

# What Should Be the Effect of Value Pluralism in Evaluation?

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## RÉSUMÉ

De nos jours, on accepte volontiers que la société n'a plus un seul système de valeurs. Dans cet exposé, on explore les effets de ce pluralisme axiologique sur l'évolution de la discipline de l'évaluation. Un de ces effets semble être une acceptation non critique du pluralisme axiologique comme étant comment on devrait trouver le monde. Il y a aussi toute une variété de méthodologies dites qualitatives où l'on trouve qu'il y a de multiples réalités ou 'patterns' en train de décrire la «vérité». On explore ici les implications de ces effets pour les évaluateurs en exercice et on fait l'argument que l'effet du pluralisme axiologique ne devrait pas être l'acceptation non critique d'un système de valeurs tous azimuts, mais devrait être plutôt une recherche plus approfondie pour scruter et peser les valeurs.

## ABSTRACT

It has become a commonplace belief that our society is value pluralistic. This paper explores the effects of value pluralism on the growing discipline of evaluation. One of these effects appears to be an uncritical acceptance of value pluralism as the way things ought to be. Another is the burgeoning set of qualitative methodologies in which there are multiple realities or patterns of "truth". The implications of these effects for practising evaluators are explored and the argument is made that the effect of value pluralism should not be an uncritical acceptance of all values, but a deeper search for worthwhileness in values.

When a new profession or discipline develops to the extent that it gains a modicum of recognition and respectability, questions arise about its values, ethics and standards. Evaluation is no exception. Of particular interest with respect to values in evaluation is the relatively recent recognition and apparent acceptance of the fact that the United States and Canada are value pluralistic societies. This paper explores the effects of this acceptance of value pluralism on the field of evaluation and attempts to explicate what those effects should be.

## Evaluation

To evaluate, by definition, means to judge the worth of an entity, or to assess its value. The problem for evaluators arises in determining what constitutes conclusive evidence for worth or value. Defining standards or choosing the criteria by which an entity is to be judged is the foundation of evaluation. "In turn, the choice of standards will depend on the choice and definition of the values to be served" (Klein, 1982: 133).

Values are beliefs about the worth of an entity. Therefore, to evaluate means to determine whether a belief about a value is true or false, whether

one has conclusive evidence for the belief. Because values are beliefs they involve conviction, and therefore emotions and decision. However, they are not merely feelings or intentions. Because they are beliefs (and are therefore cognitive) critical determination is possible. Description is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for critical determination. Ultimately values must be evaluated in terms of their contribution to instrumental and intrinsic goodness.

### Value Pluralism

The previous discussion implies that there are certain values which are intrinsically worthwhile, and that only those values, or others which contribute to them, can be justified. But it is now a widely recognized, "commonplace—and therefore dogmatic and unreflective—belief" (Nordenbo, 1978: 129) that society is value pluralistic. Value pluralism may be interpreted in several ways, but the usual interpretation is that it is simply a "more precise version of the theory of relativity of values" (Nordenbo: 130). Non-cognitivist theories of value are ruled out as value pluralism since pluralism "is generally understood to imply that differing value systems compete with one another because of incompatible viewpoints" (131). If values are simply feelings or emotions it is meaningless to refer to incompatible viewpoints or value pluralism.

Cognitive relativistic theories may be broken down into three categories (Nordenbo, 1978). Descriptive relativism describes the asserted fact that different people or groups have different values which ultimately depend on factors which vary from person to person or group to group. Methodological relativism states that the reason why there are competing value systems is that there is no rational or objective procedure for determining whether one set of values is more worthwhile than another. Normative relativism expresses the moral claim that the truth of a value depends on the person making the judgment—what is right or good in one case need not be in another; what is good for you need not be for me.

The evaluation field seems to be committing the naturalistic fallacy. By accepting descriptive relativism (Canada is a value pluralistic society) and methodological relativism (there is no rational procedure for determining the worth of a value) one moves to accepting normative relativism (this is the way it ought to be). Guba and Lincoln (1981) state:

... the fact that pluralistic values exist leads to the inescapable conclusion that a particular entity being evaluated may be judged worthy by one group but virtually worthless by another group that holds different values. In general, it is unlikely that there will be a consensus on the worth of an entity (p. 44).

But consensus is not conclusive evidence for the worth of something. It is the case that an entity has value only insofar as a person or persons believe that it has value, but it does not necessarily follow that the truth of the belief is relative to (or depends on) the person or group holding the belief.

## Effects of Accepting Value Pluralism

Faced with a value pluralistic society an evaluator has three choices: to remain neutral or value-free; to accept value pluralism as the way it ought to be, or to judge some values to be more worthwhile than others. Neutrality, the first option, is ruled out because acceptance of the fact that there are competing value systems which depend on some factor that varies from person to person or group to group makes neutrality impossible. Similarly, in normative relativism the truth of the values depends on the person making the judgment; what is good for you need not be good for me. Determining what ought to be the case rules out neutrality.

Even without these arguments, most program evaluators would concede the difficulty or impossibility of remaining neutral in an evaluation project. What has tended to result instead, is the second option—that of accepting pluralistic values without a critical determination of their truth, with a concomitant focus on “presenting the facts” and leaving the judging to others. Klein (1982) sees evidence of this in the explosion of “evaluation research”, which he defines using a description by Weiss (1975):

Evaluation research is a rational enterprise. It examines the effects of policies and programs on their targets (individuals, groups, institutions, communities) in terms of the goals they are meant to achieve. By objective and systematic methods, evaluation research assesses the extent to which goals are realized and looks at the factors associated with successful or unsuccessful outcomes. The assumption is that by providing “the facts” evaluation assists decision-makers to make wise choices among future courses of action (p. 13).

Persons in the evaluation field have become increasingly critical of the “mainstream view of evaluation as rational, scientific appraisal. . . [which] usually bears the name ‘evaluation’” (Schwandt, 1981: 95). Schwandt believes that “it is critical that a uniperspectival approach to the evaluation of social programs be replaced by a multiperspectival approach if evaluation is to be responsive to the political milieu in which those programs are developed and implemented” (p. 99). This criticism of the traditional or mainstream methodologies has promoted the development of a set of methodologies variously labelled qualitative, naturalistic, responsive, issue-based and so on. In all of these models there are multiple realities or patterns of “truth” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), and an underlying assumption of these models, according to House (1977) is that truth is relative to human nature and what is valid for one person or group may not be for another. These recently-explicated models have provided a new dimension for evaluation, and have broadened the range of available methodologies and strategies. In fact, the most recent issue of *New Directions for Program Evaluation* (Fall, 1987) is devoted to the concept of multiple methods in evaluation.

However, the use of multiple methods in evaluation which is currently being advocated, and with which I concur, carries with it certain assumptions. One is simply that all of the methods are appropriate to the situation and are defensible and credible in terms of quality. Another assumption, perhaps more relevant to the point I am trying to make in

this paper, is that these different methods are compatible, even though they may emerge from widely disparate value perspectives. The arguments for and against combining methods which are based on differing value perspectives have been effectively debated by researchers such as Smith (1983), Bednarz (1985) and Howe (1985). Patton (1985), in his rebuttal to Bednarz, suggests that in practice, pragmatism can overcome debates about the nature of reality. "By focussing on and negotiating data collection alternatives in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance, the participants can come together around a commitment to an *empirical* perspective, that is, bringing data to bear on important program issues" (p. 308).

The implications for evaluators and evaluation consumers of this unresolved debate, is that at the very least, a frank discussion about values needs to occur at the very early stages in negotiating an evaluation contract. It is at the least disconcerting, and at worst destructive, to discover at or near the end of a project that the values of evaluator and client are so disparate that the evaluation has become a waste of time. For example, a client who believes that meaning is personal and that reality does not exist apart from the knower, may pay little attention to an evaluation report which consists of hard data—tables, counts, statistics. Conversely, an evaluator who presents rich descriptions and interpretations of events gleaned from hours of participant observation or depth interviews may find his or her report ignored by the client who values "facts".

The existing evaluation standards of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981) provide some guidance for practising evaluators. It is not my intent in this paper to review the standards, or to discuss the need for a Canadian set of standards, both of which are worthwhile and necessary activities. Rather I wish to suggest that even as they currently exist, the Standards provide a solid basis for discussion in negotiations. The role of values is discussed very briefly in Standard A4 (pp. 32-36), and although the attention devoted to this issue is, in my opinion insufficient, it is at least a basis for the airing of views. In this discussion the evaluator may discover, for example, that the client subscribes to an objective-based model of evaluation and wishes the evaluator to collect evidence that the objectives are being met. The evaluator, on the other hand, may subscribe to an interpretive or issue-based paradigm and may believe it is his or her role to discover whether the objectives themselves are appropriate or in the best interests of society.

It is my belief that the uncritical acceptance of incompatible or competing value systems as the way things ought to be, and the corresponding increased emphasis on developing and improving a wide range of more responsive and comprehensive evaluation models, are occurring at the expense of evaluation as a meta-activity. For example, *should* evaluation be responsive to the political milieu, as Schwandt suggests? These more fundamental meta-type questions are being overlooked in favor of methodological issues. Brown (in Salasin, 1980) describes these different kinds of evaluation activity as two domains of evaluation: the first is the domain which has to do with the analysis of activities, goals and objectives through the various measures and techniques. "The other—the moral-

ity, values and presumptions that are often contradictory and competing—is an ethical challenge that has not yet been met in the evaluation field. . . .” (p. 2).

Perhaps an example will help to illustrate this situation. In a recent large-scale evaluation of the impact of a major innovation in a school district, the contracting agency’s initial focus was “effectiveness” as determined by gains in student achievement scores and teachers’ observed behavior scores. The team assembled as potential evaluators was unable to accept the values of the funding agency; initially we could not accept that effectiveness as defined was a valid or appropriate measure of project impact; nor could we accept the morality of conducting an evaluation based primarily on such criteria. Long discussions ensued, focussed partly on the appropriateness of the criteria, partly on how we might convince the contracting agency to buy into our values about other, perhaps more desirable outcomes, and partly on meta-issues, for example: to what extent should we “hold fast” to our values and possibly lose the opportunity, not only to obtain the contract, but also to make a contribution? To what extent were we willing to compromise? Were we right?

The point being made here is that the resolution of contradictory and competing values is becoming one of the major challenges facing evaluators and clients, and it is a challenge that is not being addressed.

### **The “Should-Be” Effects of Value Pluralism**

We have seen that the effect of recognizing that society is value pluralistic should not be to foster an uncritical acceptance of all values; rather it should be to stimulate a deeper search for worthwhileness in values. As members of a new and growing discipline, evaluators must direct their energies to meta-evaluation activities as well as to methodological issues. The process or argument about the criteria of evaluation, and hence the values to be served, must be at the forefront of the evaluation profession.

This requirement dictates that evaluators not work in a technical vacuum. Evaluators appear to recognize the need for regular and close contact and discussion with professionals in other social disciplines with whom they have substantive and methodological issues in common. What is not so apparent is a recognition of the need for consultation with moral philosophers who have expertise in value theory. As stated by Klein: “evaluation involves a constant, unending and probably unresolvable dialogue between arguments about criteria and assessment of impact” (p. 138).

The foregoing requirements have implications as well for individuals as practising professional evaluators. Much of what evaluators do ultimately depends upon their own integrity, morality and value systems. As evaluators they must be able to explicate and justify their values in terms of what is instrumentally or intrinsically good. Evaluators cannot avoid the issues of what should be or can be done. It is not enough to simply “present the facts” and walk away.

Finally, a comment about value pluralism in relation to the training of evaluators would seem to be appropriate. As the discipline grows, train-

ing of professionals is becoming increasingly important. A recent issue of *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, (1980) was devoted entirely to the training of evaluators. The various authors spoke of the need for a broader knowledge base and more diverse methodologies. However, the training models they suggest still focus on research design and methodological content, with an occasional foray into professional ethics, substantive knowledge, practicum experiences, and so on. "Research design, quantitative methods, and measurement techniques form the core content of an evaluation research program" (Wortman, Cordray & Reis, 1980, p. 22). This is not sufficient. The training of evaluators must incorporate the study of values if evaluators are to be competent in a value pluralistic society.

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