

Evaluation as advocacy.

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ABSTRACT

The argument advanced in this article is that advocacy in evaluation is inevitable. This is so when advocacy is understood not as program partisanship or contaminating bias, but rather as a value commitment to a particular regulative ideal (of rational decision making, interpretive meaning, community activism). The regulative ideal for evaluation advanced in this discussion is a commitment to democratic pluralism. These ideas are illustrated and substantiated with three case examples.

The question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side are we on? (Becker, 1967, p. 239).

INTRODUCTION

In their work today, social program evaluators are inevitably on somebody's side and not on somebody's else side. The sides chosen by evaluators are most importantly expressed in whose questions are addressed and, therefore, what criteria are used to make judgments about program quality. I acknowledge that many evaluation practitioners intentionally endeavor not to take sides, but rather to equitably advance the interests of multiple stakeholders. Indeed, I actively support this stance and argue for it later in this article. Even so, I would also maintain that major contemporary evaluation approaches--in theory and in practice--are importantly distinguished by whose questions and criteria are adopted. Evaluation in the grand experimenting tradition of Campbell (1971) characteristically seeks to address policy makers' questions about outcome attainment, accountability, cost-benefit effectiveness. Utilization-oriented evaluation as conceptualized and promoted most vigorously by Patton (1996) is pivotally focused on addressing the information needs of identified, committed evaluation users, who are most often onsite program administrators and other decision makers, such as agency board members.

Stake's (1995) case study responsive evaluation seeks holistic understanding of contextualized meanings, and explicitly grounds evaluative judgments in the criteria of stakeholders closest to the program, notably onsite program directors and staff. Scriven's (1993) comprehensive logic for evaluation as a transdiscipline is rooted in the premise that evaluation should serve the needs of program consumers. So, in their orientation around the concerns and issues of selected stakeholders, the fundamental determinate frameworks of social program evaluation are themselves interested rather than neutral or dispassionate frameworks.

Even so, the very notion of evaluation as advocacy invokes shudders of distaste and horror among most members of today's evaluation community, theorists and practitioners alike. For evaluation's founding vision was to rationalize social policy making by generating disinterested scientific information about policy options, possible only with an

accompanying commitment to objectivity and value-neutrality. Advocacy is the antithesis of fair evaluation, according to these founding visions and ideals. To advocate is to espouse and promote a partisan belief or stance, to embrace and advance a cause. To evaluate is, according to tradition, to judge fairly the quality, merit, and worth of a program based on impartial, scientifically gathered information.

Even in this pluralistic, postmodern era--where multiple frameworks for social inquiry compete for our attention and allegiance and where truth is at best indeterminate and certainty at best ambiguous--the notion of evaluation as advocacy still rings as exquisite heresy to many ears. I believe this is so for two intertwined reasons. First, for many, the construct of advocacy in evaluation contexts is inherently linked to the program being evaluated, such that to assume the role of advocate is to become a friend of the program. As a friend, one's ability to make a fair, impartial judgment about program quality is seriously compromised. And this constitutes the second, more fundamental concern--the construct of advocacy immediately raises the many specters of bias, cooptation, and contamination that haunt the corners and byways of evaluation design and implementation. Guided by our founding ideals, many of our methodologies have become exemplars of how to control for bias in real world, politicized settings. Even tempered by more realistic visions of our influence (Weiss, 1991), evaluators still aspire to help rationalize policy making with impartial scientific information. Independence not cooptation, disavowal of bias not partisanship, neutrality not advocacy remain the dominant doctrines of our profession.

The premise of this paper is that advocacy is an inevitable part of evaluative inquiry, and indeed of all social inquiry today. The important question then becomes not, should we or should we not advocate in our role as evaluators, but rather what and whom should we advocate for? I will argue herein that advocacy is best understood as the absence of value neutrality and that advocacy most importantly implies an explicit value commitment rather than a partisan stance toward a particular program or an alignment with a particular stakeholder group. I will also argue for a specific value commitment to democratic pluralism in evaluation, although the very essence of pluralism recognizes the legitimacy of other value stances. Through three brief case examples, I will illustrate how an explicit stance of advocacy in evaluation still enables, even enhances fair judgments, while reframing traditional meanings and concerns about bias and cooptation.

Advocacy as an Inevitable Part of Evaluation

I find it aesthetically pleasing and methodologically enabling to honor personal experience and post-modern insight, to recognize multiple realities and constructivist knowledge-but at such a cost! Obscuring the lines between fact and fiction, between evidence and opinion, we discover ... [that] advocacies, our own as well as those of our sponsors, no longer can be expected to be caught in the sieve of objectivity. Honoring personal construction of knowledge leads to denial that anything important can be known that is not value-laden and advocative. (Stake, November 1995, p. 1, emphasis in original).

Indeed, it is the philosophical recognition that all scientific claims to know are inescapably imbued with the theoretical and value predispositions of the inquirer that underlies the inevitable strands of advocacy in evaluation. As supported broadly if not universally by philosophers of science today, an inquirer cannot stand outside her/his own perceptual frame (comprised of experiences, interests, theoretical understandings, values and beliefs) and offer an unfiltered (objective) view of the world (Bernstein, 1983; Phillips, 1987). Rather, we can only see from within our own perceptual frames which, in turn, color what it is we see. Among the hues and tints that color the object of our gaze are our ideals and ideologies. So, wholly disinterested knowledge claims are unattainable.

For many evaluation theorists and practitioners, relinquishing the possibility of complete objectivity is a matter of old certainties unthroned but not abolished (Cook, 1985), and objectivity remains a vital regulative ideal (Smith, 1990) for evaluative inquiry. For other evaluation theorists and practitioners, a belief in objectivity has been replaced by an honoring of "personal experience multiple realities and constructivist knowledge" (Stake, November 1995, p. 1). This view that meaningful social knowledge is constructed invokes a regulative ideal of holistic understanding (Wolcott, 1990). For still other evaluation theorists and practitioners, a commitment to objectivity has been replaced by a stated commitment to a different guiding principle--to social justice (House, 1990, 1993), to the good society and to practical wisdom (Schwandt, 1989, 1992, 1996), to democratic dialogue and deliberation (Mathison, in press), to empowerment (Fetterman, 1994; Whitmore and Kerans, 1988).

The point here is that all of these alternatives to complete impartiality are value-based. Regulative ideals are a form of value commitments. They privilege the stakeholder audiences who share those ideals and they summon the methodologies that enable their realization. And whether these methodologies include multi-method triangulation to control for the bias of social desirability or active stakeholder participation in instrument design and data gathering to promote empowerment, the resulting knowledge claims are imbued with the values advanced by the inquirer's regulative ideals.

Advocacy as Explicit Value Commitment

By understanding advocacy as the absence of value neutrality and the presence of a particular value commitment, the oft-assumed automatic link between advocacy and program support is broken. A particular value commitment could imply a stance of program support and friendship, but it could also imply a stance of neutrality or even skepticism toward program intentions and activities.

The more significant connection between advocacy and program concerns the different views of social problems and social change that are invoked by different value commitments in evaluation. These different views are often embedded in our different methodologies and thereby constitute hidden value stances. As recognized as long as two decades ago,

evaluation research may validate a particular view of social problems by emphasizing certain outcomes as opposed to others. . . evaluation research methodology contributes to

the definition of social problems; virtually all technical issues have an ideological side. (Berk & Rossi, 1976, p. 339)

Some evaluation methodologies leave unchallenged program developers' assumptions and stances about social problems and social change and thereby implicitly support these assumptions and stances. Many social programs, for example, locate the essence of the "problem" within the individuals in need and offer education or skill building as strategies for "remediating these deficits." Other programs locate the essence of the "problem" in surrounding social and institutional structures and therefore seek changes in these, characteristically, through an infusion of resources. Some programs rest on established social scientific theories of behavioral or structural change. Other programs assume that "a valid knowledge base from which to initiate social change is that which originates in the lived experiences of those involved rather than in the annals of the social scientific community" (VanderPlaat, 1995, p. 83). Evaluation of these different programs can challenge their underlying assumptive and value structures or not. Either way, evaluation importantly influences our conceptualization of social problems, social interventions, and social change.

These influences and their accompanying value stances too often remain masked by our methodologies. It is time to unmask them. It is time for evaluators to explicitly state the value commitments, programmatic assumptions, and political stances that underlie their chosen methodology. It is time for evaluators to claim and proclaim their advocacy. To do otherwise is to be disingenuous, even deceptive to our audiences. It is to don a mantle of impartiality that is today tattered and threadbare, that no longer shields our inquirer selves from the prejudicial influences of values and beliefs. It is to deny the value dimensions of our methodologies and the regulative ideals that frame and guide them.

Committing to Democratic Pluralism

The view of advocacy as value commitment implies that the superordinate principles for thinking about evaluation are no longer our cherished methodologies nor even our self-critical questions about our role in the world, but rather the socio-political issues of evaluation audience and interests (Heshusius, 1994; House, 1990, 1993; Schwandt, 1989, 1992; VanderPlaat, 1995). Whose interests should evaluation advance? Which values should evaluation represent?

My response to these critical questions follows the lead of democratic evaluation (MacDonald, 1978), fourth-generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), morally engaged evaluation (Schwandt, 1989, 1992), participatory evaluation (Reiben, 1996; Weiss & Greene, 1992; Whitmore & Kerans, 1988) and other traditions in broadly viewing evaluation as a force for democratizing public conversations about important public issues. Evaluation, that is, should work to enable full participation of all legitimate stakeholder interests in the conversation and in all relevant decisions about a particular program's merit and worth, with democratic principles of equality, fairness, and justice as guides to both the conversation and the decision-making. This commitment to democratic pluralism constitutes the regulative ideal for this vision of evaluation, its essential value commitment.

In striving toward this commitment, evaluators today should make special efforts to seek out and include those voices and perspectives that are often overlooked or excluded from the evaluative conversation--because they are not invited, because their views are unpopular, or because they don't have the language or verbal fluency to be heard. Often excluded are the least enfranchised groups and individuals within a program setting, who are usually the intended participants in a social program, their families, and their surrounding communities. Democratic, pluralistic evaluation should insure that these and other excluded stakeholder interests are advanced toward enabling their stronger and eventually fully equitable -presence and voice within the larger conversation (House, 1990). Advancing these interests must not be done, however, at the expense of other interests, for that would not be consonant with the regulative ideal of pluralism. Moreover,

not only does every position have limits, but all positions have the possibility to enhance our understanding of the social world. To privilege any one position or to entirely ignore others renders our understanding of the social world to be even more incomplete than it necessarily must already be. (VanderPlaat, 1995, p. 91)

With a view of evaluation as a force for democratizing public conversations about important public issues, the evaluator assumes the responsibilities of a public scientist. She aspires to actively participate and be engaged in-not distanced from-public affairs, and she strives to contribute to-not remain insulated from-discussions and actions about public issues. Thus the border between evaluation and program need not be tall and strong; neither need protection from the other. In particular, the evaluation does not need protection from threats of program bias or partisanship, because democratic, pluralistic evaluation signifies a value commitment to full and fair stakeholder participation in decision making, not program partisanship. So, evaluation should establish open borders with the program being evaluated, borders that invite multiple crossings and visits. In this way, evaluation and program can work in concert to help democratize the conversation about equitable health care for the elderly, about generational and spatial destitution, about kids killing kids, about a safe and adequate food supply.

What follows are three brief case illustrations of this view of evaluation as advocacy. Particular attention is paid in these illustrations to how this view reframes issues of bias and partisanship, for these remain the associative specters of advocacy.

Cases Examples Of Evaluation as Adovacy

I. A participatory evaluation. Pursley (1996) conducted a participatory evaluation of a network of four family support centers located in an upstate New York city. Like many family support programs across the country, these centers operate from within an empowerment philosophy as they seek to enable poor families to move toward economic self-sufficiency and personal fulfillment. The network had received a 3-year grant from a major foundation to enhance several of their individual programs (for example, parenting education) and to strengthen their collaboration as a network. The participatory evaluation covered the first year of the grant and addressed both implementation and

outcome questions. Major audiences of the evaluation were the center and network directors and staff, as well as the funding foundation.

The participatory framework for this evaluation was implemented primarily by structuring the evaluation process to include as partners program participants and staff. Participants, direct service staff, and program administrators worked collaboratively with the evaluator to develop the evaluation questions and instruments, to collect and analyze the data, and to contribute their voices to interpretive meanings and action implications. As intended, this participatory evaluation blended with the empowerment rhythms and norms of the centers; it actually offered another opportunity for participant (and staff) personal development and empowerment. In this way, the borders between program and evaluation in this context were open, and crossings were encouraged.

This participatory evaluation, and indeed participatory evaluation more generally, well matches the portrait of evaluation as a value commitment to democratic pluralism that was sketched above. The explicit value commitment was one of inclusion, of broadening stakeholder participation in processes and decisions, in conversations and actions related to center programs. Special attention in this participatory evaluation was paid to enabling the participation of program participants and lower-level staff. From meaningful participation, these stakeholder interests were importantly legitimated and advanced.

Are the findings of Pursley's participatory evaluation of this family support network therefore irreparably biased and lacking important credibility and practical value?

* If one means methodologically biased, in the sense of social desirability, non-random response sets, and multicollinearity, well perhaps, but probably no more or less than most other community-level evaluations.

* If one means biased in the sense of favoring one particular viewpoint, the answer is no. While Pursley's participatory evaluation intentionally advanced the interests of program participants and paraprofessional staff, this was done to broaden the interests that were being included in the conversation, to enable a more pluralistic conversation rather than a more exclusive one.

* If one means biased in the sense of program partisanship, again the answer is no. Participatory evaluation does not set out to demonstrate program effectiveness, even when the program shares key values with the evaluation--as was the case in Pursley's case example. Rather, participatory evaluation sets out to engage stakeholders in a process of reflectively, critically, and pluralistically examining the meaningfulness of their own program and its intentions and activities.[1]

So, Pursley's evaluation was importantly biased only in the sense of fulfilling its explicit value commitment to democratic pluralism. The evaluative claims generated in this case example were effectively multi-interested. The claims were integrally connected to--rather than distanced from--stakeholder experiences, meanings, and actions. They advanced participant interests when these interests are usually absent, while they also encompassed the interests of other stakeholders, including remote program funders. In significant ways then, these evaluative claims are less partisan than claims based on unilaterally

determined program standards and criteria, that is, based on just one set of stakeholder or program interests.

Pursley's participatory evaluation was further successful in forging some linkages among diverse stakeholder interests toward shared understandings and collective actions. Public conversations about family support programs were illuminated and informed by this evaluation--conversations in this particular context and beyond. These kinds of linkages and connections illustrate the potential of participatory evaluation--and the advocacy dimension of evaluation more broadly--to serve as a bridge between the specific program site and the larger public conversation. Across this bridge information flows in both directions, and social change is thereby viewed as a reciprocal activity requiring both individual and systemic agency (VanderPlaat, 1995, pp. 88-89).

II. A cluster evaluation. The second example is an early cluster evaluation of 11 public policy education projects, sited in the domains of agriculture and natural resources and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Hahn, Greene, & Waterman, 1994). As developed by the Kellogg Foundation, cluster evaluation is intended to aid and support member projects in their own evaluation and program activities by providing individual- and cluster-level evaluative assistance, data gathering, and feedback. To help fulfill these roles, we as cluster evaluators conducted semi-annual "networking conferences" for project personnel from all projects in the cluster. These conferences engendered ongoing dialogue among the program people and the evaluators, well capturing an open border approach to evaluation.

Were we as cluster evaluators thereby doomed to suffer charges of program partisanship? Can cluster evaluators work closely with program personnel and still render a fair judgment about program merit and worth?

As cluster evaluators with a commitment to pluralism, to broadening the conversation, the fairness of our judgments rested on our success in including multiple interests and promoting equity of voice, not on our impartiality. In our cluster evaluation, I believe that it was precisely our stance of advocacy as a value commitment to pluralism that engendered fair and critical judgments about project progress, judgments that importantly redirected some project energies and resources upon several occasions. As cluster evaluators we were quite far removed from the intended participants of public policy education programs. We worked with program staff who educated others about how to involve people in conversations and actions about public policy issues (like clean groundwater and a safe food supply). With our commitment to pluralism, however, we were well positioned to attend to and advance the interests of the least enfranchised in this context, namely, citizens who felt neither informed about nor empowered to be participants in public discussions about public issues. Moreover, the open border character of cluster evaluation was essential to our ability to effectively advance these interests. Two specific examples from our cluster evaluation work follow.

1. During the first year of our 4-year cluster evaluation, we observed a differential materials versus events emphasis across our [11] projects. Some projects were initiating

their programmatic efforts through the development of extensive materials, like handbooks on how to do public policy education and white papers about specific policy issues. Other projects were initiating their programs through events, like public debates on specific issues and town meetings called to surface environmental concerns in that community. Both by design and in implementation, the events attracted and involved a broader range of people than the materials could reach. During a first year networking conference, we shared this observation with project personnel and invited discussion about it with questions like, "What is the role of issue expertise in public policy education?" and "What is the appropriate balance of content and process?" and "Who should be the primary audiences of these public policy education programs?" From these discussions, at least two of the materials-oriented projects redirected their project efforts toward implementing more events that would engage "ordinary citizens" in policy education and action.

2. Second and relatedly, toward the end of our evaluation, we developed a typology of public policy education philosophies and practices: imparting information, encouraging dialogue, and facilitating citizen empowerment. This typology represented several years of engagement with our cluster projects as well as our own advocacy stance regarding the importance of addressing the interests of the least enfranchised. Again, we shared this typology with project personnel and catalyzed extended discussion about it. And again, several projects subsequently redirected their efforts to try to move beyond "imparting information" to the next level of "encouraging dialogue."

Like Pursley's participatory evaluation (1996), our cluster evaluative claims can be considered relatively unbiased by partisanship, as well as fair and potentially effective, precisely because we adopted an advocacy stance of pluralism. Although we worked closely with program people, our evaluation/value agenda was not to promote their specific programs or ideas about public policy education, but rather to include multiple, diverse voices in our understanding of program and policy issues alike. Our evaluative claims can be considered fair because they were multi-interested, advancing the interests of stakeholders both present and absent. And they can be considered potentially effective because the open border, dialogic character of cluster evaluation enabled them to be heard, debated, internalized, and acted upon.

III. An advocacy evaluation. This third example illustrates the vital role that evaluator as advocate for pluralism can play in politically contentious evaluation contexts.

The context involves an innovative science reform recently implemented at a high school in New York State. In tandem with national trends, this program emphasizes active student problem solving, course content that is relevant to students' lives, course goals that prioritize the understanding of scientific principles and the development of scientific reasoning over the mastery of specific facts, "authentic assessment" procedures, and cooperative learning within heterogeneous learning groups and classes. The program was initiated and developed by the local science faculty, with the blessing of the district administration. Outspoken parents and community members, however, including the local school board, are sharply divided in their views of the program. The major issue of contention is the de-tracking program change from two college preparatory tracks

(regular and honors) to just one, in which students with varied achievement levels and interests are grouped together. Opponents of this change are concerned that capable students will not be sufficiently challenged in their science courses and will not, in fact, learn enough to compete successfully for entrance to selective colleges. Supporters underscore the educational and social benefits to minority and majority students alike from the increased racial, ethnic, and gender diversity that accompanies heterogeneous grouping by achievement.

The least enfranchised stakeholders in this context are clearly the students, followed by their parents and concerned community members, although there are considerable disparities in power within the latter. In this scenario, however, what it means to advance the interests of the students is not clear, because the basic conflict here is precisely about what constitutes priority student interests. Will students be best served by being offered the opportunity to learn the most science, perform well on standardized science tests, and compete more effectively for entrance to colleges of their choice? Or will they be best served by being offered the opportunity to learn about people different from them and about cooperation in exchange for learning somewhat less science? Or will students be served best by being allowed to choose which of these alternatives they prefer? Can high school students make these choices wisely for themselves?[2]

Positioning the evaluator as disengaged and removed from the core value conflicts in this context (as recommended by a value stance of objectivity) would miss the point. Data would be offered on the quality of the science program, probably even using a range of program criteria. But, stakeholders would still be left without the means to grapple with their multiple, contesting interpretations of these data. This kind of evaluation might just intensify the controversy. Positioning the evaluator as the judge of the merit and worth of this new science program (as recommended particularly by Scriven under a value stance of consumer-oriented objectivity) would invest him/her with extraordinary authority and responsibility. On the basis of which program standards would this evaluator base his/her judgments, and whose interests would be thereby advanced?

So the evaluator in this contentious context is perhaps best positioned as an explicit advocate for pluralism, for insuring that the continuing debate include multiple voices and perspectives. In this way, the evaluative data gathered are directly connected to, rather than intentionally distant from the central value conflicts at hand. And the evaluator fulfills his role as public scientist by providing opportunities for open, inclusive dialogue among diverse stakeholders about the meanings and action implications of evaluation findings and claims. In this contentious context, open dialogue toward increased understanding of opposing views by diverse stakeholders is a promising approach to effectively promote and advance the interests of students. Through such dialogue and continuing public conversations, the evaluator assumes responsibility but not total authority for making fair judgments of program quality. And these judgments are fair and unbiased because they are multi-interested not because they are impartial.[3]

Reprise

When advocacy is understood as the absence of value neutrality and the presence of a particular value commitment—which itself is partly constituted by methodological regulative ideals—then advocacy is recognized as an inevitable dimension of evaluative inquiry. Issues of bias accompanying advocacy are not automatically challenges of program partisanship, but rather become reframed according to the particular value commitment made. When the commitment is to democratic pluralism, as illustrated in this paper, evaluative claims become biased to the extent that they narrowly rather than broadly represent multiple stakeholder interests. Moreover, close and engaged interactions of the evaluator with program stakeholders—an open borders approach—can significantly aid in fulfilling this commitment fairly and effectively, in contrast to the oft-assumed linkage between engagement and partiality.

We may well want to choose a word other than advocacy to describe this inevitable value dimension of evaluative inquiry, for advocacy's heretical connotations will surely persist. Stance? Belief system? Ideals? Whatever we call it, it is past time to acknowledge and claim it.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a panel on Advocacy and Evaluation at the first International Evaluation Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, November 1995. My thanks to Bob Stake for envisioning and organizing the panel and to Blaine Worthen for encouraging this particular publication.

1. Clearly, critique can be obstructed by feelings of loyalty and connection. But, it can also be clouded by stances of distance and detachment. In participatory evaluation, it is in the diversity of interests coming together to share the authority and responsibility for critique that the power to overcome obstructions is envisioned.

2. Also of direct relevance here are the implications of these curricular alternatives for the kind of community and society in which we choose to live. What are the moral issues (Schwandt, 1989) involved in these choices?

3. In truth, our efforts to implement this vision of evaluation as advocacy for pluralism in this contentious context have not yet been very successful. Our efforts at public dialogue have consistently underestimated the rancor of some of the outspoken contenders. Our public forums can be better characterized as shouting matches. As well, in our efforts to position ourselves as advocates for pluralism, we have garnered no allies and are perceived as "the other side" by most. Nonetheless, we remain committed to this advocacy stance—because we believe it can contribute significantly to this context—and continue to hope that we are learning valuable lessons for its future implementation.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Greene

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