
How Micro-Cultures of Evaluation Practice Shape Evaluation Design¹

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Introduction

I have a short and simple observation to make today. It may seem obvious, but I find very little explicit discussion of it in evaluation texts, research on evaluation studies, and especially in considerations of how properly to design evaluation studies. My observation: whether an evaluation design is effective or not, depends a great deal on the nature of the job. And by “job”, I don’t mean the particular study at hand but the occupational role of the evaluator, whether as an evaluator in an R&D firm, a governmental agency, or in private practice. The micro-cultures of these jobs materially affect what turns out to be an effective evaluation design.

We often think of evaluation as a form of inquiry and evaluation design as having to do with determining what and how, that is, what questions or issues should be addressed, and how should we go about addressing them, i.e., what methods to use. But when we think of evaluation design within a specific context of practice, issues of why arise, why are we selecting these specific questions/issues and methods. The word “design” is both a noun and a verb, denoting both the product and the process of our planning. Issues of context and culture are especially important considerations in both the product and process of designing an evaluation.

Obviously one can think about the culture of evaluation at multiple levels: international level, national level, societal level, professional level, a particular evaluation study, and, of course, at the personal level. Evaluation has a different tenor and feel in Europe compared with Africa, in Canada compared to the US. The Canadian Evaluation Society often posts electronic notices about cultural aspects of international evaluation; the American Evaluation Association (AEA) Thought Leaders Forum has dealt with issues of culture at the professional level; AEA365 and AEA webinars have dealt with how to deal better with culture in doing evaluation work.

Here, I would like to focus on the role of context and culture at the level of “the job”, and consider how the micro-cultures of different jobs influence evaluation design products and process. This will not be a comprehensive review of all types of evaluation jobs with a concomitant analysis of cultural impacts. Rather, I seek here to offer some illustrations that remind us that the job settings themselves in which evaluators work have cultural aspects that shape evaluation practice. These separate job cultures each reflect a general form of practice that is replicated with variations

across many different studies. At times, some cultural aspects of these job settings are largely independent of both the broader social context as well as the contexts of individual studies and evaluation practitioners. That is, evaluation is conducted a particular way because, “that is just how we do things here, it is the nature of the job.”

Evaluation Jobs

Clearly evaluators work across a variety of jobs, each with a different cultural configuration; evaluators work in such settings as university based consultants, as private practice consultants serving local and regional clients, in local agencies, in state agencies, in non-profit settings, in the corporate sector, in medical and human service settings, in research and development (R&D) centers, in government offices, and in international development agencies.

In my career, I have conducted evaluations working in industry, a medical center, an R&D center, and a university. Each of these was a very different setting and it took time to learn “the job”, to learn and become a part of the occupational culture.

After a dozen years working in R&D, I joined a university faculty; I had to learn a new culture; a few examples will illustrate.

Start Fresh Each Year - Our university department had faculty meetings once a month and the department chair had a habit of drawing a line at the bottom of the meeting agenda and writing any issues we did not resolve below the line, to appear on the following month’s agenda. Near the end of the academic year, I noticed that we had a long list of items below the line, so I asked the department chair if we were going to hold special sessions to finish up the year’s work. He looked amused and said, “No, we’ll just throw this sheet away and start fresh next year.” I learned that although we were rewarded for making progress on corporate issues in the private R&D firm no matter how long it took, at the university, we “started fresh” each year.

Managing Urgency - I learned that group projects, especially if done by a committee, move slowly at the university, sometimes at a geological pace; being slow in the R&D firm meant we could lose our competitive edge. A colleague who worked for years in a federal agency tells of the need to manage a sense of urgency among the evaluation staff in order to be successful in his constant pressure, short deadline, federal setting. High quality work, that had serious consequences, had to be produced and he used time urgency to

motivate workers, but staff burnout had to be carefully monitored. This high level of urgency was not so much an aspect of my university job; apparently federal evaluators have less time for afternoon coffee with colleagues to leisurely discuss a recent paper on evaluation theory.

Half Life of a Solution - At the university, I was appointed chair of the school's committee to award student scholarships and spent three years revising our policy and procedures to ensure compliance with federal regulations and the charters of some of the awards. We developed a new rating process to correct for problems of inter-rater bias in the old system. The semester after I left the committee, the new chair threw out everything I had done and implemented his own process. I learned that although a solution lasted as long as it continued to solve the problem in the R&D setting, in the university, it only lasted for as long as I was committee chair. I began to understand the operational implications of Cronbach's concept of the half-life of a generalization.

Individual Versus Collective Contributions - When I arrived at the university, I asked, "What do I need to do to be successful here?" I was told by a senior professor: "We don't care what you do, just as long as you become world famous doing it." A colleague tells the story of working for a corporation in which the vice president stuck his head in the door every day and asked, "What have you done for us today?" In a corporate setting, one advances by contributing to the corporate agenda; in the university, the focus is on individual, not collective, contributions. (If you doubt this, you might want to serve on a university promotion and tenure committee someday.) In universities, rewards are given for individual contributions. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is university-based writers who are engaged in the ongoing debates making fine distinctions among collaborative, participatory, transformative, empowerment, and democratic forms of evaluation. Client service, private practice evaluators are more likely to be the ones asking, "But, how are these approaches different in practice, or are they?", and, "Do the different approaches actually lead to important different client outcomes?" The niceties of conceptual distinctions of the university context give way to practical implications in client service – what really makes a difference in practice? Each university theorist needs a distinctive theory to show his or her unique contribution, each agency evaluator needs a generic process that works for the majority of clients.

These illustrations begin to suggest some of the important cultural aspects that differ across evaluation jobs, such as whose goals take priority (the group's or the individual's), what kinds of contributions are rewarded, what is considered timely completion of the work, and who controls the work (the evaluator, the evaluator's supervisor, the client, etc.). These reflect explicit, and often implicit, values, customs, expectations, and conceptual frameworks that define the nature of the evaluation work and how it is properly to be done.

How Job Culture Influences Design and Practice

Although each local evaluation setting has its own unique characteristics, similar job types tend to share common attributes and values, that is, common micro-cultures. Evaluators working in private practice share common interests, values, and perspectives that are substantially different from evaluators who work in federal agencies. My point is not that all evaluation units in federal agencies are the same, but that they all have a shared micro-culture, and that micro-culture has characteristic attributes. The kinds of questions or issues evaluators address and the methods they use are more similar within job types than across job types.

R&D evaluators often conduct large-scale, quantitative evaluations designed to assess impact of complex programs for broad policy audiences. Private practice evaluators often conduct smaller scale, mixed-method studies of local and regional programs to assist local clients with questions of program implementation and improvement. R&D evaluators are valued for their independence, deep technical skills, and ability to handle highly visible, politically-sensitive, programs. Private practice evaluators are valued for their ability to provide supportive, timely feedback tailored to local client information needs, and often within modest evaluation resources. These statements are, of course, stereotypical overgeneralizations, but they capture the point that what works and is valued in one type of job is not necessarily the same in another job type. Elsewhere, I (Smith, 2011a) have discussed how what is considered exemplary evaluation work differs by the context of the work. A micro-culture reflects a certain set of intents, values, and practices that define and shape the evaluation work. What works in a particular type of setting, what is considered effective, profitable, and ethical, is similar across similar job types. There is a better, if not best, way of conducting

private practice evaluation work and thoughtful practitioners come to those understandings over time. The same is true in corporate-based evaluations, it is just that the values and practices differ in that context. Different job types have different micro-cultures because their contexts and conditions differ. As these aspects become integrated into the structure of an evaluation group over time, they come to represent the culture of that group. Similar sets of beliefs and practices arise in related types of evaluation jobs because a similar set of factors influence that practice.

The Role of Relationships in the Design Process

Although it is fairly easy to see how the questions and issues evaluators address and the methods they use differ across job micro-cultures, it is especially important to understand *why* evaluators make the decisions they do about questions and methods, to consider how the design process differs across micro-cultures. In this regard, it is useful to consider the types of relationships evaluators have with clients, audiences, and stakeholders. Elsewhere I (Smith, 2011b) have discussed the significant role evaluators of three exemplary evaluation studies, one each from an R&D setting, a government agency, and a private practice setting, ascribed to their relationships with clients as an essential aspect of their ability to conduct exemplary evaluation work.

1. An R&D firm had to design an evaluation that enabled them to maintain their independence and credibility throughout a 10-year, highly politicized evaluation of an abstinence-only sex education program. They had to be able to maintain their effectiveness across competing national constituencies.
2. An evaluation unit in a federal agency had to design a series of evaluation studies that enabled them to collect evidence useful to Congress in shaping national policy, while working effectively with the public media, and, at the same, maintaining support from leaders within their own agency.
3. A private practice evaluator had to design studies that enabled her to maintain the trust and personal commitment of local clients while working across a variety of projects.

In each case, what made these designs effective had less to do with the specific questions addressed or the methods used, and more to do with the nature of the relationships the evaluator was able to develop and maintain. Further, the types of relationships needed varied across the particular settings and often required the evaluators to understand the cultures of the client, the setting, and the evaluator's particular role in those. The knowledge and skill required to build such relationships differ across settings and can require years' of experience to acquire.

At the completion of such evaluations, R&D evaluators need to pay special attention to pushing their findings toward the development of the next multi-year grant proposal. Federal agency evaluators must attend to the use of their findings in improving public governance. The private practice evaluators try to ensure that their findings serve to increase client loyalty and foster an improved ongoing relationship. Again, the success of these evaluations in achieving their different ultimate ends depends less on questions addressed and methods employed and more on the relationships the evaluators develop with clients and stakeholders. These different types of relationships reflect different evaluation roles and social contracts; they reflect the different micro-cultures of these various forms of evaluation.

But Whose Micro-culture?

It is important to consider that the evaluator's micro-culture and the culture of the client or stakeholder may often not be the same. The intents, values, rewards, and sanctions of the groups may differ. The evaluator's work takes place within the framework of the evaluators' micro-culture, which shapes the evaluator's purpose, methods, and inferences. The evaluator may or may not come to understand what is being evaluated within the framework of the client's context or culture. Some would see this as a failure of the evaluator to truly understand the client's cultural framework, and argue that the evaluator should make efforts, indeed has an obligation, to understand things from the client's point of view. But it may be that within the evaluator's micro-culture a lack of shared perspective is not a deficit. Within the evaluator's framework, understanding the phenomenon being evaluated within the client's framework may not be important or relevant to the evaluator's task as defined by the job micro-culture. An epidemiologist charting the person-to-person transmission of a virus may not find it useful, nor judge her work invalid, if she

does not understand an individual patient's subjective experience of the disease. The micro-cultures of evaluation jobs develop in order to accomplish a particular set of goals within some contextual/cultural framework. Not all micro-cultures serve the same social purpose and so we might expect differences across cultural frameworks. Different contexts/cultures co-exist at times, each useful and valid in its own way, without damage to the other. Our task in evaluation is to interrogate the various micro-cultures of evaluation to discern both their benefits and their limitations.

Implications

Several implications follow from this observation that the micro-cultures of different jobs influence the nature of evaluation design and practice.

1) *On the Job Training* - First, the successful practice of evaluation requires "on the job training".

Academic preparation in terms of courses, degrees, or professional development sessions can provide necessary skills, but their successful application requires an understanding of specific contextual and cultural dynamics. Textbooks describing generic, a-contextual, evaluation methods do not provide sufficient grounding in the decision rationales that are used within different evaluation jobs for deciding appropriate and effective practice.

2) *Micro-culture Based Design Strategies* - Second, discussions of evaluation design need to incorporate considerations of a job's micro-culture.

Discussions of evaluation design need to extend beyond the view that they are basically question/answer strategies and consider how the designs serve additional needs of fulfilling social roles within the micro-cultures of specific evaluation jobs.

3) *Micro-culturally Exemplary Practice* - Third, what is considered an exemplary evaluation has to be judged within the micro-culture of a specific practice.

It is clear that the skills needed to conduct successful evaluations differ across these different evaluation jobs. How a design is implemented may be more important than the particular questions and methods used. Indeed, one cannot design a successful evaluation without understanding the purpose and context of the particular type of evaluation being conducted; that is, whether a particular evaluation design and the way it is implemented will be successful depends in part on

the specific micro-culture in which the evaluation is conducted.

4) *Micro-culturally Sensitive Research on Evaluation* - And, finally, research on evaluation studies needs to consider the micro-culture of practice.

Much of the research on evaluation work that uses surveys of evaluators' competencies, theoretical commitments, and practices, for example, fails to consider how the particular type of evaluation, that is the micro-culture of the job, influences the nature of the practice. Narrative self-reports of evaluation practice are more likely to capture the implicit cultural characteristics of particular evaluation jobs (Smith, 2012). Such reports are often faulted for their lack of generalizability, but that criticism is made based on the questionable assumption that a generalized form of evaluation will always reflect effective evaluation – perhaps good evaluation is "job" specific.

In sum, designing practical and effective evaluation studies has less to do with the specific questions or issues addressed and the methods used, than it does with how well those choices fit within the particular demands, expectations, constraints, and social roles of the particular job; that is, effective evaluation design depends upon the micro-culture of the evaluation being conducted.

Epilog

Part of my university-based micro-culture is incessantly to ask, "So what? Who cares?" So I must ask – "Job micro-cultures, so what? Who cares?" What do considerations about job micro-cultures have to tell us about the broader, more important cultural aspects of race, gender, disability, and other dimensions of diversity in evaluation? I believe an examination of job micro-cultures can tell us something about how cultural differences arise and how they influence evaluation practice. The examination of cultural differences in job settings help us to understand the dynamics of the development and influence of cultural differences in less emotionally charged contexts. We each belong to several micro-cultures simultaneously, and move in and out of them continuously. Part of our task is to understand how they arise and how they influence what we do. Perhaps examining micro-cultures in occupational settings will provide us a fresh look at issues of cultural responsiveness in evaluation more generally.

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