## New Directions for Evaluation (Vol. 102)

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## Views on Cultural Competence

*A summary of the Summer 2004 edition of New Directions for Evaluation entitled "In Search of Cultural Competence in Evaluation—Toward Principles and Practices"*

> "Culture is present in evaluation not only in the contexts in which programs are implemented but also in the designs of these programs and the approach, stance, or methods evaluators choose to use in their work. A common thread between culture and evaluation is the concept of values. Culture shapes values, beliefs, and worldviews. Evaluation is fundamentally an endeavor of determining values, merit, and worth." (p. 6)

The most recent edition of *New Directions for Evaluation* reviews the impact that cultural influences may have in evaluations. The journal begins with an overview of the historical and current ideas surrounding cultural competence and then looks at the topic from the perspective of different cultures: African American, American Indian and Alaskan tribal communities, and Latinos. The journal then examines issues with program evaluation in multicultural settings and potential next steps for the future.

Many evaluators may attempt to consider cultural influences on a project and think only of the physical characteristics of a community such as food, music,

celebrations, and clothing. However, there is a much deeper layer "…that influences customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes, language, caretaking practices, media, educational systems, and organizations (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, and Nesbitt 1998, p. 6)." Many of these factors are often either topics themselves of evaluation or relevant values that should be considered in doing an evaluation's KEC. Evaluators are asked to consider the stakeholders' and clients' values when processing an evaluation—but how, if they have no heritage in that culture?

> "The APA's multicultural guidelines (2003) posit that culture is the embodiment of a world view through learned and transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions. It also encompasses a way of living informed by the historical, economic, ecological and political forces acting on a group." (p. 6)

When there are value differences they often lead to value conflicts that can impact an evaluation from problem definition all the way to recommendations. The journal gives several examples of Eastern versus Western cultures or even the impact of Caucasian researchers interpreting the experiences of low income minorities. The editors also debate the approach used for many policy evaluations involving funding that are done on needs based rather than a strengths based approach. Rather than trying to understand and determine the needs, it may be more beneficial to focus on the strengths and how those positive attributes can be leveraged in a program. The evaluators must possess an "active awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the context at hand, and uses responsive and inclusive means to conduct evaluation" (p.11).

In the second chapter of the journal, "A Journey to Understand the Role of Culture in Program Evaluation: Snapshots and Personal Reflectors of one African American Evaluator" by Stafford Hood, the author states: "It is my continuing belief that few evaluative approaches of the past (or for that matter the present) have seriously considered race, culture, poverty, or contextual context as anything more than 'error variance'" (p. 22). Hood reviews various historical views from leading experts such as Cronbach, Scriven, Stufflebeam, and Tyler. He refers to evaluation standards that recommend evaluators understand the audience and their needs as part of the evaluation process. Hood takes it one step further in identifying stakeholders:

1. Include less powerful groups or individuals as stakeholders, such as racial, cultural, or language minority groups,

2. Determine how they would like to use the results and for whom the information will be particularly useful,

3. Include clients and stakeholders in designing and conducting the evaluation as well as interpreting the results (p. 30)

Evaluators should also have to meet PES criteria in order to perform culturally diverse evaluations. There are guidelines that state that the evaluator must be "knowledgeable of the social and political forces affecting the less powerful stakeholders and use this information in designing and conducting the evaluation." (p. 30) However, Hood questions whether these criteria are being enforced in the evaluator interview process.

Lastly, the AfrEA has started to amend many U.S. standards to address cultural considerations. For example, written law as the highest U.S. value versus "law is

not always more important than tradition or custom".(p. 34) Hood believes that there is a great foundation in the evaluation industry, however, and as the applications evolve, the standards should also evolve to be inclusive of all cultures. Hood states: "Properly used with a culturally responsive approach, the good work of Tyler, Stake, and Stufflebeam permits mid-course corrections in evaluation. It permits feedback to the decision makers for change." (p. 35)

The third module of the latest *New Directions for Evaluation* journal is entitled "Culturally Competent in Indian Country" by Joan LaFrance. Similar to the cultural differences described thus far, this module stresses the uniqueness of tribal sovereignty and the need for cultural integration into the evaluation practice. Throughout the article, La France reinforces the need to seek the knowledge of the community, build relationships and reflect those learnings in the methodological process. This strategy continues the momentum of truly getting to know your audience and the cultural values that influence them.

The fourth article, "Developing & Implementing Culturally Competent Evaluation: A Discussion of Multicultural Validity in 2 HIV Prevention Programs for Latinos," Ross F Conner examines the importance in distinguishing internal, external and construct validity.

> "Cultural issues and differences can be important factors in understanding which variables did or did not cause differences in programs (internal validity), which effects generalize over other settings and times (external validity), and what effects mean for higher order constructs and implications (construct validity). Multicultural validity therefore extends the issues evaluators need to

> be attentive to if they are to draw valid conclusions, set out well-grounded implications, and make accurate recommendations." (p. 52)

The writer goes on to explain key factors in the two programs that were run and once again proves that participant inclusion throughout the evaluation to enable cultural context is critical for success. One additional point discussed in this module is the inclusion of both the literal and figurative language of the participants in the evaluation process. This inclusion of speech allows the cultural influences to permeate and not be hidden during the examination.

The remaining articles continue to support the need for cultural inclusion and emersion in evaluation programs. These articles reinforce the three future needs that are identified by the editors: policies regarding cultural competence and developing practice guidelines, a pool of qualified multicultural evaluators, and more reports and best practice sharing of multicultural evaluation programs (p. 15). Evaluators should be reminded that cultural context has an impact on both international programs and domestic programs. Domestic programs that are in a community unfamiliar to the evaluator may have just as many cultural competency complexities as foreign lands. Evaluators must realize the need to understand cultural values in all scenarios. The definition of cultural competence as articulated below, embodies the current issues surrounding evaluation and the severe impact that cultural context has played in the past and could in the future if not addressed:

> "A systematic, responsive inquiry that is actively cognizant, understanding, and appreciative of the cultural context in which the evaluation takes place; that frames and articulates the epistemology of the evaluative endeavor; that employs culturally and contextually appropriate methodology; and that uses stakeholder generated,

interpretive means to arrive at the results and further use of the findings." (p. 13)

**References**

Thompson-Robinson, M., Hopson, R., & SenGupta, S. (Eds.). (2004). In search of cultural competence in evaluation: Toward principles and practices. *New Directions for Evaluation, 102*.