

Editorial

Activist Evaluation

Michael Scriven

School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences, Claremont Graduate University

To what extent should the evaluator be an active agent in the events surrounding or incorporating or following whatever s/he is evaluating? This question comes up to haunt us in the field from time to time and it does not have an easy answer. It is part of a larger methodological question about proactive versus reactive research. The term ‘participant observer’ reminds us that even the observer’s role has been, rightly or wrongly, avoidably or unavoidably, sometimes blurred into the participant’s role. And the evaluator is often more ‘involved’ in events than the observer, because in formative evaluation, or even in summative evaluation that will be published, what the evaluator is doing will often have some direct effect on what happens thereafter.

David Fetterman has suggested that it is entirely appropriate for an evaluator to be an advocate for programs that s/he has evaluated favorably. I used to view this practice with a rather jaundiced eye, partly because it might lead to evaluators being chosen for their probable success in that role rather than for their expertise as evaluators. I’m now not so sure that that is necessarily bad. I have previously mentioned another type of case, one where proactivity may be ethically compelling rather than optional. This is the (Kalamazoo Promise) case where the evaluator uncovers a highly favorable possible outcome of a program that is not being exploited, cannot get anyone else to exploit it, and could get it exploited by some

activity on his or her part. Should they not then become active?

Here’s an interesting third type of case where, rightly or wrongly, I took a proactive role—and got into trouble for doing it. In evaluating a very expensive program in which an extremely wealthy philanthropy was funding a local community to do more or less whatever they felt like doing (of a philanthropic kind), I found that they were funding what were, in my view, extremely trivial projects, when much greater needs were present. So I spent a day developing—that is, planning and getting the (hypothetical) permissions for—three major projects of very large potential benefit to the community. I did this since I felt that merely describing them as possibilities, and recommending them, would be unconvincing: one had to actually get them cleared (this involved federal and regional approvals, and yes, I got hypothetical approvals in one day from a federal agency and two city councils) in order to show they were *real* possibilities. Well, this did make my point; but the philanthropy asked my boss to make sure I never went back to that region again. No reasons were given, but perhaps making the local committee look as if they were asleep on the job was thought to generate bad relations with the foundation.

Now, let’s look at the general picture for a moment. It’s generally the case that clients want recommendations, and evaluators make them in the hope that they will be adopted. In other words, you are *trying* to have an impact. That’s

pretty proactive, isn't it? If you want to increase the chances of the recommendations being adopted, might it not be appropriate to do a simulation to show they are realistic? That's essentially what I was doing. Too strong for your taste? You may be right; tell us your reasons in an email, and we'll publish it.

Meanwhile, here's a recommendation from me to you. It looks a bit less activist, but appearances may be deceiving. We're finishing our third year of doing an impact evaluation of the overseas efforts of a large international aid charity. Each year we've made recommendations. In the plans for the fourth year, it seems to me we really should include a minor study of the impact of our prior recommendations (and I believe we should probably have done this earlier). Moreover, I think this should be standard operating practice for all continuing evaluation relationships. I also think this will have considerable impact, so you should be careful about doing it. Some organizations will be very nervous about having anyone check on whether they actually *use* the evaluations/recommendations they commission and some evaluators will not be too keen to have past recommendations dragged back into the light of day, since some of them will look less plausible now than they did at the time, and others will look even more vacuous than they did then (both possibilities strike me as good reasons for doing this, so that you can refine them and admit errors). But if you believe in utilization-focused evaluation, this is surely good practice, and I'm hoping it's in the eponymous bible of that approach (which is in the moving vans as I write this, so I can't check, and Michael Quinn Patton, the author, is anyway completing a fourth edition as you read this, so even doing a check wouldn't bring me completely up to date with his thought).

What do you think?