Intangible Outcomes: The Importance and Current Neglect Within Evaluation Practice

Kurt Wilson, PhD
President, Effect X LLC

Background: Despite directly influencing the visible outcomes typically measured by evaluations, intangible outcomes are often neglected by evaluators.

Purpose: The goal of this paper is to encourage evaluators to consider the complex domain of intangible outcomes within evaluations involving human systems

Setting: Evaluation practice and literature.

Intervention: NA

Research Design: Literature review.

Data Collection and Analysis: A literature review of three leading evaluation journals was conducted seeking substantive use of common intangible outcome keywords.

Findings: The use of keywords related to intangible outcomes was mostly related to the practice or experience of evaluators; new evaluation theory and methodology will need to be developed to address this domain.

Keywords: Evaluation design, Evaluation Methods, Outcomes, Hope, Trust, Faith, Love, Joy, Peace

Intangible Outcomes

> Evaluation has explored merit and worth, processes and outcomes, formative and summative evaluation; we have a good sense of the lay of the land. The great unexplored frontier is evaluation under conditions of complexity. (Patton, 2010, p. 1)

Intangible Outcomes: Large Territory Within the Unexplored Frontier of Evaluation

The goal of this paper is to encourage evaluators to consider the complex domain of intangible outcomes and overcome the longstanding neglect of this important aspect of human life.

The domain of intangible outcomes involves bewildering complexity characterized by interconnections between causes and effects, and where evaluative feedback can contribute to—but not cause—evolution and change within individuals or groups. Intangible outcomes flow from the intersection of the human head and heart in an unlit territory. This is where human goals are forged out of varying alloys of values, decisions, and social influences. This is where motivation is birthed, nurtured, and sustained—or left to die. This is where the qualities that describe relationships—such as trust, love, and respect— make the difference between either the rich rewards of flourishing or the high costs of strain or broken relationships. The complexity of this territory is compounded by the fact that only *some* of this region is even accessible to the light of conscious thought—the deepest and most powerful forces operate in unconscious darkness. While this territory might be new to the direct inquiry of evaluators, our exploration must proceed with humility, because we are not discovering anything; it is a territory as ancient as our humanity and is well traversed by generations of thoughtful explorers from fields as diverse and established as psychology, philosophy, sociology, and theology.

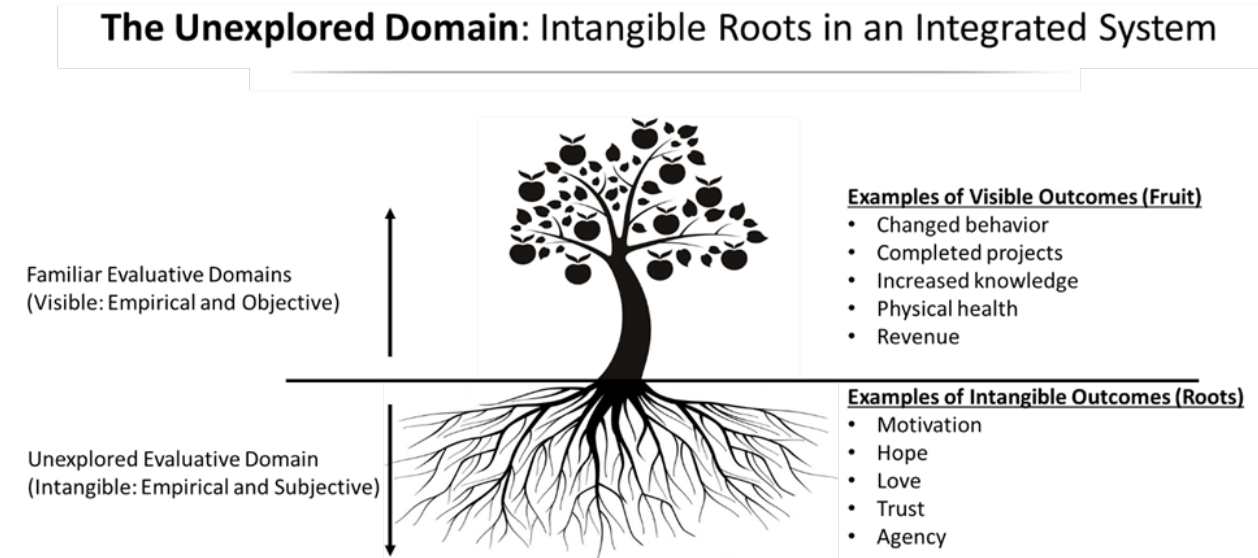### *Charting the Domain of Intangible Outcomes*

Simply describing the domain of intangible outcomes in a way that is relevant for evaluative inquiry is itself a considerable challenge. For example, while on the surface it would seem that there would be an easily defined line between the tangible domain of the body and the intangible domain of the mind, this distinction has been the subject of ongoing philosophical argument since Plato (Robinson, 2020). Given that, it is safe to say that there is no clear and universally agreed line separating what's in from what's out. A warning is therefore in order: if you need the precision of an established and trusted map, this early-stage exploration isn't for you. For this stage, we essentially just have a compass and credible evidence of gravitational forces that are exerting significant and widespread impact on most—if not all—of the individuals and organizations we seek to serve with insightful and useful evaluation.

An analogy to the natural world can provide a helpful starting point. While traditional evaluation is typically entirely focused on visible and countable outcomes of programs, such as changed behavior, increased knowledge, or physical health, those important outcomes are clearly not independent or separable from relevant intangible factors. Instead, they are seamlessly connected to intangibles, as a tree's root system is connected to its fruit: the tangible fruit of behavior doesn't spring from an isolated branch; it is connected to a root system of motivation. Similarly, the fruit of a completed project isn't harvested without some level of hope and trust between stakeholders. Acquiring new levels of readily testable knowledge isn't possible without some level of motivation, hope, and agency.

Outcomes in this intangible domain are relevant to evaluations in at least two ways, which are often interconnected depending on the structure of the evaluand (or program being evaluated): (1) as direct outcomes themselves or (2) as indirect outcomes (i.e., important contributors to visible outcomes). A direct intangible outcome happens when, for example, an international development program increases a sense of agency in women, or when a peace program rebuilds trust in a post-conflict context. On the other hand, an indirect or contributory intangible outcome can be seen when varying levels of student motivation influence an education program, or when levels of trust influence a community development project. Figure 1 illustrates how the tangible and visible territory more familiar to evaluators (i.e., the fruit) is integrated with the root system of intangible outcomes:

Figure 1. Illustration of the Unexplored Territory

The Unexplored Domain: Intangible Roots in an Integrated System

Familiar Evaluative Domains
(Visible: Empirical and Objective)

Examples of Visible Outcomes (Fruit)
- Changed behavior
- Completed projects
- Increased knowledge
- Physical health
- Revenue

Unexplored Evaluative Domain
(Intangible: Empirical and Subjective)

Examples of Intangible Outcomes (Roots)
- Motivation
- Hope
- Love
- Trust
- Agency

The Important and Invisible Dimension of Human Systems

Within human systems, intangible factors are often primary factors influencing the success or failure of the visible outcomes that are the typical focus of evaluation. Just how important are intangible outcomes? This section addresses that question from three different perspectives: the prevalence of intangibles within the nonprofit sector, the contributions intangibles often make to other outcomes, and an illustration.

Scope of Intangible Outcomes in the U.S. Nonprofit Sector

One indicator of importance is prevalence; dimensions that are common are generally considered more important for evaluation design than those that are uncommon—the outliers. The largest category of nonprofit organizations that deliberately prioritize intangible outcomes are religious or faith based. Throughout history and around the world, faith has contributed to the full spectrum of human experience, from the extremely negative (e.g., inquisition, crusades, genocide, misogyny, etc.) to the extremely positive (e.g., hospitals, hospices, homeless services, etc.) While the scope of this influence is global, for the purposes of this paper the focus will be on organizations within the United States, because of readily available data. Within these organizations,

the influence of faith generally involves either one or a mix of the following two expressions:

- Exclusive and explicit faith goals: Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other organizations are founded to support specific faith traditions and sustain specific communities formed around specific religious traditions. A 2013 Gallup study estimated that 39% of Americans attend religious services once a week, and many more attend less frequently.
- Indirect or implicit faith motivation and/or goals: Many organizations have been founded by those motivated by their faith to address a wide variety of needs. The Salvation Army, local gospel rescue missions, child sponsorship organizations, hospitals, nursing homes, and a wide variety of other organizations are within this category—which includes 40 of the largest 50 charities in the United States (Zinsmeister, 2019). Additionally, many faith communities run programs apart from their worship services based on this same motivation (e.g., churches which house homeless people or use their gym for youth activities on weekdays).

The full scope of nonprofit activity that is influenced by faith combines both of these dimensions. Studies commissioned by Connected to Give, a consortium of Jewish funders and other independent foundations, found that 73% of all charitable giving in the U.S. goes to organizations that are explicitly religious (Jumpstart Labs, 2013).

Another indicator of the influence of intangible outcomes within the nonprofit sector is the number of organizations whose names explicitly identify them with common intangible outcomes. I conducted a brief search of the Guidestar database of nonprofit organizations to quantify these organizations. As indicated in Table 1, this search found a total of 118,280 organizations whose names included six common intangible outcome terms. While this is a small percentage of the 2 million listed organizations, it is nonetheless a large number of organizations with such direct linkage between their identities and intangibles:

Table 1. Search Terms and Number of Nonprofit Organizations

Search term	Number of nonprofit organizations
Hope	31,408
Trust	26,516
Faith	22,074
Love	25,527
Joy	4,640
Peace	8,115
Total	118,280

Importance Related to Contribution to Other Outcomes

As shown in Figure 1, intangible factors can be understood as the invisible roots within a system that contributes to other outcomes. A full literature review related to this indirect contribution is beyond the scope of this paper, but two brief examples illustrate this point: (1) While educational outcomes are appropriately evaluated related to visible factors such as the quality of lectures or curriculum, the motivation of students (to reference just one of many potentially relevant intangibles) is also clearly important. One longitudinal study found motivation a better predictor of skill acquisition than even I.Q. (Côté & Levine, 2000). (2) Performance of teams within a work environment is clearly influenced by directly measurable factors such as compensation structures, quantity and quality of meetings, and other factors—but trust between team members is also important. A meta-analysis of 112 independent studies representing 7,763 work teams found that trust between team members provides a "positive and above-average effect size" on team performance (De Jong et al., 2016). Because of these clear connections, evaluations that are framed to focus only on the visible domains are missing either important direct outcomes or factors known to contribute to the "merit, worth, and significance" (Scriven, 1995, p. 49) of our evaluands.

A Story Illustrating the Importance of Intangibles

A brief story illustrates both the importance of intangibles and the typical neglect within current evaluation practice: Imagine that it's halftime during the championship game and the score is tied. Inside one locker room is a seasoned coach— brilliantly weaving words, tone, and gestures into a motivational masterpiece. The considerable roar of the crowd is drowned to insignificance in that locker room by the roar of the team itself—which is now ready to run faster, block harder, and work together more effectively than at any point that year. Inside the other locker room is a seasoned evaluator, hired to provide objective and data-driven coaching. The team looks expectantly at the evaluator-coach, who stays true to current evaluative orthodoxy. This evaluator coach tells the team, "The outcome of your training is shown in the data that indicates an increased running speed and distance endurance at least two standard deviations from the mean for your age. Additionally, data from our weekly practice shows reduced dropped balls by 14% and unforced errors by 23%. Based on this data, I can cautiously claim that we have a non-zero chance of victory." Which team do you think will win? Which team would you want to be on? Motivation (like trust, agency, hope, etc.) is invisible and hard to measure, but is nonetheless extremely important within human life and systems.

Evaluation's Current Neglect of Intangible Outcomes

The neglect of intangibles in the current practice of evaluation can most easily be identified by each reader asking themselves a simple question: when was the last time you participated in—or even knew of—an evaluation that included an intangible outcome? If you have examples, please contact me at the email listed below! Additional evidence is found in the scarcity of intangibles referenced in leading evaluation literature—an absence that is quantified below. A brief exploration of cultural and historical reasons for such neglect follows.

Scarcity of Intangibles in Evaluation Literature

As an indicator of the tendency for evaluations to neglect intangible outcomes, I conducted a literature review of three leading evaluation journals, including *The American Journal of Evaluation* (AJE) from 1981 - 2022, *New*

Directions for Evaluation (NDE) from 1978 - 2022, and *The Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation* (JMDE) from 2012 - 2022. I intended this non-exhaustive review as a quantified indicator of this oversight within the field of evaluation. I chose eight keywords that, based on my experience, are the most common intangibles relating to evaluation, and conducted the search within the leading evaluation publications in the United States to determine how frequently these common intangible outcomes are referred to in a substantive way. I defined "substantive reference" as use of the term within the title or abstract, or use of the term as either an evaluand, a relevant consideration for the evaluation design, or an otherwise relevant subject for evaluative consideration. I filtered out incidental use of the words, such as the use of "agency" in reference to a government entity or organization, the use of "hope" as an expression unrelated to the evaluand (e.g., "The authors also hope..."). The small number of substantive uses of these terms in each of the journals is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 2. Literature Review for Prominent Intangible Contributions to Outcomes

Search Term	AJE	NDE	JMDE	Total
Hope	0	1	2	3
Agency	0	0	0	0
Trust	1	1	0	2
Motivation	1	0	1	2
Identity	1	1	0	2
Love	0	0	0	0
Joy	0	0	0	0
Peace	1	0	0	1
Total	4	3	3	10

This literature review revealed an interesting broad theme: of the few articles that did include substantive reference to intangibles, most were related to the practice or experience of evaluators themselves. Only one (a review of the book *Peace Education Evaluation*) was related to an intangible outcome as an evaluand (Campbell-Patton, 2016). Brief descriptions of the highlighted articles are below.

AJE: Trust: Grubbs (2009) discusses the ethical implications associated with the varying levels of trust between the evaluator and various stakeholders of the evaluation.

Motivation: Clinton presents "empirical evidence that willingness, capacity to engage in evaluation activities, and the use of evaluation information increases the probability of achieving desired outcomes and sustainability" (2014, p. 120).

Identity: Sturges (2014) utilizes qualitative analysis to explore how evaluator identity is shaped by reference to political economy, knowledge work, and personal history.

Peace: A review (Campbell-Patton, 2016) of the book *Peace Education Evaluation* addresses the primary themes of the cutting-edge efforts to evaluate peace education efforts.

NDE: Hope: Datta (2009) provides encouragement to the AEA to find hope in ongoing efforts to shape evaluation policy and practice.

Trust: In a brief and personal article, Donaldson (2018) explains how—despite extensive formal evaluation training and experience—he often trusts his gut in making decisions.

Identity: Sechrest (1980) explores the identity of the field of evaluation as a profession.

JMDE: Motivation: Brownhill et al. (2021) reference the level of motivation of clinicians to recruit patients as being one factor impacting a complex randomized, controlled trial.

Hope: Tarsilla (2010) references hope within the title of an article which addresses an evaluator's relationship with an evaluand, and that relationship's implications for objectivity and bias. Additionally, Shackman (2012) references how the authors of the book *Social Psychology and Evaluation* "hope the relationship between evaluation and social psychology will continue to develop" (p. 132).

Social Psychology and Evaluation: Finally, while a review of journals highlighted overall scarcity, one book proves a valuable exception: the 2011 book *Social Psychology and Evaluation* (Mark et al., 2011) provides inspiration that some leading evaluators have identified the potential value of intentionally integrating aspects of social psychology (which explicitly addresses intangibles) with evaluation practice. That said, the primary focus of the book is not intangible outcomes themselves; instead, it addresses the reciprocal connection between the theories and approaches of social psychology with program design and evaluation. Weighing in at 420 pages and representing contributions from multiple authors, it is nonetheless an inspiration for the type of cross-discipline exploration that can provide valuable addition to the field.

The WEIRD Heritage of Evaluation

Good reasons related to history, epistemology, and culture have contributed to this territory being largely (and often intentionally) unexplored by evaluators. In fact, these reasons might be strong enough to lead some to conclude that these intangible factors *still should* remain outside the scope of evaluative inquiry. Fully exploring those reasons would be interesting but is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that the dominant aspects in the current field of evaluation are an outgrowth of a specific cultural

tradition that psychologists have labeled "WEIRD," an acronym standing for Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. Multiple studies have shown that people from WEIRD contexts are "often at the extremes of global distributions ... tending to be more individualistic, independent, analytically-minded, and impersonally prosocial (e.g., trusting strangers)" as compared with the rest of the world (Schulz et al., 2018, p. 2). This cultural heritage influences evaluation design in two primary ways: it prioritizes focus on independent (not interdependent) variables, and it prioritizes analytic approaches focused on visible (i.e., "objective") and quantifiable domains. This orientation is so pervasive that the process of "operationalizing" goals and criteria within an evaluation design is almost exclusively understood as the process of identifying observable and countable items. Evaluating intangibles inherently requires dealing with interdependence and subjectivity—both of which are largely foreign to the current culture of evaluation.

Conclusion

The scope for many evaluations is defined by the boundaries of a project: an overall education, government, or nonprofit project or program. While typical nonprofit or international development programs and theories of change often include goals and outcomes within the intangible domain of human experience (e.g., increasing agency, hope, trust, etc.), evaluations tend to be framed toward the visible dimensions only. This focus on the visible could be an intentional design decision and is not necessarily a mistake: visible changes (e.g., new behaviors, testable knowledge, improved health) can often be useful and relevant indicators of the underlying intangible outcomes.

New evaluation theory and methodology will need to be developed to adequately address this domain in cross-disciplinary discussion with psychology, sociology, and philosophy. In the meantime, relevant questions related to intangible outcomes can be informed by three of the Guiding Principles for Evaluators (AEA, 2018):

- A2. Explore with primary stakeholders the limitations and strengths of the core evaluation questions and the approaches that might be used for answering those questions.

  (Do the core evaluation questions address relevant intangible outcomes? Why or why

not, and were these decisions discussed with relevant stakeholders?)

- A4. Make clear the limitations of the evaluation and its results.

  (Does the evaluation framework include relevant intangible dimensions? What are the limitations associated with either including or excluding relevant intangibles?)

- A5. Discuss in contextually appropriate ways the values, assumptions, theories, methods, results, and analyses that significantly affect the evaluator's interpretation of the findings.

(Is the treatment of intangible dimensions appropriate within the context of this organization and culture, or more influenced by the prevailing WEIRD culture of evaluators?)

Thoughtful consideration of these questions will help strengthen evaluation practice by providing a first step toward recognizing the interconnection between intangible realities and the visible and countable outcomes that are the traditional focus of evaluation efforts.

References

American Evaluation Association (2018). *Guiding principles for evaluators.* https://www.eval.org/About/Guiding-Principles

Brownhill, S. H., Stevens, G. J., Hammond, T. E., Baldacchino, R., Maposa, R., Makoni, B., Sheb'A, A., Andepalli, J., Kotak, A., D'Souza, O., Atashnama, A., Thayil, A., & Jones, A. (2021). Cultural humility: A collaborative approach to recruiting patients with deliberate self-harm into a multi-hospital randomized controlled trial. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation, 17*(39), 1–14.

Campbell-Patton, C. (2016). [Review of the book *Peace education evaluation: Learning from experience and exploring prospects*, C. Del Felice, A. Karako, & A. Wisler, eds.] *American Journal of Evaluation, 37*(4), 580–583.

Clinton, J. (2014). The true impact of evaluation: Motivation for ECB. *American Journal of Evaluation, 35*(1), 120–127.

Côté, J. E., & Levine, C. G. (2000). Attitude versus aptitude: Is intelligence or motivation more important for positive higher-educational outcomes? *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15*(1), 58–80.

Datta, L. E. (2009). Golden is the sand: Memory and hope in evaluation policy and evaluation practice. *New Directions for Evaluation, 123,* 33–50.

De Jong, B. A., Dirks, K. T., & Gillespie, N. (2016). Trust and team performance: A meta-analysis of main effects, moderators, and covariates. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 101*(8), 23.

Donaldson, S. I. (2018). There is more to life than evaluation logic and data: Trusting gut feeling. *New Directions for Evaluation, 157,* 117–119.

Gallup (2013, December 24). Church attendance today similar to 1940s. https://web.archive.org/web/2014012208 1705/http://www.gallup.com/video/1665 98/church-attendance-today-similar-1940s.aspx

Grubbs, S. T. (2009). An evaluation of an alternative teacher certification program a matter of trust. *American Journal of Evaluation, 30*(4), 581–586.

Jumpstart Labs (2013). Connected to Give: Faith Communities Key Findings from the National Study of American Religious Giving. http://jumpstartlabs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ConnectedToG ive3_FaithCommunities_Jumpstart2014_ v1.3.pdf

Mark, M. M., Donaldson, S. I., & Campbell, B. (Eds.). (2011). *Social Psychology and Evaluation.* Guilford Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2010). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use.* Guilford Press.

Robinson, H. (2020). Dualism. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 ed.). Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualis m/

Schulz, J., Bahrami-Rad, D., Beauchamp, J., & Henrich, J. (2018). The origins of WEIRD psychology. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3201031

Scriven, M. (1995). The logic of evaluation and evaluation practice. *New Directions for Evaluation, 68,* 49–70.

Sechrest, L. (1980). Evaluation researchers: Disciplinary training and identity. *New*

Directions for Program Evaluation, *8*, 1–18.

Shackman, G. (2012). Social psychology and evaluation. *The Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, *8*(17), 132–134.

Sturges, K. M. (2014). External evaluation as contract work: The production of evaluator identity. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *35*(3), 346–363.

Tarsilla, M. (2010). Being blind in a world of multiple perspectives: The evaluator's dilemma between the hope of becoming a team player and the fear of becoming a critical friend with no friends. *The Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, *6*(13), 200–205.

Zinsmeister, K. (2019, Winter). *Less God, less giving? Religion and generosity feed each other in fascinating ways*. Philanthropy Roundtable. https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/philanthropy-magazine/less-god-less-giving