

Overcoming our Negative Reputation: Evaluation Becomes Known as a Helping Profession

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INTRODUCTION

If I were to suddenly awaken in the year 2010, how would I describe the field of evaluation as I would like it to be? This is one of the main questions asked by the organizers of this special issue. I have come to believe it is an interesting and important question for us to ponder at this time. It has caused me considerable reflection and stimulated a stream of futuristic thoughts about our field. As I cull my musings, I see principle themes on evaluation theory, methods, ethics, professional issues and the like. I have decided to resist the strong temptation to take up one of those central topics one more time in this context. Rather, I see this volume as an opportunity to explore an issue that has bothered me for some time, and that seems particularly troublesome for some of my students who are about to embark upon a career in evaluation in the 21st century. The issue to which I am referring is the negative reputation of evaluators outside of our profession. After exploring this issue in some detail, I will share my vision of a picture-perfect future for evaluation in 2010—*Evaluation Becomes Known as a Helping Profession*.

REPUTATION OF EVALUATORS

One reaction to this issue of reputation might be—who cares what others think about our noble profession? For those well established in their careers, this might even be a personally healthy response. After all, we know evaluation is a very important profession and that most evaluators are competent, ethical, well intentioned, and the like. However, I would argue that the failure to concern ourselves with our reputation outside the “evaluation in-group” could be detrimental to future evaluation practice and the advancement of our field.

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I start by describing the context in which my thoughts and observations about the reputation of evaluators have developed. First, my views are colored by my experiences conducting evaluations across a range of workplaces (in profit and nonprofit organizations), in mental health clinics, in health care settings including HMOs, in community-based organizations, in schools, and in research and university settings. Much of this work has involved supervising evaluation teams commissioned to do external evaluations in the western region of the United States. Second, my view is colored by my experience developing graduate programs to train students to become program evaluators in similar settings. I start with this context because I expect that my experiences do not generalize to all program evaluation settings. However, I believe, based on discussions with other practicing evaluators, that my views and experiences are not uncommon, and that they do generalize to some degree to other contexts and parts of the world.

Based on my experience, let me assert that not all stakeholders in an evaluation, colleagues in related disciplines and specialty areas, and casual observers view the profession of evaluation as favorably as we view ourselves. For example, it is common to hear evaluators describe the profession of evaluation as primarily focused on helping to solve pressing social problems, meet human needs, design and improve a range of human services, empower the disenfranchised, foster self-determination, and establish learning organizations and communities, among other noble pursuits. It is very rare for me to hear program developers, program staff, program management, and other nonevaluator stakeholders describe our activities in that manner.

Quite to the contrary, I find that many relevant stakeholders who are nonevaluators view evaluation as an unpleasant and often threatening requirement typically forced upon them by outside influences (e.g., funding agencies, regulatory bodies, management). They often see evaluators as the uninformed enemy, using insensitive scientific methods to unfairly challenge their current claims, and to threaten the future of their efforts to provide services to meet desperate human needs.

I am not suggesting that the profession of evaluation is unique in having outsiders more critical or less optimistic than insiders. For example, lawyers and consultants probably have similar experiences from time to time. My point is that if evaluators fail to acknowledge, understand, and address this issue, it has the potential to undermine evaluation practice and the development of the profession. As I have listened to complaints and concerns about evaluation and evaluators over the years, the essence of the dark cloud seems to involve the issues of evaluator credibility, evaluation costs, and undesirable consequences of evaluation.

Evaluator Credibility

Do evaluators typically deliver? I have run across many cases where various stakeholders in an evaluation would answer this question with a resounding "NO!" I believe that at the heart of this answer is the fact that evaluators have not met stakeholder expectations. Sometimes this is simply the case of poor evaluation or malpractice (see Lipsey, 1988). But often this negative response can be traced to unrealistic expectations about what evaluation can deliver. For example, it is not uncommon for stakeholders to believe that evaluations should leave few unanswered questions and should be definitive about all evaluative conclusions. Other groups I have encountered expect the evaluation to document all program successes. They are surprised or angered when they feel the

evaluation has not done this or when negative findings are presented. In my view, the core problem is that evaluators often neglect to develop a common understanding of the evaluation process with stakeholders, which can result in unmet expectations or unpleasant surprises.

Irrespective of the content of the unmet expectations, many disgruntled stakeholders seem to take the view that evaluation is purely a political activity rather than an open search for truth and subsequent program improvement. This view often leads stakeholders to believe they must fight against evaluators by presenting their program or organization only in its most positive light. If successful, they can further the stereotype that evaluation and evaluators lack credibility.

Evaluation Costs

Another threat to the reputation of evaluators is the view that they are not worth the fees they charge. Many stakeholders believe that evaluation activities typically waste precious resources, stealing time and financial resources away from critical services for clients in need. Even those who see the value of evaluation may balk when they learn how much effort is required to conduct a high quality evaluation. Funding agencies often struggle with the calculation of how much of the project budget should be allocated for evaluation. In some recent cases, I have observed an unfortunate trend that the more experience a funder has had with evaluators, the more likely they are to fund services in lieu of evaluation. Some evaluators suggest that evaluation should strive to pay for itself and then some (e.g., see the notion of cost-free evaluation; Scriven, 1991). Although I agree we should strive for cost-free evaluation, I think it is important to acknowledge that this ideal may not be realistic under many circumstances. However, I do think it is critical that evaluators work hard to conduct evaluations in a manner that justifies the time and resource commitment, and that the potential costs and benefits of their work are clearly communicated to stakeholders.

Undesirable Consequences of Evaluation

Whereas evaluators often think in terms of how evaluation can benefit stakeholders, nonevaluators often fear the potential negative consequences of conducting an evaluation. Any given evaluation may lead to criticism, ridicule, embarrassment, loss of respect and support, loss of funding and jobs, and the termination of critical services (cf. Donaldson, Gooler, & Scriven, 2001). Sometimes these dreaded consequences are warranted, but other times they may be very undesirable side effects of a poorly conducted evaluation. No matter how you view it, there is always the chance that, while some will benefit from working with evaluators, others will suffer and yet others will neither suffer nor benefit. Of course, the real and the subjective probabilities of these possible outcomes vary from one evaluation to another. It should be easy to see why avoiding evaluation services and insulating one's organization from evaluators is considered by some to be a prudent risk management strategy. If evaluators fail to acknowledge and discuss with stakeholders both the potential undesirable consequences of evaluation and how they plan to minimize these risks, the stakeholder-evaluator relationship, the quality of the evaluation, and ultimately the reputation of evaluation and evaluators can be undermined.

Academic Settings

Negative stereotypes of evaluators are not limited to those on the receiving end of evaluation (e.g., stakeholders, program managers, and staff). In some universities and academic settings, evaluators are not seen in the most favorable light. One rather common view by nonevaluator colleagues in related areas is that evaluation is at best a second rate scientific activity. *Well-controlled scientific inquiry* is typically the gold standard for exemplary work in these settings. Evaluators take on messy “real world” problems and questions that often require giving up scientific controls. Many academics seem to believe that this results in work based on rather loose and untrustworthy methodologies. To some, evaluation is pseudoscience and an appropriate career option only for those who can’t make it in traditional research and academic tracks.

Summary

In summary, I am arguing here that there seems to be a substantial disconnect between the way evaluators and some nonevaluators view the profession of evaluation today. Like most evaluators, I am appalled by these views and don’t feel the negative reputation is deserved in most cases. It is a far cry from how I envision our profession today. However, the true state of affairs is a tangential issue here. What I am concerned about is that this reputation will reduce support for rigorous external evaluation in the future, and is often demoralizing to those considering whether or not to embark upon a career as an evaluator.

EVALUATION BECOMES KNOWN AS A HELPING PROFESSION

Fortunately, in my vision for the future of the profession I see a way to improve our reputation and practice. My picture-perfect future for the profession of evaluation in 2010 is for us to realize our aspiration of becoming known as, and truly becoming, a helping profession. As I awaken in 2010, I see the occupation of program evaluator in the company and good standing of other helping professionals like doctors, nurses, health educators, counselors, social workers, teachers, human resource development practitioners, and the like. In this future, it is well-known that the primary activity of the evaluator is working with other helping professionals, various types of human service organizations (e.g., school, health clinics, government agencies), communities, and private industry to meet human needs and solve human problems, in an effort to improve the human condition. Accordingly, students seek training in evaluation because (1) they aspire to develop organizations and programs to serve children, adolescents, and adults with identifiable needs; (2) they want to spend their careers preventing and solving social, health, and human welfare problems; and/or (3) because they want to improve human performance and well-being in private industry.

Gone are the images of the evaluator as cop, judge, strictly a methodologist or statistician, or a political pawn of management. No longer is it common for stakeholders to run the other way, leave the room, or dramatically change their behavior to a self-presentation strategy when in the company of evaluators. Thousands of new entrants into the profession are now realizing their aspirations to help others in society by evaluating programs based on sound principles, theory, research, and evaluation methodology.

In 2010, it has become common practice for evaluators to be trained in evaluation and co-concentration areas. Evaluators of 2010 are not the substance-free, general methodologists of the 60s. Instead, they are well versed in both the substantive content and state-of-the-art of evaluation practice within their domain of specialty. Evaluators are now welcomed instead of shunned because evaluation is described by nonevaluators as a profession primarily focused on helping to solve pressing social problems, meet human needs, design and improve a range of human services, empower the disenfranchised, foster self-determination, and establish learning organizations and communities.

Is this a realistic vision of the future of evaluation, or just a fantasy of someone tainted by the hard knocks of evaluation practice? If it is the former, what will it take to realize this vision for the profession of evaluation? In addition to the unknowable and plenty of renewed energy and momentum, two key changes must occur within the profession of evaluation. First, the means of evaluation must no longer distract evaluators from the end. Second, evaluators must fully disclose the potential risks, rewards, and purposes of every evaluation they conduct. Below I will elaborate on these changes to show that evaluation can truly become known as a helping profession.

Means No Longer Distract Us from the End

The vast majority of evaluation discourse today involves debates and discussion about how best to conduct program evaluations (e.g., see Donaldson & Scriven, 2002; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Evaluators currently work in a profession that rests on rather shaky and evolving ground, rather than on a widely accepted and firm foundation. Evaluators practice at a time when the field is still occupied with finding potential resolutions to theoretical tensions and methodological controversies. Furthermore, evaluators often must evaluate programs that are based on little knowledge about social problems and their solutions, and are poorly implemented. Evaluators must also be concerned with evaluation implementation challenges, design sensitivity, professional issues, ethics, and guiding principles (Donaldson, 2002). These issues are extremely important but they have a tendency to keep us internally focused on the means of our trade.

Sometime before 2010, evaluators will need to refocus some of their energy to stakeholder and public relations issues. Efforts to understand more fully how others experience evaluation and view evaluators would likely lead to ideas for improving evaluation practice and the reputation of evaluators (cf. Donaldson, Gooler, & Scriven, 2001). This external focus could also explore how best to portray the profession to evaluation stakeholders, to those contemplating a career in program evaluation, and to the general public. If these efforts occur, it is my prediction the evidence will suggest evaluation would be greatly improved if it becomes known as a helping profession.

Evaluators Must Fully Disclose

Actions speak louder than words. The way we behave in the future is the second major piece for realizing the vision. There are obviously many reasons for seeking or conducting an evaluation. We must disclose the true purpose(s) of our efforts (e.g., to help improve the program, to help management decide whether or not to cut funding, to see if the program is

worthy to be replicated in other settings, etc.). This issue may sound mundane and obvious to those who are not directly involved in evaluation in the settings to which I have been referring. However, to practicing evaluators in these domains, this is a very delicate and challenging issue.

The American Evaluation Association publishes guiding principles for evaluators (see Shadish, Newman, Scheirer, & Wye, 1995). These principles include systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honesty, respect for people, and responsibility for general and public welfare. Consistent with these principles is the need for evaluators to fully disclose all aspects of the evaluation process. This disclosure should include a discussion about the fact that some people may be negatively affected by the evaluation. Evaluators should admit the evaluation may take valuable time and resources away from the program under investigation, the evaluation process could be a very uncomfortable and disruptive for some stakeholders, and that evaluation findings may be very negative and detrimental to program staff. It is also important to acknowledge that the evaluation itself may change behavior in unpredictable ways (e.g., staff may be motivated to falsify data and program information). Finally, evaluators should describe in some detail the methods and procedures that will be used, and how findings could be used and disseminated (potential positive and negative uses). Of course, these issues would be considered in light of the potential benefits of conducting the evaluation. The main point is that when evaluators and stakeholders fully explore the potential benefits and costs of doing an evaluation, expectations become realistic, and the evaluation is much more likely to be beneficial for all in both the short and the long run.

CONCLUSION

Evaluators have a negative reputation in many settings today. This negative reputation has the potential to undercut serious evaluation efforts and discourage future generations from entering the profession. More attention to how program evaluators are perceived by relevant nonevaluators is needed to more fully understand and prevent the consequences of this problem. I have shared my vision of how I would like to find the field of evaluation in 2010—*Evaluation Becomes Known as Helping Profession*. However, I believe this vision will remain fantasy unless evaluators, first, fully disclose the risks of conducting evaluations and, second, refocus some of their energy toward improving their negative reputation. The new focus must be on understanding and communicating that evaluators are ultimately concerned with helping others prevent and solve the most pressing social and human welfare problems of our time.

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