Evaluation for Decisions: Is Anybody There? Does Anybody Care?

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As evaluators, we undertake our studies with the intention of helping decision makers make wiser decisions. We provide evidence that shows the successes and shortcomings of programs. We identify some of the factors that are associated with better and worse outcomes. And we often try to explain *how* the program works in practice and *why* it leads to the effects we observe. We expect that these data will feed into the decision-making process and influence the actions that people take at the staff level, at management levels, or in the higher reaches of policymaking.

We are often disappointed. After all the "sturm und drang" of running an evaluation, and analyzing and reporting its results, we do not see much notice taken of it. Things usually seem to go along much as they would have gone if the evaluation had never been done. What is going wrong here? And what can we do about it?

I do not always turn to economists for advice on matters like this, but I recently came across a speech made by James Buchanan, who received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1986. On that occasion, he said that "economists should cease proffering policy advice as if they were

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Plenary address for meeting of American Evaluation Association, Boston, Massachusetts, October 16, 1987.

employed by a benevolent despot, and they should look to the structure within which political decisions are made" (Buchanan, 1987). His own early work, he said, "called upon my fellow economists to postulate some model of the state, of politics, before proceeding to analyze the effects of alternative policy measures."

Evaluators have been coming to the same conclusion. A number of writers have been urging evaluators to understand the decision-making systems in organizations and the policymaking system in government if we want our evaluations to have any influence. The traditional posture of our field toward policymakers is obsolete. We have been excessively rationalistic, and we have presupposed something very much like a benevolent-despot decision maker who would listen to our results and proceed to put them into practice.

Lee Cronbach (1982: 5) has written, "Nearly all the literature on evaluation speaks of it as an attempt to serve a decision maker." He says, "It is supposed that information flows to a manager or policy official who has a firm grasp on the controls.... Actually, however, most action is determined by a pluralistic community, not by a lone decision maker" (Cronbach and Associates, 1980: 84). That is one of the keys to understanding the patterns of utilization: Program and policy decisions are the result of multiple actions by multiple actors. So most of the advice that we have heard over the years turns out to be irrelevant, because it is geared to the unitary decision maker, the benevolent despot, who can make things happen all by himself or herself.

You've heard the advice: Identify the key decision maker (or the few key decision makers). Get them involved in planning the evaluation. Be sure the evaluation addresses the questions they raise. Limit the study to variables that they have the authority to manipulate. Communicate results early. Talk to them in person. When you write, make the report short, clear, and simple. Make explicit recommendations for improvement. Be sure that the results, and the recommendations that you draw from the results, are feasible within the constraints of their organization. And so on. Evaluators have been repeatedly advised to make themselves and their findings comfortable and "user-friendly" to the key decision maker.

In some cases, the advice works. There are examples of officials who have become committed to the evaluation and have proceeded to implement changes based on evaluation findings, particularly in relatively small programs without much divergence of interests. And of course these are often good things to do in and of themselves. Talking to program managers and staff, and discussing the questions that they raise, helps to educate the evaluator about the program and the issues it faces. Maintaining an ongoing conversation with people who will shape the future of the program keeps them informed about the emerging findings. But in most cases that I know of, the influence of evaluation on program decisions has not noticeably increased. Even evaluators who have tried conscientiously to abide by the traditional advice have had indifferent success in making evaluation the basis of decisions.

Let me give you five reasons why I believe that these kinds of strictures are only partially useful in most large-scale program situations.

First of all, they assume that one or a few key people determine policy. The traditional advice fails to take account of the fact that decisions are the outcome of interests in contention. It pays insufficient attention to the political nature of program decision making. Let me quote Cronbach one more time, because I believe that this sentence of his captures a glittering truth: "What is needed [from evaluation] is information that supports negotiation rather than information calculated to point out the 'correct' decision" (Cronbach and Associates 1980: 4). When there are multiple participants with multiple views and interests involved in decision making, there can be no single correct decision. An evaluation study that tries to provide the one best answer often winds up getting used by one side or another as ammunition in organizational contests, or it gets neglected.

A second reason that the traditional good advice has limited reach is that evaluation is never comprehensive or convincing enough to supply "*the* correct answer." There are always issues that evaluation does not address, but that decision makers have to worry about: What changes will make the program work better? How much will such changes cost? How hard will it be to implement change? Which groups will support or oppose it? What will constituents think? And so on. However good an evaluation study may be, it does not answer all questions a decision maker must consider.

The third reason that the traditional advice falls short is that many program decisions do not come about through rational decision processes. In a surprisingly large number of cases, decisions seem to "happen" without any formal decision process at all. Small steps are taken in many different offices that close off some avenues and narrow the range of available options. By a series of disjointed and amorphous accommodations, a line of action takes shape, which only in retrospect is seen to be a decision. Sometimes decisions are the side effects of other matters entirely. Sometimes the hiring of new people determines what the organization can and cannot do. Sometimes decisions are made by precedent or by improvisation. In situations like these, nobody trots out the formal decision-making paraphernalia; in fact, people are not consciously aware that they are setting precedents or taking stands. Still a decision accretes (Weiss, 1980). When this is the case, the use of evaluation evidence is difficult. If people in the organization are not making formal choices, they do not go out and seek information—nor are they particularly responsive to information coming in. They act on the basis of what they already know—their current stock of knowledge. In order for evaluation to have an influence in these nondecision decisions, evaluation findings have to be widely diffused and accepted as part of the "taken-for-granted" assumptions that organizational actors accept.

Fourth, even when there *are* clear-cut decisions and readily identifiable decision makers, people don't always know what kind of information they need to know. I've been in situations where we tried to get people in positions of authority to describe their informational needs. It is amazing how difficult it was for them to foresee what kind of information would make a difference. They are inclined to fall back on answers that seem socially acceptable in the organization. For example, if you ask school people what kind of information they want to have in order to make a decision about curriculum or in-service training or school organization, the most common answer is "student test scores." Test scores may have nothing at all to do with the issue at hand, but educators care about student achievement, and so "test scores" is the all-purpose answer.

Finally, there are all the reasons we have known about for so long that have to do with the constellation of interests that set hard as concrete around a program. People who are involved with things as they are—including clients as well as staff and administrators—are comfortable with the status quo, and they are often wary of shaking up the system. That is one reason why the major users of evaluation usually turn out to be *not* the people affiliated with the program that is evaluated, but people at high levels or at other sites or those considering the establishment of similar programs or policies.

These, then, are some reasons why the advice about involving decision makers in evaluation and being responsive to their needs is valuable only in limited situations. Nevertheless, and this is one of the most heartening empirical findings of the last 10 years, evaluation often has considerable influence on program and policy. Consider some of the markers. Public policy discourse is permeated with references to data and findings from evaluation. Read the press releases of government agencies and the newsletters of interest groups; read the reports of congressional committees; listen to the speeches of federal, state, and even local officials. With surprising frequency, they allude to ideas that had their origins in evaluation studies. Clearly, officials believe that their case is strengthened when they have credible evaluation findings to provide a rationale. In fewer and fewer policy debates can entrants hope to prevail without good arguments, and arguments are bolstered by the respectable support of evaluation results.

How can this be? We have just been through a list of reasons why participants in decision making are not open and amenable to the findings of evaluation. How can evaluation results get around these barriers and influence policy? Well, for one thing, we have to recognize that it is not the single decision maker, the benevolent despot, who uses evaluation to improve the program. Rather, evaluation findings—and generalizations from those findings—come into currency among the many groups and interests involved in a policy domain. They infiltrate the "policy subsystem," and much of the discourse on policy and program alternatives is phrased these days in the language of social research. Participants who have no data or evidence to support their position are at risk of being brushed aside; any group whose case rests on faulty data or flawed analysis can be more easily overwhelmed. Of course, there is more to political bargaining than facts and evidence; but, where many groups vie, where power is roughly equally distributed, or where important actors have not yet taken a stand, evaluative evidence can be of significant value.

Recall, too, Cronbach's statement that evaluation is most useful when it facilitates negotiation. Evaluation that opens new facets of a situation or that discloses possible grounds for agreement can have widespread influence. For example, an evaluation of a workfare-style program suggests that work requirements both get people off welfare and give former welfare recipients the self-supporting independence that they want. Such data can rally both liberals and conservatives to support certain kinds of work requirements in the welfare program.

Let's sum up this part of the discussion. Most evaluations are undertaken in a policymaking system where authority is dispersed, multiple groups have a say, and policy is the resultant of conflicts and accommodations across a complex and shifting set of players. The evaluator has little chance of being a "gray eminence" standing behind *the* decision maker. But evaluation findings that become known in the larger policy community have a chance to affect the terms of the debate, the language in which it is conducted, and the ideas that are considered relevant in its resolution. Even when decisions come about through informal compromises and accommodations, without conscious activation of formal decision-making machinery, generalizations from evaluation can percolate into the stock of knowledge that participants draw upon.

Empirical research has confirmed this situation. Research on knowledge utilization has disclosed that the results of one study rarely influence the direction of the program that was evaluated. But decision makers indicate a strong belief that they are influenced by ideas and arguments that have their origins in research and evaluation. Case studies of evaluations and decisions tend to show that the generalizations and ideas that come from research and evaluation help to shape the development of policy. The phenomenon has come to be known as "enlightenment." Through diffuse processes, research concepts and ideas come into currency and have consequences for the shape of policy to come.

Decision makers tend to be interested in the topics that evaluators study, particularly if their own program is not on the block; they are interested in the general kinds of results that evaluation finds—what kinds of programs work well and what kinds of clients are most likely to fare well. They see research and evaluation as providing a backdrop of facts and ideas for keeping up with the world. Evaluation is a form of news. It is a kind of continuing education. It helps policy actors update their map of the social world (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980). They are likely to be more open to new information in the early phases of the policy cycle than in the later stages. Reformist governments with expansive programs are more willing to listen to evaluation than conservative governments in times of retrenchment (Tarschys, 1983). But many policy actors have a basic hospitality to the kinds of knowledge that evaluation offers.

In our western rationalist culture, reliance on systematic fact and tested theory is seen as a proper and rational mode of behavior. Policy actors who consciously pay attention to evaluation view themselves, and are often viewed by others, as behaving rationally. It is in their interest to commission studies, call in experts, cite evaluation evidence. Such actions show their colleagues and the public that they are good decision makers, because they are doing what good decision makers do. They are abiding by the convention to study the facts (Feldman and March, 1981).

As evaluation moves into currency and becomes accepted by informed publics, it can change the premises that are taken for granted and the issues that are seen as problematical. Thus it can clarify the nature and extent of problems and their susceptibility to purposive action, and so reorder the policy agenda. It can show which kinds of actions work well and thus recast the types of alternatives that are considered as potential solutions. In these ways, evaluation serves to enlighten policy discourse (Rivlin, 1971; Bulmer, 1986; OECD, 1980; Kallen et al., 1982; Weiss, 1980).

HOW EVALUATION IDEAS TRAVEL

"Enlightenment" is an engaging idea. The image of evaluation as increasing the wattage of light in the policy arena brings joy to the hearts of evaluators. But if, as we have seen, evaluation reports sent directly to policy actors do not generally bring about much change, how do these ideas travel? What communication channels bring evaluation to attention? How does evaluation have an influence?

First of all, it seems that there are certain participants in policy making who tend to be "users" of evaluation. The personal factor—a person's interest, commitment, enthusiasm—plays a part in determining how much influence a piece of research will have (Patton, 1978). We don't yet know why some people become committed enthusiasts—no identifiable background trait or experience has yet shown to be consistently present—but we do see a number of policy actors, and a larger number of staff aides, who give evaluation a serious hearing—even go out and look for it.

Most policy actors seem to be indifferent. They are busy people, and reading reports is low on their list of activities. They tend to make do with what they already know or what people they trust tell them. Nevertheless, evaluation results still filter through. Let me mention five ways in which evaluation can come to their attention.

Staff

Probably the most immediate source of evaluation information is the policymaker's staff. Whether policymakers are bureaucrats, political appointees, legislators, or interest group leaders, they rely on staff to keep them informed. No policy actor wants to look ignorant or to be unaware of evidence that is going to be used by those with opposing views. They rely on briefings from their aides to keep abreast of the issues.

The aides in turn can look to the in-house offices of research and evaluation that exist in many government agencies and other organizations. These offices sponsor evaluation, by grant and contract, and disseminate relevant results to organizational decision makers. These offices are an institutionalized testament to the perceived importance of research and evaluation in public policymaking.

The U.S. Congress can go to the congressional support agencies—the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, the General Accounting Office (GAO), and Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). Whether or not members of Congress or staff seek them out, these agencies pour out a cascade of reports. GAO in particular undertakes large numbers of evaluations of government programs.

The volume of evaluation done by and for government is, despite the Reagan cutbacks, substantial. Many reports are available inside government offices, and when outside groups—such as the mass media or blue ribbon panels—pick up the results of a government-sponsored study, its influence is likely to be magnified.

Blue-Ribbon Commissions and Panels

A second route by which evaluation reaches decision makers is through blue-ribbon commissions and panels. Presidents, Congress, and cabinet secretaries have established special commissions to examine such issues as civil disorder, AIDS, and the state of American education. Members are usually chosen to represent major segments of the society—industry, labor, government, universities, and other interests relevant to the commission's charge. Almost all commissions have a professional staff, which collects existing evidence and often undertakes new research. When the commission writes its report, it relies to some degree on the nature of the research and evaluation that have been brought to light. (Some commissions are more conscientious about this than others.) Through the report, the commission gives considerable publicity not only to its conclusions but to the research and evaluation that support those conclusions (Komarovsky, 1975; Bulmer, 1980, 1983). One of the most endearing characteristics about commission reports from the standpoint of policymakers is that they represent a consensus among diverse segments of the society. Commission members have fought out their differences and resolved most of the thorny questions, sparing policymakers the task of resolving complex and often emotional issues. They can embrace the report without fear of major opposition. Whatever their immediate effect on policy, commission reports usually add to public knowledge of the issue and of the research bias for the commission's stand.

Mass Media

The mass media are another important channel to policymakers—in fact, to all of us. Reporters on major newspapers, such as the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* and the *Washington Post,* report significant amounts of news about research studies, statistical indicators, and evaluations (Weiss and Singer, forthcoming). The topics that attract reporters are those already in the news, so evaluations relevant to current policy have particular appeal. Most researchers whom we interviewed in a recent study on media reporting say that stories about their work are factually accurate and give appropriate emphasis. Although they have some complaints, especially about oversimplification, they believe that readers are generally receiving an accurate impression of their work.

Policymakers pay careful attention to the media for a variety of reasons and are alerted to the evaluation findings that appear. Even though they may have their own specialized communication system and their own staff, they may not hear about relevant evaluation findings until they read about them in the press or see them on television. From the policymaker's perspective, media reporting of evaluation of a program in their domain is a significant event. It is not just that *Time* magazine or the *Washington Post* gives them a capsule summary of the evaluation; more important, policymakers know that the same story reaches all the other players in the policy game. They will be asked about it. They had better know about it. They can't sweep it under the rug. A zealous staffer may call around and get the original study on which the story was based. The media focus attention on the evaluations they report.

Interest Groups

From what we said earlier about the political nature of much program decision making, it should come as no surprise that another source of news about evaluation is the interest group. Many interest groups, such as professional associations, unions, and client organizations, relay evaluation data. Their interest is not disseminating knowledge. Their interest is advancing their own cases. If they find supportive information in evaluations, they make those findings part of their argument. Competing interest groups press different evidence on decision makers, and they sometimes criticize the data made available by their competitors.

Legislators, in particular, seem to be receptive to evaluation that arrives in this form, interwoven with argumentation and proposals for action. They are not particularly worried about distortion. They assume self-interest and an adversarial process, not "objectivity" or "truth." They take for granted that each side is exaggerating the strength of its case, and they assume that the facts lie somewhere between the extremes. They expect each side to point out the errors in the other side's case, and they believe they can ferret out the gist of the story.

Interestingly, they seem to be more receptive to information that comes from interest groups than they are to information that arrives under the guise of objective research. Legislators can be suspicious of academics who come bearing data. They want to know "Why are they telling me this? What's in it for them?" Interest groups they understand. They know where they are coming from and what they want. They wonder about these evaluators who claim to be impartial and objective. They wonder about the secret axes they may be grinding.

Issue Networks

Another source of evaluation information for policymakers is what Heclo (1978) has called the "issue network." Around many major issues in contention, there has grown up a set of people who have knowledge and long-term interest in shaping policy. All kinds of people are members of the network—staff of executive-branch agencies, political appointees, members of Congress and their staffs, state executives and legislators, program managers, academics, consultants, interest group representatives, and "think tank" experts. As policy on an issue develops over time, these people maintain contact with each other—serving on committees, talking on the phone, attending hearings, circulating material, and exchanging ideas. Researchers are members of many of the most active issue networks, such as those concerned with welfare reform and health-cost containment, and they become catalysts for the dissemination of research and evaluation.

FUNCTIONS THAT EVALUATION SERVES

Much evaluation comes into currency through these diverse channels. Policy actors in many places hear directly or obliquely about the lessons that evaluation yields. They perform their own intuitive meta-analysis as they figure out what the current state of program knowledge is.

What do they do with the information? How is evaluation translated, transmuted, or otherwise "used" in the policymaking process? Much evaluation, of course, is used peripherally or not at all. When decision makers already have considerable knowledge and experience on an issue, when they have strong ideological commitments or strong self-interest, evaluation is seen as an unnecessary frill. But on many issues the scope of problems is so complex that individuals are puzzled—and groups are at odds. They want new information, new ideas, new thinking. Evaluation is likely to get a hearing.

There are four ways in which policy actors use information in the policy process: as warning, guidance, reconceptualization, and mobilization of support.

Warning

Evaluation can provide the signal that things are going wrong. If studies show that graduates of job training programs are not getting and keeping jobs, if studies show that released mental patients are not receiving community services, these are warnings that something needs to be done. If longitudinal data are available, they provide data on trends—whether conditions are getting better or worse. Sudden shifts can signal serious trouble and may be particularly potent in triggering a policy response.

Guidance

A second function that evaluation serves is guidance. It gives direction for improving policies and programs. If the evaluation has compared several variations of a program, it can suggest which variant works better, and under what conditions. Thus some studies suggest that educating non-English-speaking students in their native language results in better English proficiency in later grades; whereas "immersion" programs, in which students are dumped into English classes from the start, lead to a loss of learning in all subjects until they master English. This kind of comparative information can be especially useful as policy guidance.

But for all the reasons we discussed earlier, program and policy people are not always docile candidates for guidance. It is much easier for evaluation to influence new programs and policies than it is to influence programs that are already in existence and buffered by a phalanx of supporters.

Reconceptualization

Evaluation offers another kind of contribution to policy, "reconceptualization." Studies can offer new approaches to familiar issues, new ways of thinking, new models for making sense of activities and outcomes. Evaluations can help to counteract the "taken-for-granted" assumptions, the musty sameness, of existing policy.

When research and evaluation offer new frames of reference, they help policymakers to reinterpret events, think critically about what happened in the past, and even reexamine past criteria for success. Recent studies of research use (Caplan, 1977; Rich, 1977; Cherns, 1986; Weiss with Bucuvalas, 1980; Knorr, 1977; Webber, 1987) suggest that policy actors may welcome ideas like this—particularly if they have tried many variations of programming without success and are yearning for new directions.

Mobilization of Support

A final way in which evaluation is used is to mobilize support for program and policy proposals. Advocates can use evaluation results to help build a winning coalition. Evaluation becomes a means of persuasion. It can reinforce the conviction of the original advocates that their plan is a good one; it can stiffen the support of current allies; it can help to persuade the undecided; once in a while it can sway the beliefs of opponents, weakening their adherence to their old position. Of course, good arguments and evidence are not uniformly successful, but they are useful counters in the policy game.

FINALE

Let me sum up the story. Evaluation results enter a "policy community," a set of interacting groups and institutions that push and haul their way to decisions through what Lynn (1987: 269) calls "fluid, overlapping, and ambiguous processes." To gain influence, the ideas from evaluation have to come into currency and be accepted in ongoing program and policy discussion. There are many and diverse routes into the discussion: via staff, expert commissions, the media, interest groups, consultants, conferences, and hearings, among others. When the findings and the intellectual structure of evaluation begin to shape the way that decision makers think about an issue—and the elements of it that they think about—evaluation has been "used."

We have analytically distinguished four types of use to which evaluation is put: warning of problems, guidance for crafting program reforms, reconceptualization of the nature of the issue, and building coalitions of support. These categories are conceptually distinguishable, but in practice they often blur. Evaluation that signals the seriousness of a problem may also provide ideas for dealing with it and help persuade others to support the new proposal.

Evaluation has become a regular component of discussion about programs and policies. Its influence has survived the Reagan Administration, budgetary cutbacks, and self-doubts in the evaluation community. Evaluators know that the purpose of their enterprise is program improvement, but I think we have come to recognize and accept the fact that evaluation does not always lead to improvements in the program under study. No matter how hard we try to be good planners, negotiators, and communicators with the stakeholders in the program, they are sometimes going to go their merry way. On the other hand, I think that we are becoming more aware that evaluation does influence decisions—often indirectly and at some distance from the original evaluation site. I think we can do more to make that happen. We are only starting to face up to the opportunities to improve the use of evaluation in the diffuse, multiparticipative bargaining processes that characterize democratic decision making. A necessary first step is to start thinking about the challenge in these larger terms.

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