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Strategies for Managing Evaluation Anxiety: Toward a Psychology of Program Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Excessive evaluation anxiety (XEA) can be a destructive phenomenon in modern program evaluation. Some of the negative consequences include: Lack of access to important information and data; compliance and cooperation problems; false reporting; effects on bias and validity; and reduced utilization of evaluation findings. If left alone, XEA can lead stakeholders to behave in ways that destroy the credibility of evaluation findings and evaluators. The purpose of this paper is to examine the sources and signs of XEA in program evaluation, and to provide practicing evaluators with strategies to prevent and manage this common problem. This example of how more than technical skills are required to conduct high quality program evaluations illustrates the need for and begins a broader discussion of the psychology of evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Most people experience anxiety when their behavior or achievements are being evaluated. Whether evaluations are formal, as in the case of standardized achievement testing, or informal, such as being picked to be part of a soccer team or cheerleading squad, the experience of being evaluated, critiqued, or judged commonly results in an emotional reaction of uneasiness, uncertainty, or apprehension. In essence, many evaluative situations cause people to fear that they will be found to be deficient or inadequate by others (e.g., supervisors, funding agencies, or evaluators in the program evaluation context).

The fear of the prospect of a negative evaluation is probably inherent to being human. Criticism, ridicule, contempt, embarrassment, loss of acceptability, loss of respect, and rejection are unpleasant experiences most people attempt to avoid. In fact, the ultimate imaginable

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consequence of a negative evaluation is to be shunned and abandoned—something we may learn to dread from the dependency of infancy (Beck, 1989; Klass, 1990; Leitenberg, 1990). In general, evaluation anxiety refers to the set of (primarily) affective, and also cognitive and behavioral responses that accompany concern over possible negative consequences contingent upon performance in an evaluative situation.

Evaluation anxiety has been studied rather extensively in areas such as test taking (Sarason & Sarason, 1990), sports performance (Smith & Smoll, 1990), dating (Hope & Heimberg, 1990), performance in the workplace (Moss & Martinko, 1998), oral examinations (Arnkoff, Glass, & Robinson, 1992), writing (Kean, Glynn, & Britton, 1987), jury selection (Marshall & Smith, 1986), counseling training (Shauer, Seymour, & Geen, 1985), and computer use (Shermis & Lombard, 1998). However, with few exceptions (e.g., Rose & Jason, 1988), there is a paucity of literature on the antecedents and consequences of evaluation anxiety within the context of program evaluation.

In the clinical literature (e.g., in the “Handbook of Social and Evaluation Anxiety”; Leitenberg, 1990), what is called “social and evaluation anxiety” refers, as one would expect, to anxiety that is disproportionate or excessive. High levels of anxiety are not necessarily disproportionate or excessive, for example, if one’s job is at stake. We use the abbreviation XEA to refer solely to disproportionate or excessive evaluation-induced anxiety, not to all such anxiety or even to all high levels of evaluation-induced anxiety. Clinically, there are people who will not eat in a restaurant because of their fear that others will negatively assess the way they eat or their choice of foods. That is a case where there is some doubt whether the feared evaluation actually takes place, but the person is still experiencing XEA. In program (and personnel) evaluation, however, there are people who are very upset by, and sometimes rendered virtually dysfunctional by, any prospect of evaluation, or who attack evaluation without regards to how well conceived it might be. We take these to be, nearly always, signs of XEA.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe the problem of XEA in program evaluation, and to provide evaluators with some strategies for managing this problem that often undermines the quality of program evaluations. We do not suggest, however, that the effects of XEA that we identify as of particular concern to evaluators are uniquely caused by XEA; nor do we mean to imply that the remedies we suggest are only of use against XEA. In other words, we believe the strategies that we describe for managing XEA are also likely to be beneficial in dealing with evaluation anxiety that is not excessive and with many cases of resistance based on factors other than anxiety.

ANXIETY AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

Although evaluation anxiety of varying levels of intensity has always been present in program evaluation practice (Scriven, 1991), it is possible that recent developments in the field have sometimes elevated its prevalence and importance. For example, in the past two decades, interactive evaluation approaches have replaced distanced approaches as the most common way of working with stakeholders (see Donaldson & Scriven, 2002a; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). That is, most modern approaches now require regular interaction with stakeholders, which has made the fear of negative evaluation a more day-to-day concern for some stakeholders rather than a one-time event when the summative report was issued.

TABLE 1.
Some Common Consequences Excessive Evaluation Anxiety

Difficult to gain access to required information
Lack of cooperation by critical stakeholders
Compromises the quality of the data collected due to false reporting
Challenges of the validity of evaluation results
Lack of utilization of evaluation results
Lack of program improvement
Decrease performance and productivity in general
Dissatisfaction with program evaluation

Consequences of Excessive Anxiety in Program Evaluation

We argue that evaluation anxiety can be an asset as well as a liability in the program evaluation context. For example, a moderate level of evaluation anxiety motivates people to perform. It is only when this anxiety becomes excessive that evaluators are likely to encounter a range of difficulties that can undermine the quality of their work. Table 1 displays some of the common consequences of XEA, including lack of information access and cooperation problems, false reporting and bias, and validity and utilization problems. In short, XEA can make stakeholders behave in ways that make evaluation data and findings worthless and that undermine the credibility of evaluators.

Signs of XEA

How does XEA manifest itself in evaluation practice? Although there is no doubt there is a wide range of potential signs of this phenomenon, we have identified five common ways we have encountered XEA in practice in Table 2.

First, XEA often shows itself in high levels of conflict between evaluators and stakeholders. If stakeholders begin attacking reasonable evaluation feedback and accusing the evaluators of having hidden agendas it is likely evaluation anxiety has become excessive. A second sign is if stakeholders begin to withdraw and avoid or refuse to work with the evaluators (absent grounded objections to the evaluation process). A related but more subtle sign than withdrawal is unargued resistance or denial. Resistance often takes the form of stalling, protesting, or failing to use well-supported evaluation results. Fourth, stakeholders may appear to be obsessed with hiding weaknesses of the program because of excessive levels of anxiety. Finally, the sign that is difficult to miss is anger. When stakeholders become hostile, aggressive, and are focused on “Killing the Messenger,” evaluation anxiety may be out of control. The strategies

TABLE 2.
Signs of Excessive Evaluation Anxiety

Conflict—Accusing evaluators of hidden agendas
Withdrawal—Avoiding or refusing to work with evaluators
Resistance—Stalling, protesting, or failing to use evaluation results
Shame—Hiding weaknesses
Anger—Killing the messenger

TABLE 3.
Some Sources of Evaluation Anxiety

Dispositional sources
Lack of experience with program evaluation
Negative past experiences with program evaluation
Excessive ego involvement with program model
Excessive fear of negative consequences
Situational sources
Failure to highlight program accomplishments
Social norms
Role ambiguity
Interaction of dispositional sources × situational sources

we present later are intended to help evaluators prevent these reactions, and to help evaluators cope when they do occur.

Sources of Evaluation Anxiety

Why do some stakeholders experience XEA while others do not? A useful way to think about this question is to identify possible dispositional and situational factors that may exist within a given program evaluation context (see [Table 3](#)). Dispositional factors are typically stakeholder characteristics that exist prior to the evaluation. For example, lack of experience with program evaluation, negative past experience with program evaluation, excessive ego involvement with the success of the program, and excessive fear of negative consequences may characterize a key stakeholder or group of stakeholders. Assessing dispositional characteristics ahead of time can help evaluators gauge the likelihood that XEA will result from dispositional factors.

XEA can also be due to situational factors. These are typically behaviors of the evaluator or characteristics of the environment in which the program evaluation is conducted. For example, evaluators who neglect to highlight program accomplishments when providing formative evaluation findings showing areas that need improvement may foster anxiety ([Donaldson, 2002](#); [Donaldson & Gooler, 2002b](#); [Fitzpatrick, in press](#)). Another common situational factor is role ambiguity amongst the evaluators and stakeholders, conducive to territorial disputes. These types of situational factors are usually under the control of the evaluator and can be prevented or massively reduced.

On the other hand, preexisting organizational culture or social norms may be unfavorable to evaluators and the evaluation. This type of situational factor is not created directly by the evaluator and is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to prevent. The best evaluators can do in the short run is to understand the nature of this source, and to work in a way that minimizes its influence on the evaluation process. A longer term, labor-intensive approach is to establish and reinforce new norms. This approach may be worth the effort if the evaluation relationship is lengthy or ongoing.

In summary, we suggest that evaluators explore the potential dispositional and situational sources of XEA prior to implementing an evaluation. It is very important to point out that in any given evaluation, two or more of these sources may interact to create a very unfavorable environment for program evaluation with XEA as an intermediary factor.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING XEA

XEA and its consequences can make the occupation of program evaluator very unpleasant and unproductive. This occupational hazard can wear down evaluators to the point that they give up on aspirations of conducting rigorous, objective evaluations, or even give up on any pretense of maintaining cordial or even professional relationships with program staff. One way evaluators can avoid the problems of XEA is by engaging in work that avoids evaluative conclusions and instead emphasizes mere description, mainly of process (Scriven, 2002). Sometimes, the move away from evaluative conclusions is justified by an evaluator in the name of several “evaluation approaches,” such as those primarily focused on stakeholder and impactee satisfaction, utilization, empowerment, self-evaluation, describing social constructions, the process of evaluation consulting, and the like (cf. Donaldson & Scriven, 2002b; Mark, 2002). While the fear of negative evaluation is virtually eliminated and evaluators are then more welcomed and popular with some stakeholders (i.e., if there is no evaluation, there will be no XEA), we see this move as a very inappropriate response to the problem. Conversely, it is sometimes easy to adopt an insulation strategy, reducing the interaction with program staff and other stakeholders to near zero. But to do this merely to avoid the stress of interacting with XEA is undesirable and we do not recommend it in general.

An alternative type of response is to learn how to use strategies for preventing and managing XEA. Rather than avoiding conflict and the professional responsibility to evaluate, we highly recommend evaluators learn to manage evaluation anxiety in ways that enable them to conduct rigorous program evaluations. Unfortunately, we know of no “magic bullet” or universal strategy for dealing with the problem of excessive anxiety in program evaluation. However, we have developed a list of strategies that we have found very useful under specific conditions (see Table 4). Below, we briefly discuss our short list of 17 strategies and the conditions under which these are most likely to be effective. Note that many of them apply only to highly interactive evaluations. Many evaluations are done with little or no interaction,

TABLE 4.
Strategies for Managing Evaluation Anxiety

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1. Expect and accept
 2. Work through hangovers from bad evaluation experiences
 3. Make sure this isn't legitimate opposition to bad evaluation
 4. Determine program psychologic
 5. Discuss purposes of this evaluation
 6. Discuss the professional standards for program evaluation
 7. Discuss why honesty with the evaluator is not disloyalty to the group
 8. Discuss the risk/benefit ratio of cooperation for individuals
 9. Provide balanced continuous improvement feedback
 10. Allow stakeholders to discuss and affect the evaluation
 11. Be prepared to wear your psychotherapy hat
 12. Role clarification on an ongoing basis
 13. Be a role model
 14. Distinguish the blame game from the program evaluation game
 15. Facilitate learning communities/organizations
 16. Push for culture change
 17. Use multiple strategies
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sometimes from choice but sometimes also from necessity. There are well-known advantages and disadvantages of these alternatives, and we take no stand about the absolute superiority of either.

Note also that some of these strategies have been advocated by others, for reasons that involve no direct mention of XEA. We do not claim that all of the strategies are original here, just that they have an independent justification in terms of XEA reduction.

Expect and Accept

Many evaluators (especially new evaluators) are surprised and shocked when they encounter stakeholders reacting to XEA. If one is not prepared for this sometimes hostile and tense situation, it can quickly ruin an evaluation and sour one on the occupation. The closest to a universal strategy we can recommend is to train evaluators to expect and accept evaluation anxiety, as far as possible, as a common aspect of evaluation practice. When evaluators and evaluation team members are knowledgeable about the phenomenon, expect it, and work in ways to prevent and manage excessive anxiety, they are much more likely to be effective.

Work Through Hangovers from Bad Evaluation Experiences

We have often encountered stakeholders who have previously had negative experiences with evaluators and program evaluation. We suggest evaluators provide stakeholders with opportunities to discuss prior experiences and expectations for program evaluation. If negative past experiences surface, it is important to acknowledge and legitimate stakeholders' opposition to incompetent or inappropriate evaluation. This establishes a baseline from which the evaluator can now promise to do better. The discussion often reveals potential "land mines" to avoid, insightful history, and idiosyncratic issues that might be useful for navigating the new evaluation context.

Make Sure this isn't Legitimate Opposition to Bad Evaluation

Don't assume negative reactions are a sign of XEA. They may be reactions to a weakness in the evaluation that the evaluator has not really appreciated. So, the moment the evaluator runs into resistance (etc.) for which there is no obvious explanation, even if latter suggestion above had been followed, it is desirable to review the design for failure to involve or respect the views of program staff or other stakeholders. If nothing obvious emerges, it's worth trying a focus group of participants or a quick phone round-up to identify objectionable features of, or omissions from, the evaluation design or operation. A commonly successful prophylactic and panacea here is to set up an advisory panel with volunteers (preferable, if not too many) or elected representatives of the program staff, in particular, but also of other stakeholders. The others are crucial because they can prove to be essential allies in balancing the design against high-pressure tactics from the staff representatives. Keep in mind, however, that such panels are not without their risks; they can serve as crystallization nuclei for systematic opposition. The evaluator will need good people skills to avoid this. She or he may do as well or better with an open meeting or two, as mentioned below.

Determine Program Psychologic

Sometimes stakeholders are hypersensitive to evaluators because they perceive they have much to gain or lose based on the success or failure of the program. We suggest evaluators determine what we call the “program psychologic”—what stakeholders (program designers, staff, management, funders, watchdog agencies, etc.) are hoping the program will do for them personally (e.g., make them rich or famous), or how its success or failure might damage them personally. Knowledge of program psychologic (in the above sense) can be very helpful for anticipating responses to various types of evaluation feedback. For a stakeholder who perceives she or he has much to lose, negative findings or limitations to date should be presented in a manner that does not unnecessarily trigger excessive evaluation anxiety (e.g., in the context of program accomplishments or other positive findings, if possible).

Discuss Purposes of this Evaluation

Often stakeholders have divergent or inaccurate views about the purposes of the evaluation. We find that an open discussion about the various purposes of evaluation in general, coupled with a discussion of the specific purpose(s) of the current evaluation, can lead to a common understanding of the value of this evaluation and reduce fears and anxieties about the process. This discussion can also help evaluators steer clear of the somewhat common trap of using evaluation for the purpose of justifying predetermined decisions (i.e., pseudo-evaluation; [Scriven, 1991](#)).

Discuss Professional Standards for Program Evaluation

Some stakeholders may think program evaluations are based on rather subjective opinions of the evaluators (non-scientific or unsystematic), or that evaluators are not regulated by professional standards and associations. Of course, this can cause great anxiety because of the potential for misuse of evaluation findings. We recommend that evaluators provide a copy and discuss with stakeholders the Joint Committee’s Standards for program evaluation ([Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994](#)), or at least the American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles for evaluations ([Shadish, Newman, Scheirer, & Wye, 1995](#)), particularly for stakeholders who seem wary or concerned about the legitimacy of the profession. Some stakeholders seem to find great comfort in discovering evaluators are regulated and must follow principles of systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honesty, respect for people, and responsibility for general and public welfare. Optionally, you might hand out a list of the evaluator’s ideal of cooperation from the program staff and other stakeholders ([Scriven, 2001](#)).

Discuss Why Honesty with the Evaluator is not Disloyalty to the Group

We have found that some stakeholders feel it is disloyal to their organization, program, or co-workers to reveal problems to evaluators. Protecting the group (program) from the potential threat of outsiders seems to be a natural and healthy response in many situations. This is particularly likely to be an important issue and source of anxiety when dealing with members of cohesive groups. Under these conditions, we have found it is necessary to discuss and explain

the countervailing considerations that suggest honesty with the evaluators helps the group in the long run rather than threatens its functioning or existence.

Discuss the Risk/Benefit Ratio of Cooperation for Individuals

Related to the previous point, people often think very superficially about strategies of cooperation with the evaluator. They just feel that it's in their best interests to be cagey, or to play it safe. In fact, there can be major benefits to individuals from a good evaluation, for example, improvement of their work environment, or reality-leavening of the expectations laid on them. If your design also has an appropriate degree of strict confidentiality, and where possible, also anonymity, the downside is negligible. But you have to talk this through or they don't realize it.

Provide Balanced Continuous Improvement Feedback

Formative evaluation or continuous improvement feedback are a critical component of many modern program evaluations (Donaldson & Gooler, 2002a). This process is often used to improve the design and implementation of a program. A common mistake evaluators can make here is to focus exclusively on the areas that need improvement. This is a natural mistake because identifying remediable mistakes is the most obvious way to prove that we have added value to the social programming endeavor, whereas identifying good features is just "patting the cat," that is, praising the routine or expected. Of course, the problem is that stakeholders may become very upset and anxious because they fear their efforts and successes are not fairly acknowledged and unappreciated. It is, however, equally important to show stakeholders as many examples as possible of how continuous improvement feedback benefited the program, albeit stressing ways in which it can help them with their already successful efforts, for example, by reducing the effort required on that front.

Allow Stakeholders to Discuss and Affect the Evaluation

It is very important to allow stakeholders the opportunity to discuss and voice their concerns about the evaluation and evaluation findings on a regular basis. It is usually not enough to issue a report and ask for written feedback. Stakeholders often appreciate having their voices heard, the opportunity to correct factual errors, and having procedures in place that allow them to refute evaluation claims (e.g., allow them to attach an independent, written response to the back of the evaluation report). These discussions and procedures can be an effective means of preventing XEA when stakeholders disagree with negative findings.

Be Prepared to Wear Your Psychotherapy Hat

It is important for evaluators to be aware of how evaluatees think and feel as they are being evaluated. That is, we believe it is important to teach evaluators how to actively listen to evaluatees' frustrations and concerns, and to develop empathy. In addition to the anxiety reduction benefits of catharsis, for the stakeholder, evaluators may learn how to avoid provoking sensitive, anxiety-producing issues in this and/or future evaluations.

Role Clarification on an Ongoing Basis

As discussed previously, role ambiguity is a common situational source of evaluation anxiety. In some evaluations, evaluators must take on different roles simultaneously, or change roles throughout the evaluation, for example, from critic to co-author to staff trainer. This can be highly confusing and anxiety-provoking for stakeholders. Of course, evaluators are not the first professionals to experience the challenges of a changing role. Teachers, managers or supervisors, and even parents experience the double role of improvement and judgement.

We recommend providing a handout to all relevant stakeholders in which there is an explanation of what evaluation is, including some mention of the various roles the evaluators will play vis-a-vis the stakeholders throughout the phases of the evaluation. This is done to dispel misconceptions. Next, we have already recommended the evaluation team facilitate regular discussions and we suggest that the agenda for these include discussion of roles and responsibilities throughout the life of the evaluation. In doing this it may be useful to show anxious stakeholders the symmetry of roles, "stakeholders evaluate evaluators," and remind them that evaluators can be fired for cause, which can be based on complaints from stakeholders.

Be a Role Model

Taking the previous point one step further, one of the most effective ways of showing stakeholders how to respond and use evaluation findings is to create opportunities to be a positive role model. For example, we recommend encouraging stakeholders to evaluate the evaluation and the evaluation team formally on a regular basis, at least twice during the evaluation. This provides evaluators the opportunity to show stakeholders how to respond to evaluations by using feedback to improve their practice in a non-anxious and non-confrontational manner. Of course, if the evaluators get caught up in the moment and fly off the handle or become highly defensive in response to negative findings this strategy will have the opposite effect (although it helps if one of the evaluators can make an example of this for immediate discussion). Another benefit of this strategy is that it helps evaluators appreciate and understand how the evaluatees feel on a regular basis.

Distinguish Blame Game from the Program Evaluation Game

Some stakeholders may be over-anxious because they believe evaluation findings will assign blame. But the blame game goes well beyond evaluation of the usual kind, because it requires proving responsibility and intentionality, which include adequate knowledge of alternatives at the time of choices, and not just causal agency. The program evaluation game is about causal agency and not about responsibility and intentionality. Making this distinction clear in the course of open discussion helps the potentially anxious evaluatee to understand that the program evaluator is not out for blood, hence not such a threat, because she or he is not inquiring into what would be needed to establish blame, only into what the program causes, in order to find explanations. Of course, it would be dishonest to say that one can never make plausible inferences about blame from contextual knowledge plus causal analysis or that someone other than the evaluator (e.g., a funder or boss) will not assign blame. However, there is typically no need for the evaluator to make such inferences and this discussion of the limits of evaluation findings can help prevent others from inappropriately assigning blame.

Facilitate Learning Communities/Organizations

Some organizations and communities of stakeholders are open and receptive to the notion that program evaluation is a means to enhance learning by them and their organization. Others may require some help in developing this concept and implementing it. Establishing a learning community of stakeholders (some prefer the term “learning organization”), one that reinforces continuous improvement efforts and creates a safe environment for critical reflection and discussion of evaluation findings, can do much to prevent the problem of XEA (see [Fitzpatrick, in press](#)). To achieve this, it is important to establish ground rules and supportive group norms for the evaluation, to model and reinforce open communication about program successes and failures, and to provide ongoing feedback concerning the goals and purposes of the evaluation. We have found initial stakeholder skepticism about this strategy dissipates over time if evaluators stay true to their promises (e.g., the evaluation is used for learning and not for individual rewards and punishment). That is, evaluator actions or behaviors over time are much more convincing than words.

Push for Culture Change

One rather bold strategy, although it is a natural extension of the previous one, is to suggest that evaluators push for culture change at the organization, community, profession, and even national levels. This change would be toward normalizing rigorous evaluation as a regular and routine aspect of professional, and more generally, working life ([Sanders, 2001, in press](#)). A move toward cultures that embrace evaluation might begin with increasing the reach and frequency of evaluation training as part of professional development in the short-term, getting it into job descriptions in the mid-term, and more professionalism in dealing with it in the long-term. It should become a best practice for professionals (of course, this includes evaluators) to be seriously evaluated regularly, whether or not it is already standard operating procedure in an individual’s employment environment. Encouraging organizations and communities to regularize rigorous evaluation practices promises to enhance productivity dramatically, eliminate the mystique about evaluation, and consequently reduce the prevalence of XEA.

Use Multiple Strategies

We realize that using one or more of the previous 16 strategies will require additional time and possibly resources for evaluation. It is important to note that strategies not on our short list may also be effective. Given that we have not found a strategy or combination of strategies that seems effective across all evaluation situations, we recommend using a combination of strategies that seem to meet the needs of the stakeholders and evaluators, and that fit within time and resource constraints. This, of course, requires evaluators to think critically about the potential dispositional and situational sources of anxiety at play in an evaluation, and to build in strategies to prevent and to manage XEA throughout the course of the evaluation.

TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

The field of program evaluation is rich with literature about theories of how to practice program evaluation, methods for collecting data, techniques for analyzing data, human subject issues,

ethics, professional issues and the like (e.g., Donaldson & Scriven, 2002b; Mark, 2002; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000; Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999; Shadish et al., 1991, 1995; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001; Stufflebeam, 2001). Despite this wealth of evaluation information, many practicing evaluators still find it very difficult to implement evaluation designs in a way that leads to valid conclusions and the direct utilization of evaluation findings (Weiss, 1988, 1998). We argue in this paper that psychological and behavioral issues often prevent a sound evaluation design as laid out on the whiteboard, or in the textbook, from realizing its potential in evaluation practice.

One purpose of this article is to begin or revive the discussion about the psychology of program evaluation (cf. Scriven, 1991, pp. 290–291). We elected to focus on the topic of preventing and managing XEA as a starting point, because of its prevalence and importance to the practice of modern program evaluation. It is our hope that this paper serves as a model for how we might integrate and apply theory and research from the psychological and behavioral sciences toward addressing challenges to the productive development of evaluation practice. Topics for future discussions of the psychology of evaluation might include how to overcome our negative reputation (see Donaldson, 2001); the psychology of the program evaluator (e.g., evaluators on power trips or obsessed with control; overly pleasing or conflict-avoidant evaluators; evaluators primarily motivated by financial gain or fame; evaluators using evaluation to promote personal or political agendas, etc.); whistle-blowing; the kill the messenger phenomenon; power and politics; the therapeutic role of evaluation; forms of resistance to change; and the psychology of negotiating with stakeholders, among others.

CONCLUSION

More than technical skills are needed to conduct high quality evaluations. The ability to deal with XEA is one of those skills. XEA can reduce reliability, validity, and utilization of evaluation findings. Symptoms of XEA include conflict (e.g., accusing the evaluators of having hidden agendas), withdrawal (avoiding or refusing to participate in evaluation), resistance (e.g., stalling, protesting, or refusing to accept findings), shame, and anger. These phenomena are often traumatic for all parties. XEA may be at least partly responsible for some of the newer evaluation approaches that focus intensely on satisfying stakeholders, often at the expense of providing rigorous evaluation findings and conclusions. It is our hope that the conceptual frameworks and strategies presented in this paper will help evaluators prevent and overcome the difficulties posed by XEA.

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