

Between Power Plays and Interests: A Return to the Core Purpose of Evaluation¹

**Entre jeux de pouvoir et intérêts:
retour à la raison d'être de l'évaluation**

**Entre jogos de poder e interesses:
retorno à razão de ser da avaliação**

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The credibility given to evaluation results by stakeholders remains a significant concern for evaluators. How do stakeholders, who are interested parties, perceive the evaluation process and the credibility of the generated results? This article presents the documented perceptions of stakeholders as to the credibility of the obtained results and the overarching process. These perceptions are then compared to evaluators' points of view. The discourses converge on several levels; however, a potential divergence is underlined in the way stakeholders and evaluators come to understand the aim of the evaluation process. The analysis thus focuses on this divergence and its implications of the evaluation process in such a way that an innovative solution is submitted, which requires, nevertheless, a repositioning of the evaluators' relationship to the approach and to stakeholders.

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MOTS CLÉS: évaluation de programme, jugement crédible, parties prenantes, utilisation de l'évaluation

La crédibilité accordée aux résultats d'une évaluation par les parties prenantes demeure une préoccupation importante chez les personnes évaluatrices. Comment les parties prenantes, porteuses d'intérêts, perçoivent-elles la démarche évaluative et les résultats qu'elle génère comme crédibles? L'article présente les résultats d'une recherche ayant permis de documenter la perspective des parties prenantes à cet égard. Discutés sous l'angle comparatif avec la perspective de la personne évaluatrice, les résultats indiquent que les discours convergent sur plusieurs plans, mais qu'une divergence potentielle peut être observée quant aux finalités poursuivies dans le cadre de l'évaluation. Les constats mettent en relief plusieurs questionnements réflexifs quant aux implications de cette divergence pour la pratique de l'évaluation, lesquels mènent à conclure avec une piste de solution innovante exigeant un certain repositionnement dans la façon d'approcher une évaluation et dans les relations avec les parties prenantes

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: avaliação de programas, juízo credível, partes interessadas, utilização da avaliação

A credibilidade atribuída aos resultados de uma avaliação pelas partes interessadas continua a ser uma preocupação importante para os avaliadores. Como é que as partes interessadas, que têm os seus próprios interesses, percebem o processo avaliativo e os resultados que dele decorrem como credíveis? O artigo apresenta os resultados de uma investigação que documentou a perspectiva das partes interessadas a este respeito. Discutidos numa perspectiva comparativa com a perspectiva do avaliador, os resultados indicam que os discursos convergem em vários aspetos, mas que pode ser observada uma potencial divergência quanto às finalidades pretendidas no âmbito da avaliação. As conclusões salientam várias questões reflexivas quanto às implicações desta divergência para a prática de avaliação, levando à proposta de uma solução inovadora que exige um reposicionamento na forma de abordar a avaliação e nas relações com as partes interessadas.

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Introduction

The world is facing many complex problems, including poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, and inadequate public health and education. Many initiatives have been developed to tackle these challenges. However, ensuring responsibility and the efficient use of resources is more important now than ever before. This explains why program evaluation is emerging as a prerequisite for ongoing financing.

In this context, evaluation is also facing challenges, including evaluator independence and the value placed on conclusions (Picciotto, 2020). Many evaluators express feeling pressured to modify outcomes when they oppose stakeholder expectations. They are compelled to defend their conclusions to preserve their integrity, particularly in tumultuous times (Jakubik, 2020) or when the social climate is highly contentious.

The evaluation community has taken strong interest in evaluative quality, regarding both strategic and methodological decisions (House, 1980; Hurteau et al., 2012a; Hurteau & William, 2014). These studies encourage us to explore the question of the acceptability and legitimacy of evaluative judgments by stakeholders. They propose frameworks for understanding the underlying process used to make credible judgments with models that predominantly rely on the stance of experts. Considering the present obstacles, it is increasingly essential to examine whether this vision is widely held by all concerned parties. This concern is even more legitimate given the current trend towards democratizing evaluation, which promotes participatory approaches. (Bourgeois & Hurteau, 2018; Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014; Cousins et coll., 2013; Fetterman et al., 2017; Fleischer & Christie, 2009; Greene, 2006; Mathison, 2018; Orr, 2010; Torres-Cuello et coll., 2018; Whitmore, 1998). This article discusses the findings of a study that examined the following questions (Marchand, 2020): How do stakeholders perceive the evaluation process? How credible do they find the results, and what are the influencing factors? How do stakeholders' and evaluators' perspectives differ? Investigating these issues could contribute to designing innovative and effective methods that ensure evaluation processes more

effectively serve their purpose of judging and guiding decision making. Also, developing strategies with more comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues would improve stakeholders' acceptance of the results.

Conceptual framework

Judgment Credibility

The word “credible” comes from the Latin *credibilis*, meaning ‘worthy of belief’. As such, credibility is a subjective concept based on an individual’s and a culture’s perception (Mabry, 2009). Likewise, evaluation can be understood as a “pluralistic reality”, where knowledge is relative and influenced by the specific context (Dubeau et al., 2018; Dubois & Marceau, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Lack of trust in the evaluator or the evaluation process can hinder acceptance and implementation of the results (Taut & Alkin, 2003).

Carefully selected methodological approaches can help prevent such a stalemate (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014; Chen, 2004; Donaldson et al., 2009; Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2013). Validity and rigor are crucial, but they are not enough to ensure the trustworthiness of an evaluation and the results (Chelimsky, 2006; Greene, 2006; Hurteau et al., 2012b; Mabry, 2009; Schwandt, 2009). Fleming (2011) argues that stakeholders with limited evaluation expertise are less likely to consider methodological aspects. Toulemonde (2005), Mabry (2009) and Smith (2011) all agree that it is crucial to consider the diverse viewpoints of all stakeholders involved in an evaluation. Schwandt (2009) expands on this idea, stating that “however necessary, developing credible evidence in evaluation is not sufficient for establishing the credibility of an evaluation” (p. 209). Including stakeholders in the evaluation process ensures sensitivity to their experiences and the context, and optimizes the representation of the different groups involved (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014; Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Dagenais et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2013; Harnar, 2014; Luskin & Ho, 2013), ultimately improving their acceptance of the results (Chadillon-Faranacci et al., 2022; Fetterman et al., 2017; Rodriguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2012). Given the apparent connection between a judgement’s credibility and stakeholders’ perspective, examining this concept is essential.

Stakeholders

According to Taut and Alkin (2003), various factors specific to different stakeholders can affect the successful implementation of an evaluation. They include the stakeholders' level of trust in the evaluator, their expertise and experience in evaluation, their concerns regarding the evaluation's results and benefits, and their personality. Moreover, stakeholders are multifaceted and play different roles, depending on their specialized knowledge, area of expertise, and unique abilities.

Many scholars have developed systems for categorizing types of stakeholders (Daigneault & Jacob, 2012; Nelson, 2009; Weiss, 1983). Despite differences shown by their findings, there is tendency for overlap between most classifications. Daigneault and Jacob's (2012) typology is applicable in most evaluation contexts as it points to the similarities and different perspectives for each group regarding the program under evaluation. Table 1 presents four main groups: (a) program decision-makers, designers, and managers; (b) people responsible for implementing programs; and (c) direct and indirect beneficiaries, as well as negatively impacted third parties; and (d) civil society.

Table 1
Typology of Different Stakeholder Groups

| Types | Description |
|---|---|
| Program decision-makers, designers, and managers | Individuals responsible for the program and its evaluation on a political, legal, and organizational level. |
| Program implementation officials | Public servants and experts who ensure the provision of goods and services to specific populations and recipients. |
| Beneficiaries (directly or indirectly); third parties negatively affected by a program | The program's intended audience and beneficiaries, as well as other individuals who may be affected positively or negatively by the program. |
| Civil society | Individuals and organizations that are invested in the program and its evaluation in terms of its tangible, political, and/or scientific aspects. |

Adapted from Daigneault & Jacob, 2012, p. 242

The table illustrates the diverse interests of stakeholders: organizational, professional, and personal (Dubeau et al., 2018) and shows they do not necessarily have any evaluation expertise or experience. As a result, their perception of the reliability of the evaluation process and the legitimacy of the outcome is likely to differ from that of evaluators, whose work is driven by ethical principles and scientific interests (Chadillon-Farinacci et al., 2022). This explains why evaluators aim to engage stakeholders to reach a judgment that is both scientifically sound and socially acceptable (Champagne et coll., 2011; Thiebaut et coll., 2011).

Establishing Judgment Credibility: A Modality for Operationalizing Credibility

Findings by Hurteau et al. (2012a, 2012b) and Hurteau and Williams (2014) and Hurteau et al. (2016) have resulted in a model for ensuring the credibility of evaluative judgments. It comprises the following six principles:

- 1) Establishing credibility necessitates a repeated cycle of exchanges between the evaluator and stakeholders and ongoing collaboration and dialogue throughout the evaluation process.
- 2) Choosing rigorous methodological choices is essential for ensuring validity, but it does not guarantee credibility.
- 3) Effectively managing information gathered benefits from flexibility and adaptability.
- 4) Generating a credible judgment is seldom a linear process. Debate is essential for assessing data, establishing links between them, and reaching a conclusion.
- 5) Stakeholder participation is crucial, as they provide valuable information and lend credibility.
- 6) To produce credible judgments, evaluators must possess certain qualities, both professional and personal.

In summary, the essential nature of stakeholder contribution (Hurteau et al., 2018) and the personal qualities required in the evaluator emerge as important factors for ensuring credibility, both for the process and results (Houle et coll., 2018; Hurteau et coll., 2020; Hurteau & Archibald, 2023; Hurteau & Gagnon, 2022). Given that this model was created by drawing on the insights of evaluation experts, it is important to consider how it can be applied to individuals with varying interests. Comprehensively understanding this is crucial for developing innovative and effective approaches to securing acceptance of evaluation results.

Methodology

We opted for in-depth, one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, like the study conducted by Hurteau et al. in 2012a and 2012b. The goal of these interviews was to explore their perspective, rather than to validate findings. We carefully chose participants based on their current or past involvement in evaluation processes. The process of selecting participants began with random sampling of the network. This was followed by a more extensive approach involving internet searches for organizations that publish evaluation reports on their websites or declare participation in evaluation processes. This technique identified a “principles focused sampling” (Patton, 2015). We subsequently sent emails to potential participants, inviting them to join our research. Approval was obtained from an institutional ethical board for our protocol.

Table 2
Profile of Interviewed Participants¹

| Stakeholders: Classification and Roles | Primary Field | Sectors | |
|---|--|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Implementation specialists (n = 5): | Food security (n = 1) | | |
| | Social welfare (n = 3) | | |
| | • Training (n = 1) | Education (n = 5) | |
| | • Immediate action with the recipients (n = 5) | Employability (n = 3) | |
| | | Justice (n = 1) | |
| Decision-makers, planners, and leaders (n = 23): | Recreation/entertainment (n = 1) | Community (n = 22) | |
| | • Design (n = 1) | Early childhood (n = 2) | Corporate (n = 3) |
| | • Project coordination and management (n = 12) | Health (n = 1) | Government (n = 2) |
| | | Security (n = 1) | Educational (n = 2) |
| | • Leadership (n = 10) | Services for families (n = 6) | |
| | | Services for women (n = 2) | |
| | | Services for youths (n = 7) | |
| | | Services for seniors (n = 1) | |

1. The data presented illustrates the roles, areas of influence, and primary fields and sectors for the study participants. A single individual may assume more than one function and work in more than one field and more than one sector, which explains why the identified numbers exceed the total number of participants who were interviewed.

A total of 27 individuals were interviewed. They were all affiliated with organizations offering diverse services in different sectors. They are all from Quebec, except one from another Canadian province. Despite our efforts, we were unable to secure interviews with any program recipients. The following table presents a summary of the participants' profiles.

The reported evaluations had different objectives: A significant proportion analyzed the quality of services provided and documented short- and medium-term results among their subjects. Several were carried out by external entities not affiliated with the organization (n=21).

The researchers structured their conversations using an interview guide with both broad and follow-up questions. The questions were open-ended and derived from an evaluation scenario the participants selected from their own experience. They could choose an example they considered successful, credible, with value and qualities they trusted. Alternatively, they could choose a scenario where an assessment was questioned, deemed insufficient, or lacking in credibility. These situations served as a starting point for in-depth conversations, offering opportunities for contrast. The discussion covered several factors that affect the credibility of an evaluation and the subsequent results, such as involvement in the process, evaluator competence, interactions with the evaluator, and the nature and presentation of the results.

The interviews, which lasted about 35 minutes, were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Interviews were conducted until we reached data saturation (Charmaz, 2006), a point where additional data collection yielded no new insights. To handle and structure our data, we used the NVivo program. Thomas's (2006) method of inductive analysis was followed in four steps: first, prepare the raw data; second, examine it thoroughly; then, identify and describe preliminary categories; and, finally, hone them. The coding process followed a moderate inductive approach, considering the previous conceptual framework as a broad reference point, rather than a rigid structure (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016; Savoie-Zajc, 2018). Furthermore, as advocated by Savoie-Zajc (2018, p. 207), no predetermined analytical framework was used, allowing the data to dictate its own path. To ensure a rigorous analytical method, independent examiners reviewed the clarity of the categories with study participants and an external researcher at different points during the process.

Limitations

The study has some methodological weaknesses, including the limited number of participants and lack of representation of some crucial stakeholder groups, such as program beneficiaries. As a result, it is not feasible to draw broad conclusions. Moreover, given the diversity of stakeholders and their interests, they do not have the same perception of evaluation nor agree on what defines a credible evaluation.

Contrary to our original intention, it was not possible to compare successful and unfavorable evaluations as the evaluation experiences shared by the surveyed individuals were predominantly positive. A natural inclination or personality trait may make them particularly interested in evaluation methods and keener to participate in the interview process, leading them to actively engage in the activity. Considering the discussion above, factors affecting credibility seem associated with specific situations conducive to evaluation. For example, the interactive stage, as Chouinard and Milley (2016) call it, disappears in certain highly charged situations. In these situations, the evaluation process can exacerbate existing disagreement, leading to overt opposition from stakeholder groups and making genuine dialogue nearly impossible. Factors influencing credibility by stakeholders in highly contested scenarios are likely to vary considerably from those identified by the study participants. Hence, the findings of this research are limited to situations where there are specific favorable conditions for evaluation.

Results

Which aspects do stakeholders think influence their confidence in the evaluation procedure and its results? According to the research, influential factors include the achievement of evaluation goals, collaboration between the evaluator and stakeholders, their respective roles in the evaluation process, and specific methodological considerations.

Factors Affecting the Achievement of Evaluation Goals

According to the interviewees, an evaluation is only pertinent when it addresses a genuine need and yields usable results. In this case, evaluation is an analytical tool and helps with decision making. It supplies the essential data for modifying programs and enhancing services provided. It can also bolster requests for financing from funders. This dual purpose was highlighted in the following statement:

“I think it helps reinforce the image we have, as professionals who don’t just do things randomly, without thinking much. No, we think about what we do, how we do it, why we do it, and we want to have proof of that. To also increase our credibility and to then advocate for funding. If I can demonstrate that through my project, I achieve such and such objectives, it will be easier afterwards to legitimize asking for more funding for this project” (Quote from interview transcript)

For the interviewees, the evaluation process serves as a tool for acquiring knowledge and fostering a culture of evaluation. It also helps to hone their evaluation skills, which is enhanced when stakeholders are engaged throughout the process.

Collaboration Considerations for the Evaluator and Stakeholders

An evaluation can be considered credible if it is the result of a collaborative effort between stakeholders and the evaluator based on open exchange. Such collaboration, benefiting from complementary expertise, ensures that the evaluation reflects the concerns of all parties involved, while also providing the evaluator with valuable insights into the program and the context. By sustaining this partnership throughout the evaluation process, a climate of trust and mutual understanding emerges. It is crucial for stakeholders to create interactive communication channels from the outset, so evaluators can address the needs of all affected parties.

“I think that communication is really the foundation. Communication between the [evaluators] and the team in the field, the participants too. I think that’s what makes it credible, compared to something that would be more disconnected. I think it’s really communication. [...] The reciprocity between the [evaluation] team, the field team, and the participants.” (Quote from interview transcript)

Factors Influencing Stakeholder Contribution

Stakeholders say they perceive themselves as experts on the content to be evaluated. As a result, it is difficult for them to accept results if their point of view is not considered. This is shown by the following interviewee’s quote:

“I think that to manage to find exactly what we want to evaluate and the way we want to do it, I think we need to have several minds and several perspectives looking at the action. [...] I think, in any case, that it would be too simple if it could be like that, because we would save time doing it alone, instead of struggling to coordinate and argue. But that’s what enriches the process as

well and necessarily it also enriches the results that go with it.” (Quote from interview transcript)

Accumulating positive evaluation experiences and appropriating the process fosters acceptability of an evaluation. Careful consideration in the selection of stakeholders participating in the evaluation exercise and balanced representation seems important. Study participants reported that the implementation of the process was enhanced when tailored to their specific circumstances, making it less onerous and minimizing disruption of their routine duties. Several participants expressed unfamiliarity with evaluation practices, and although their involvement in the process increased their commitment, they perceived it as an additional to their workload. This situation is observed in many settings where resources are limited. Finally, study participants mentioned ongoing challenges for implementing evaluation recommendations in their organization to ensure the evaluation report is not shelved.

Factors Related to the Evaluator’s Contribution

The evaluator’s main responsibility is to serve as a resource, offering their evaluation expertise to the stakeholders. Interviewees emphasized that, once fully immersed in the context, the evaluator needs to be able to express themselves concisely and clearly, using simple language to explain the implementation of the evaluation. They also emphasized the importance of the evaluator’s interpersonal skills and communication style, beyond the transfer of knowledge. One participant shared their perspective on the evaluator’s role.

“Their way of facilitating too. It’s a very personable individual. It’s someone you want to confide in and tell things to as well. Someone who is very open, who quickly understands the issues [...]. They understood very quickly when we mentioned issues and they responded well to ask the right questions and to push and dig deeper. So, they had both the theoretical knowledge, in terms of evaluation, and knowledge of the setting, with a very positive and open attitude of co-construction.” (Quote from interview transcript)

Moreover, the evaluator may also be involved in follow-up, helping stakeholders incorporate evaluation results into their decision-making procedures.

“What we realized is that the people who accompany us really need to know our organization’s work well, be very good at simplifying, know evaluation well, but be able to simplify it well for the people in the organization and

provide them with the tools so that afterwards they can use it. And that's extremely important." (Quote from interview transcript)

Factors Related to Methodological Considerations

According to the interviewees, data collection tools should be appropriate for the stakeholders – simple, clear, and engaging – and their professional environment and produce qualitative data. They acknowledge that quantitative and qualitative data are complementary, but they express a preference for qualitative information because it is more pertinent to their work, which is rooted in human interaction.

"Because in fact, numbers interest field workers very little [...]. I think we don't work to have numerical results, we work to accompany human beings in their development. Of course, there isn't always a little number that will appear at the end of that [...]. I think that qualitative is perhaps the most important result in the work we do. Of course, for funders, for them, what speaks to them more [are] people who are more business-oriented [...]. That said, I think funders are always very receptive when we present them with our beneficiaries' success stories." (Quote from interview transcript)

In summary, a range of factors shape the credibility of evaluation processes and results. The intricate interplay between these influencing factors enables a more nuanced understanding of how credibility can be tailored to stakeholders' perspectives.

Discussion

Firstly, the article presents a contrast between the views of evaluators and stakeholders regarding credibility. It then argues for reconnecting with the core objective of evaluation considering the myriad challenges confronting the field. This study is not particularly original, but it confirms long-standing understandings of stakeholders in the evaluation sphere, providing a starting point for pertinent consideration.

Comparing Perspectives

Comparison between stakeholders' and evaluators' viewpoints of an evaluation's credibility lead to different observations (Hurteau et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2014, and 2016). This section explores the commonalities and contrasts that arose from this comparison.

Elements of Convergence

Three key themes emerged from both stakeholder and evaluator discussions: (a) the necessity of collaboration between the evaluator and stakeholders; (b) the stakeholders' indispensable role; and (c) acknowledgment of the evaluator's expertise.

Indeed, consistent collaboration throughout the evaluation process is important, if not essential. Evaluators highlight the importance of ongoing and sustained dialogue, whereas stakeholders prioritize high-quality exchange and discussions from the outset to reach a consensus. Hurteau et al. (2012a) also underscored the link between an authentic decision-making process and active stakeholder participation. Engaging in dialogue seems an effective strategy for raising stakeholder awareness of gradually emerging evaluation results, enabling them to better understand and appreciate their significance.

Stakeholders play a pivotal role in the evaluation process. Their involvement is crucial for reaching consensus between different perspectives. Evaluators emphasize their importance in capturing experiences, suggesting possible solutions if a stalemate arises, and ensuring the accuracy of the final evaluative conclusion. Stakeholders view themselves as experts on the subject matter and are keen to participate from the outset of the process so they can ensure the evaluation's operational feasibility.

In summary, based on the prevalent viewpoints, evaluators serve a crucial function in facilitating a seamless evaluation process and making it more understandable. This is particularly crucial for democratizing practice and enhancing an organization's evaluation capabilities. Stakeholder contribution, and the various challenges, potential impacts and modalities of collaboration between stakeholders and the evaluator, are discussed in several publications (Chadillon-Farinacci et al. 2022; Dubeau et al., 2018; Fetterman et al., 2017; Leclerc & Lessard, 2015; Tello-Rozas et al., 2022; Torres-Cuello et al., 2018; Whitmore et al., 2017). The importance of the evaluator's contribution is also acknowledged and appears to be supported by the evaluation community. The Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice, as outlined by the Canadian Evaluation Society in 2019, points to the importance of evaluators' competencies in context-based practice for establishing a process between the evaluator and the stakeholders where knowledge and expertise are shared and stakeholders develop evaluation skills. In this regard, by sharing their expertise, evaluators play a pivotal role in the process (Bourgeois & Valiquette L'Heureux, 2018; Buetti, 2021).

Elements of Divergence

Areas of contention emerge when comparing perspectives, regarding both the techniques used and the desired outcomes. Examining methodological differences is significant, but analyzing differences in evaluation goals is equally critical, despite the many questions it raises regarding the evaluation's fundamental objective.

Central to the conflict lies a divergent perspective regarding the goals. The evaluator must produce an unbiased and credible evaluation that genuinely portrays reality. Stakeholders on the other hand are mainly concerned with how evaluation results will be used, and the inherent association with ensuring - or losing - further funding. This potential pitfall is often exacerbated because evaluators mainly work with stakeholders, whereas their mandate is generally delivered by higher authorities looking for an unbiased and impartial assessment of the program.

Comparing viewpoints raises questions about approaches, but it also challenges the very nature of evaluation. Evaluators prioritize maintaining rigor but acknowledge it does not suffice to guarantee credible evaluative judgments. Meanwhile, stakeholders place importance on suitable tools and the undeniable value of qualitative data. A common response to a conclusion contrary to the interests of a particular group is scrutinizing the methodology for weaknesses or errors. Numerous experts in the evaluation field have either personally experienced these obstacles or heard about them.

Table 3 summarizes the key findings of the perspective-based discussion, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement. The main point of agreement is operationalizing the evaluation process for credibility. However, it is important to note that divergence relates to the very nature of the objectives and goals of process. This sheds light on why the issue of credibility endures.

The Inevitable Return to Evaluation's Purpose

Comparing perspectives reveals unreconcilable contradictions, especially about the goals of evaluation. Evaluation must strive for the most objective judgment possible of a program's performance for public interest (Greene, 2012). Stakeholders, however, expect results that benefit, such as confirming their operations' value or securing funding. These two positions raise challenges and can even be conflicting. Evaluators encounter intricate challenges and possible conflicts in their role, regardless of the field. They are obliged to negotiate diverse expectations among their different clients.

Table 3
Comparing Viewpoints

| ELEMENTS OF CONVERGENCE | |
|---|--|
| The crucial role of cooperation between evaluators and stakeholders | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-construction approach, where two concurrent processes occur: evaluative judgment production by establishing evaluator and stakeholder credibility. • An iterative process that takes place in an encounter between the evaluator and stakeholders (dialogue), leading to consensus. • Continuous collaboration and ongoing conversation throughout the process. • The significance of high-quality interactions among the individuals involved. | |
| The crucial role played by stakeholders | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important sources of information: content expertise. • Strategic selection of stakeholders. • Adaptation of the process to avoid interference with usual professional tasks. | |
| Recognizing the evaluator’s expertise | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional qualities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Flexibility and adaptability when processing collected information – Essential nature of argumentation to support conclusions based on collected data – Importance of understanding the context • Personal qualities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facilitating and simplifying concepts relating to the evaluation process – Importance of interpersonal skills • Post-evaluation contribution for appropriating results | |
| ELEMENTS OF DIVERGENCE | |
| Evaluator Perspective (Hurteau et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016) | Stakeholder Perspective |
| Goals | |
| <p>Production of a valid judgment, credible in the eyes of stakeholders and that informs decision-making.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing evaluation outcomes to enhance programming and bolster funding requests • Adopting the evaluation process to enhance capabilities and contribute to fostering an evaluation-centric culture |
| Methodological considerations | |
| <p>Methodological integrity</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonized instrumentation adapted to the context. • Value creation from qualitative data |

There are two groups involved in the evaluation process: administrators, who usually request an evaluation, have decision-making authority, and require a complete and objective overview to guide their decisions; and program managers, who are directly involved in the evaluation and want to showcase favorable outcomes to maintain funding. It is therefore not surprising that challenges arise when evaluations do not yield the expected results.

The field of evaluation has been exploring ways to overcome these challenges for several decades. Engaging stakeholders in every stage of the evaluation is one of the most widely recognized strategies. The fundamental concept is to maintain communication with stakeholders, to ensure they know the program has been meticulously recorded and scrutinized. This method aims to cultivate acceptance of the outcomes, even if they do not meet expectations.

The examination of the findings from the present research sheds light on the cornerstones of the evaluation process. It is crucial to conceptualize stakeholder engagement as a strategic approach rather than an end in itself. We suggest examining the three criteria for conducting a valid evaluation proposed by House (1980): truth, beauty, and social justice. According to these three cornerstones proposed for the field, evaluations should accurately reflect reality, be presented in an acceptable manner, and align with social justice. Lincoln and Guba (1985), who advocate for evaluators to be actively involved in the field, also emphasize that evaluation outcomes should never be entirely unexpected by stakeholders. In this context, it is the evaluator's responsibility to implement all the strategies necessary to ensure the evaluation process is conducted according to best practices and supports stakeholders.

In House's (2018) chapter "The Contribution of Practical Wisdom", he details how he executed a mandate that had every chance of failing. However, by carefully planning, maneuvering strategically, skillfully facilitating, and proposing realistic solutions, he overcame all the challenges and achieved a successful outcome. House provides a comprehensive, masterful account of a process that combines practical wisdom, while highlighting the many complex facets. His testimony shows that all his choices were motivated by respect for individuals and a commitment to the integrity of the evaluation process, which are both essential.

Perhaps these essential objectives have become neglected over time, in favor of evaluation methods such as stakeholder participation? This question is even more pertinent when considering the myriads of viewpoints of those involved in evaluations. By doing so, we uphold high-quality standards considering present-day obstacles and transformations within the field.

Conclusion

Evaluators continue to focus on ensuring that stakeholders accept their findings to prevent them from objecting or rejecting the evaluation's conclusions. To address this persistent challenge, evaluators often encourage stakeholder participation, which is not always effective. However, the issue of result acceptance persists.

This study highlights a possible disparity between the evaluators' and stakeholders' point of view, making it necessary to reconsider the actual goals of the evaluation process. Although engaging with stakeholders continues to be a valuable approach, it is essential to recognize that reaching a consensus that perfectly balances the interests of all involved can prove elusive. A successful evaluator must be professional and ethical and have exceptional interpersonal skills, while also infusing practical wisdom into their actions.

How can professions such as medicine, nursing, and management, which incorporate practical wisdom, contribute to the development of program evaluation? Could the evaluation community follow the lead of craftsmen who, as Aristotle remarked, repurposed existing tools to meet new needs for building the world's greatest cathedrals? The metaphor of creating such architectural marvels makes this solution even more compelling.

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