

New Directions for Evaluation

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The two most recent issues of *New Directions for Evaluation* each cover international perspectives in the field. The Fall 2004 issue (Rugg, Peersman, and Carael) addressed “Global Advances in HIV/AIDS Monitoring and Evaluation” while the Winter 2004 issue (Russon and Russon) concerned “International Perspectives on Evaluation Standards.”

The Fall issue covers a wide range of topics in HIV/AIDS monitoring and evaluation including political influences, international perspectives focusing on the roles of the United Nations and the World Bank, and specific program evaluation experiences.

While this issue deals mostly with subjects specific to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment it does offer some insight into evaluation questions with a wider impact. These questions are identified nicely by Michael Quinn Patton in his overview chapter “A Microcosm of the Global Challenges Facing the Field: Commentary on HIV/AIDS Monitoring and Evaluation.” Patton identifies issues touched on by the various authors that are seen in many evaluation contexts, such as the denial of problems despite compelling evidence, the use of evaluation for accountability vs. program improvement, and selective use of evaluation findings.

The three main critiques Patton offers are: 1) the sense that the authors are overwhelmed by numbers and fail to include stories of real people affected by HIV/AIDS, 2) the “deeply entrenched mechanistic linearity” (p. 168) in evaluation,

and 3) the acceptance of unrealistic goals. He argues for including stories of real people along with the reporting of data so that the data doesn't take on "an abstract life of their own." (p.168) He criticizes the "input-activities-output-outcome-impact" framework presented in one chapter as the "basic organizing framework" endorsed by all agencies "to organize the data required to monitor program progress." (p. 37) Patton cites Uganda and Brazil as two successful cases of countries greatly reducing their HIV/AIDS infection rates through "complex, dynamic systems change." (p. 169) In situations such as these "complex systems change mapping and networking models hold more promise than do traditional linear-logic models." (p. 169) Patton also contends that evaluators should not merely accept the program goals when evaluating a program. Specifically, he says overly optimistic goals, like those set by the United Nations regarding HIV/AIDS, should be questioned by evaluators.

The Winter issue reviews the development of evaluation standards in the United States, Western Europe, Africa, Australasia, and at some large international nongovernmental organizations. Craig Russon (co-editor of the issue with Gabrielle Russon) provides an overview of the development of national- and regional-level evaluation standards in the years since the Joint Committee's Program Evaluation Standards were adopted in 1994. He notes that the Joint Committee Standards were influential on all standards that followed, acting as either a "point of departure" or as an example of what some national and regional groups "did *not* want their standards to be." (Russon, p. 90)

One such instance is addressed by Doug Fraser in his review of the experience of the Australasian Evaluation Society's (AES) ongoing process of developing a policy on standards. Fraser recounts how the Joint Committee Standards were the starting points but they "depended on a number of fundamental preconditions or

assumptions that did not necessarily hold true” in the environment of Australia and New Zealand. (p. 71) The Program Evaluation Standards concentrated on “risks that were internal to the evaluation itself: risks of evaluators’ overreaching themselves, overlooking key aspects of their task, exercising bias, behaving unethically, or failing to apply an appropriate range and quality of techniques.” (p. 71)

AES members saw the risks and threats they wished to address as being external to the process of evaluation. These risks and threats concern how evaluation is managed, planned, supported and used. Many of these issues are controlled by those who fund and use evaluation, therefore any standards should address these audiences, not simply practicing evaluators.

Fraser recounts how the AES has long had a practitioner code of ethics but the process of developing a set of standards for evaluation stalled in 2001 owing to many factors. However, an Ethics and Standards Committee did prepare a draft set of standards for the society’s 2001 conference. This draft included six categories: transparency, utility, practicality, cost-effectiveness, ethics, and accuracy/quality/comprehensiveness. (p. 77) Fraser notes the prominence of transparency in this draft as contrasted with the Joint Committee Standards.

References

- Rugg, D., Peersman, G., & Carael, M. (Eds.). (2004). Global advances in HIV/AIDS monitoring and evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation, 103*.
- Russon, C. & Russon, G. (Eds.). (2004). International perspectives on evaluation standards. *New Directions for Evaluation, 104*.