The Socio-Politics of Evaluating: Some Issues of Values, Roles, and Tactics

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La littérature contemporaire qui traite d'évaluation en pédagogie tend à décrire la réalité sociale de façon plus harmonieuse qu'elle ne l'est vraiment dans les faits. Lorsqu'on se penche sur les éléments "socio-politiques" rattachés à l'évaluation, on constate (a) la fonction essentielle dévolue aux valeurs et à la valorisation dans l'acte d'évaluer et (b) l'importance des problèmes soulevés par les attentes divergentes au niveau des rôles que peuvent avoir les "évaluateurs" et les "évalués". On propose plusieurs tactiques pour libérer l'acte d'évaluer de ces contraintes socio-politiques. L'une d'elles est le concept de réflexivité que l'on perçoit comme un antidote contre la présente domination du positivisme dans le domaine de l'évaluation. Il semble que le succès de la remise en question de l'acte d'évaluer doive passer par le dépassement d'une approche technologique pour pouvoir saisir les influences sociales, politiques et éthiques du milieu.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation, though by no means a new concept, has of late gained a prominent niche in the domain of applied social science. Innovations and even on-going social or educational programs all demand evaluating, notably in the eyes of administrators, politicians, and accountability-minded publics. Through the sixties at least, however, a certain "backwardness" in theory was perceived vis-à-vis this demand. As one analyst of educational evaluation's "failure" observed,

> the primary task in evaluation today is the provision of sensible alternatives to the evaluator. The evaluation of educational innovations awaits the modernization of the theory and practice of the evaluative art. We need, then, a technology of evaluation. [Guba, 1969, p. 38]

The general response to this felt need, from mid-decade on, was a plethora of "second-generation" or "systems evaluation" models (Taylor & Cowley, 1972, pp. 89–134). This development marked a shift from the earlier methodology, which had been predominantly the curriculum evaluation influenced by Tylerian thinking and stressing pupil performance, behavioral objectives, and paper–pencil tests of subject-matter mastery. Eschewing this narrow focus, the new systems models evaluate all elements central and peripheral to the educational program or even an entire school system. The systems world-view thus moves beyond a concern

with pupil performance and behavior to additional consequences such as staff satisfaction and extra-classroom side effects, as well as "inputs" (e.g. resources, social environment) and "processes" (e.g. teacher–learner interactions, administration).

My concern here lies not with the actual form or content of second-generation models, which do vary, but in the strikingly optimistic tone common to much of this literature. Explicitly or implicitly, such optimism augured that the "art" could become "science" with improvements in the tools, among which models received the most attention. The intent of this article is to show why at least some portion of this optimism is illusory. Essentially, it is argued here that in the normal setting of most educational or social programs the evaluator's role is subject to certain constraints transcending the utility of any model however technically sophisticated. Constituting what can be broadly called the "socio-politics" of evaluating, these constraints involve two dimensions. The first concerns the place of values in the evaluation process, and the second includes socio-political issues which deal with social relationships pertinent to the evaluator's role. The focus is on the evaluating act in general without distinction among different contexts such as curriculum, program, or institution.

VALUES IN EVALUATING

In the so-called "crisis" ethos of academia (Gouldner, 1970) one major focus of dissent centres on the fact that much of contemporary social scientific inquiry is steeped in positivistic tradition. This orientation also permeates both educational and evaluation research. As Easley (1966) says, there is in education a "methodological parochialism" that relies excessively on behavioristic, experimental-statistical designs. A recent text on evaluating social programs, edited by two veteran evaluators, consistently upheld the "superiority" of such approaches (Rossi and Williams, 1972). Randomization, factorial designs, regression coefficients, measurable outcomes, and rationalistic processes like PPBS (planning, programming, budgeting system) which create "rules of evidence" are apparently the keys to sound evaluative research and effective policy analysis. In this positivistic paradigm of evaluating, which sees little distinction between the "subjects" of scientific and social scientific inquiry, there appears little explicit recognition of the place of values. This attitude needs to be criticized as mere mystification of the normative stuff that is social reality.

Non-"Value Free" Social Science

As followers (inspired by Kuhn, 1962) of the movement in social scientific paradigms will have observed, a new mood has emerged over the last decade to challenge the notion of a "value free" social science. Practically all fronts of the social and behavioral sciences are covered: witness Myrdal (1968)

in economics and international development; Gouldner (1970) in sociology; Maslow and Rogers in the humanistic psychology school (Bugental, 1967); and educationists like Yee (1972) who warn of the limits of scientific-economic-technological approaches. In essence, what seems common to these varied social scientists is a determination to relate human values explicitly to the knowledge arising from scientific inquiries. Basic to their methodology is an awareness of the initial values-imbued frame of reference investigators bring to any research situation, vis-à-vis model(s), conceptualization(s), or theoretical stance adopted, data-collection techniques used, and most importantly, the identification of what actually constitutes the "problem" or "issue" to be studied.

Evaluating and Values

The critique of "value free" evaluation in education has expressed itself most clearly in the debate over accountability. For instance, a recent set of readings entitled *Educational Accountability: A Humanistic Perspective* challenges the validity of behavioral objectives which require exact measurement (Welch, Richards, & Richards, 1973). Calling on educators to respond to man's need for meaning and personal worth, the editors warn that the emphasis on easily measured goals causes important aspects of the educational process to be overlooked.

Likewise, Popkewitz and Wehlage (1973) have raised questions about the value-assumptions of conventional accountability. They contend that such accountability, highly imbued with the world-view of technological management and human engineering (e.g. Meade, 1969; Greenfield, 1972), stresses

> (1) Specification of precise objectives that are measurable to insure accurate evaluation; (2) use of management techniques to improve efficiency and control of educational institutions to achieve the specified objectives. The two components reflect a concern for formalizing the procedures of schooling into a logical and rational process in which every element is controlled and assessed in terms of its observable functions. *The school, whatever its overall effects on children, is made more efficient in terms of measured ouput on intended outcomes.* (Italics in original.) [Popkewitz & Wehlage, 1973, p. 49]

This "technological mode" of thought is said to sustain an impoverished view of reality, and leave unquestioned the assumptions underlying conventional schooling.

> For example, there is no discussion of the honesty of the work children are called upon to do or of its integrity to the scholarship of the various intellectual fields from which it is drawn. The structures and practices of schools are given and unchanging in their essentials, as no alternatives are sought except those that fit into maintaining the stability of the operating system itself. [P. 54]

In the evaluating act, it is suggested, values intrude most significantly

via the evaluator's perception of what education ought to mean and accomplish. This does not imply, of course, that since value judgments or "tastes" are involved, evaluating then regresses into a purely "subjective" exercise. As Scriven (1974) argues, value judgements can be logically evaluated with no more or less reliability or objectivity than factual claims. What makes educational evaluation problematic lies not in the objective measurement of value-positions, but in deciding what evaluative categories should be employed.

> Schooling is essentially a moral-value undertaking . . .there is a crucial problem of selecting from among alternative categories before data can be gathered and interpreted. How does one choose these categories? What criteria guide an evaluator's choice? [Wehlage, 1974, p. 67]

Wehlage further points out that when educational evaluations are made, based on certain value premises, there are also tacit assumptions behind these premises about what constitutes the "good" society or the "good" life. Similarly, Apple (1974) notes that evaluation is not only a form of social valuing by which one or more groups of people (e.g. teachers, administrators) assign values to activities, goals, and procedures of others (e.g. students) but also implies a choice among a range of value-systems that might give meaning to educational activity. Systems management or technological modes of evaluating, however, serve to submerge this valuing process underneath "process–product" reasoning and technological concepts like system, inputs, and feedback.

It has been argued so far that values and valuing play inescapable roles in the evaluating act. By virtue of their choice of evaluative categories for collecting and interpreting data, evaluators are not value-free researchers when they begin their inquiries. Acceptance of this fact is critical to the demystification and undermining of the contemporary dominance of positivist thinking in the theory and practice of educational evaluation.

ROLE RELATIONSHIPS IN EVALUATING

Besides neglecting values, much of prevailing educational evaluation literature also says little about the evaluating role per se in the socio-political setting of any evaluating act. It is as though an evaluator, armed with the appropriate model, automatically produces an efficacious evaluation by applying the prescribed procedures. Yet, privately or unofficially, evaluators often reveal a picture far less harmonious than their printed reports indicate. It is argued here that a prior awareness of the socio-political issues likely to color role relationships in evaluating may help to qualitatively improve evaluation. Furthermore, it is reasonable to view an acquaintance with evaluation in all its complexities, rather than a mere armory of models, as an integral aspect of the training of would-be evaluators.

Generally, to date, researchers involved in social programs have taken

the lead in exposing the "socio-politics" of evaluating roles (Weiss, 1972; Bend, 1970; Carter, 1971), though insights have also come from a few educationists (Cohen, 1970; Williams & Evans, 1969; MacDonald, 1973). Bend's (1970) analytical discussion serves in particular to identify succinctly many of the issues likely to operate in evaluation situations, and provides several threads of the argument below.

Divergent Role Expectations

Although programs usually include in-house evaluation exercises, it is still standard practice, where summative evaluation is concerned, to bring in external or independent evaluators. When this happens, divergent role expectations become a problem in the socio-politics of evaluating. The divergence may stem from inadequate initial understanding and mutual agreement, between the evaluator and the sponsoring and/or participant organization, over the objectives, activities, and outcomes of the evaluation. The problem may be more complex where sponsor and participants are separated entities (e.g. central office administrators and teachers) since divergent expectations are often associated with differential location in the organizational hierarchy. Haste in drawing up the evaluation proposal, lack of time for the evaluator to establish initial rapport with participants, and the evaluator's vested self-interest in not imposing value demands on the sponsor are common contributory factors to inadequacy in initial understanding.

Differences in expectations can also complicate the process of evaluation through lack of acceptance of the evaluator by program participants during the fieldwork itself. As Weiss (1970, p. 99) points out, fundamental differences in role are usually involved. Since practitioners have to believe in what they are doing, while evaluators naturally adopt a questioning attitude, conflicting goals, values, interests, and frames of reference between the two are understandable sources of tension. Practitioners, being accountable for project success, may feel threatened vis-à-vis the future of their programs as well as their own professional competency. They may be skeptical, too, of the "sensitivity" of the evaluator's tools in measuring what they feel are the really important consequences of the program.

Not unjustifiably, practitioners often criticize evaluators also for engaging in "hit-and-run" operations that preclude the empathetic understanding that can emerge only from a longer immersion of evaluators in the program.

Lack of acceptance may further arise if practitioners perceive that evaluation represents ritual behavior designed to satisfy some "upstairs" needs, and is largely irrelevant to helping the local program being evaluated. In particular, when the institution or organization has a history of top administrative resistance to change, staff soon recognize the low utility

value of research in introducing change. Hence, they may be unready or unwilling to co-operate (Carter, 1970, p. 92). Finally, for evaluators who employ the conventional experimental designs of evaluating, a special case of the lack-of-acceptance problem occurs when program staff fail to co-operate in maintaining minimal design conditions. Pretest data, for example, may reveal a serious operational problem. Should staff decide to use these data for problem rectification, as they tend to do, given their practitioner ethos, the experimental design is effectively ruined.

Divergent role expectations have been observed to entail such problematic consequences for evaluating as: refusal of the participants or institution to give access to essential information; questioning of the evaluator's capability and methods by participants; biassing of evaluation results through prearranged "successful" program activities; disruption of experimental designs; and even the non-use of evaluation findings by sponsor or participants. The last-mentioned problem, being increasingly seen as somewhat intractable, deserves a separate discussion.

The Utilization Problem

The final part of the evaluating act, when data analysis and reporting of results are undertaken, can be as problematic as the fieldwork itself. For example, findings and recommendations may be presented in a form difficult for sponsor or participant to interpret and apply. More decisive reasons for non-utilization, however, can be traced to socio-political issues. Evaluation unavoidably produces judgmental information that can potentially change power relationships and affect the political investments of individuals or groups (Cohen, 1970, p. 197). A program judged ineffective may lead to loss of influence or even dismissal of staff personnel.

This political logic of evaluating seems to underlie the frequently encountered resistance to negative findings. Looking over case studies of evaluations in industry and education, Carter (1971) noticed that where conclusions did not meet expectations of the clients (sponsor; participants), certain defensive reactions occurred. A typical ploy is selective ignoring or repudiation of the findings, so that only certain results coinciding with the clients' preconceptions are highlighted. The evaluation then serves a latent legitimization function for the vested interests of sponsor or participant. In extreme cases suppression of the total evaluation report occurs.

Recently, Weiss (1970, p. 114) has provided a useful framework for discussing the utilization problem. Focussing on "organizational resistances" to findings, she refers to the notions of "feasibility," "acceptability," and "ideology." Organizations tend to find the status quo a "contentedly feasible state," since changes, if drastic or extensive, could require more material resources, more administrative time and effort, and concomitant variation in established staff working habits. The "acceptability" factor

concerns the reactions of outside groups to any new practice(s) that may be suggested by the evaluation. Such groups (e.g. funders, community) may find the proposed changes in conflict with their social values and current expectations. Similarly, politicians are generally mindful of the potential vote-gain or -loss impact of planned changes. Finally, organizations embody certain ideological commitments that cause them to resist the most negative findings, and sometimes even to launch counterattacks via such tactics as criticism of the evaluation methodology. A case in point was the controversy raised over the Westinghouse–Ohio University evaluation of Head Start (Williams & Evans, 1969).

In sum, when the evaluating act is examined in the context of roles, a host of problematic socio-political issues comes to light. The literature on evaluation models, however, pays scarce attention to such constraints.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

What are some practical implications derivable from awareness of "the socio-politics of evaluating"? As proposed by various practitioners they constitute reasoned tactics rather than rules of certain success.

Preliminary Tactics

To begin with, it makes good sense for the evaluator not to develop an evaluation plan without first considering the expectations of sponsors and participants. Logical tactics include becoming familiar with the structure and mode of operation of the sponsor/participant organization, presenting a preliminary study plan (e.g. identifying and operationalizing variables; specifying measures and techniques) and, ideally, preparing

> an unequivocating proposal that comes to grips with the issues which lead to mis-understanding. This includes clear statements of:
> - The objectives of the evaluation research study
> - The minimum conditions to which the sponsor must agree in order to meet the objectives
> - The nature and form of the products of the innovation
> - The limitations on the appropriate use of the products. [Bend, 1970, p. 115]

Such hard-nosed negotiation should help expose some if not all of the potential goal conflicts and different expectations between evaluator and client. Frank preliminary discussions may also assist the evaluator in assessing the likelihood of the client's acceptance of negative findings, and perhaps to decline the commission if such likelihood seems low.

Enhancing Acceptance

One possible tactic for mitigating the non-acceptance problem involves careful selection of evaluators with characteristics (e.g. professional qualifications, work experience) that inspire confidence. Another important

step is communicating the logic of data collection to participants through some form of orientation activity. Program participants at all hierarchical levels should be informed of the specific objectives of the evaluation plan. Perhaps most crucial is the obligation of evaluators to provide to the participant organization information that is collected during the evaluation but which may also facilitate implementation of the program. Such information includes not only the final report but also on-the-spot informal assistance that may be offered if requested by participants.

Soft Evaluation

If evaluators adopt the practice of passing back to participants information which may then be used for continuing program changes, they effectively preclude their own use of the experimental design so favored in the positivist paradigm. The inability to perform so-called "hard" evaluation, however, should not be equated with "no" evaluation. In fact, when a program is broad and complex, there are good reasons (e.g. non-standardized treatment, lack of controls) for jettisoning the experimental approach in favor of a more qualitative, process-oriented strategy (Weiss & Rien, 1969). This "soft" approach seems more likely to discover unanticipated information about reasons for failure and success. An interesting example is seen in the Nuffield/Schools Council humanities curriculum project in England (MacDonald, 1973).

Promoting Utilization

The problem of non-utilization of evaluation results has as its major underlying cause various organizational resistances to change. Not surprisingly, then, one line of approach has been aimed at a reconsideration of the place of evaluating in the institutional decision-making structure. As Rossi (1968) puts it,

> The main problem . . . is that evaluation has not yet been accorded its proper place as playing a major role in policy formation and change. Policy is formed without considering what kinds of evaluation research would be needed to sustain the worth of a program, and even more important, what are reasonable alternatives when evaluation indicates that a program has failed. Without such a two-pronged commitment to evaluation, research tends to be unwittingly or otherwise designed to produce irrelevant results shoddily conceived, poorly carried out and easy to disregard. [P. 18]

Weiss (1970, p. 120) has suggested a "program, planning and development unit" as a structure for allying evaluation with policy-making. Located high in the organization hierarchy, such a unit is concerned with continuous program development and improvement. In this scheme, the evaluator becomes an important source of information, and through feeding reports into an ongoing planning process, appears to acquire "leverage" in the system.

While closer ties between evaluation and policy-making are important, it should be noted that structural relationships affording more "leverage" to the evaluator within an organization do not automatically make the "socio-politics" of evaluating vanish. Evaluators will still need to cope with goal conflicts and role differences. Indeed, their "inside" status may make them more vulnerable to pressure from colleagues to refrain from open criticism. Weiss (1970, pp. 114, 120), in talking about "ideological" commitments shared by members of organizations that "resist" utilization findings, and in proposing as a solution an evaluation unit whose members in fact belong to the same organization, seems to overlook this contradiction.

One recently proposed strategy that may be able to overcome such contradictions is Morrison and Riffel's (Note 1) model of "co-operative conflict resolution." Their basic argument is that conflict within an organization, when managed co-operatively, can be a constructive force for change. An evaluator, whether insider or outsider, can play the social role of "third party mediator," helping organizational members with divergent expectations to confront each other frankly, identify sources of conflict, mutually understand each other, and come to a mutually satisfying resolution of problems raised through continuous evaluation. This strategy is clearly in line with recent attempts to initiate some form of "organization development" within schools (Schmuck & Miles, 1971). However, in so far as such experiments have not enjoyed widespread application, it may not be a tactic readily available to most evaluators.

Lastly, one assumption of the organization-type solution to non-utilization (whether in the form of a special unit, à la Weiss, or the Morrison-Riffel conflict-resolution model) may be questioned: that is the apparent emphasis on "internal" leverage or collaboration to effect policy changes. Indeed, the opposite premise of external "leverage," such as that exerted by relevant extra-organizational groups (cf. Alinsky's community organizing strategy) seems just as valid a method of promoting utilization of findings. To permit this, of course, findings must be made freely available to the groups concerned. Yet, evaluators who work via contract with a sponsor usually find their hands tied vis-à-vis independent public disclosure. Such reasoning leads to at least one practical implication, namely the desirability of an increased role for researchers who are willing to evaluate independently of any sponsoring organization. The most relevant context appears to be that where a great power gap lies between program participants and the sponsoring organization (e.g. underclass minorities and institutional officials).

Reflexive Evaluating

The discussion so far has focussed more on socio-political issues pertinent to evaluating roles than on the earlier-addressed issue of values and

valuing. What implications for practice flow from the fact that evaluators are never value-free when they begin an evaluative inquiry? First of all, for the sake of objectivity it seems ethically imperative that evaluators be explicitly aware of and candid about the values embodied in their particular conceptualization, design, or theoretical stance. Secondly, they may then be more sensitive to the fact that their choice of certain evaluative categories may approximate only those of, say, people in official capacities. Scriven (1974) for one admits that "the evaluator has to be willing to face the fact that there are conflicting demands from different audiences and be willing to provide an evaluation for each of the audiences in response to its particular interests" (p. 71).

The current "humanistic" accountability movement, for example, illustrates one model of reflexive evaluating (Welch, Richards, & Richards, 1973; Popkewitz & Wehlage, 1973; Yee, 1972). In general agreement with such critics of education as Goodman, Kozol, Illich, and Holt, the evaluative criteria of the "humanistic" evaluators centre around the "quality of life" in schools. They share an aversion to conventional testing geared towards selecting individual competitors for future membership in meritocratic hierarchies (Karier, 1974), to the behavioral objectives movement (Atkin, 1968) and to performance contracting as a form of accountability (Yee, 1972). The proposed alternative of "institutional" evaluation seeks instead to raise educational evaluation to a level of ethical discourse beyond technological, means–end, or process–product reasoning by always asking what kind of schooling is consistent with the "good society" desired (Apple, 1973; Wehlage, Popkewitz, & Hartoonian, 1973; Popkewitz & Wehlage, 1973). Such an approach – characterized not only by awareness of the importance of values in the evaluating act but also by explicit involvement of the evaluator's own values – is clearly anti-positivistic in orientation. It affords therefore a useful exemplar for those concerned about the contemporary dominance of positivism in evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The intention of this article has been to illuminate two major dimensions of the "socio-politics" of evaluating. One dimension concerns problems emerging from divergences in role-expectations between those evaluating and those whose activities, programs, and institutions are being evaluated. It has been suggested that some problems may be consciously mitigated through various tactics, though never wholly eliminated, given the normal political flux of human experience. In this sense it is still valid to talk about an "art" of evaluating. The second dimension concerns the values and epistemological assumptions of the evaluator vis-à-vis the educative process, the actual functions of evaluating in educational institutions, and even the role of school in society. Evaluators often seem aware of this dimension, if

at all, only at an unexpressed level. It has been suggested that the reflexive step of making the values dimension explicit and involving it in the evaluating act is the personal and ethical responsibility of each evaluator. In sum, if fruitful rethinking of the evaluating act is to occur, it seems critical that researchers in the field of evaluation move beyond technological designing to an earnest grappling with social, political, and ethical issues.

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REFERENCE NOTE

1. Morrison, T. R., & Riffel, J. A. *Curriculum evaluation as cooperative conflict resolution.* N.d. (Mimeographed)

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