisms through which interventions contribute to overcoming the non-take-up of rights. The first project focuses on integrated rights-based practices and argues the importance of proactively shifting the responsibility to realize rights. In the second project we elaborate on the importance of practices of informality adopted by community workers for developing advocacy strategies in close collaboration with vulnerable target groups to influence policy makers.