

Can Passion Aspire to Objectivity?

The Search for Balance between Advocacy and Evaluation

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NOTE: This handout accompanied a presentation at the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute Spring Training 2015. This handout is best used not as a record of what you hear during the session, but rather as the start of your questions, reflections, and ideas about ways that you do or could do your own research.

Why is it important to balance advocacy with scientific rigor and objectivity?

- Real or perceived bias will result in some audiences rejecting, discrediting, or ignoring study findings and recommendations
- Scientific inquiry and good quality evaluation can result in getting us closer to the "truth" of what works and why, allowing policymakers and program providers to better use resources and improve outcomes for people and communities

In what ways can our passions and biases cloud our ability to conduct good social science? By causing us to ...

- Frame research questions in a way that limits the range of potential answers
- Collect data from a less than representative sample, or from only some relevant sources
- Ask leading questions
- Relax (or disregard) methodological rigor
- Favor data that is consistent with our point of view
- Fail to carry out additional analyses to explore data that is inconsistent with our point of view
- Fail to recognize other ways of interpreting findings
- Draw out only some of the conclusions, implications, and/or recommendations that arise from the findings

**Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute
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Standards and Accountability: The Challenge
for Evaluators*

What can we do, and what pitfalls can we avoid, in order to ensure credible and rigorous work?

A. Ensure that study design, data collection, analysis, and reporting are rigorous, transparent, and credible.

Clarify our point of view about a problem ...

Carry out some intentional self-reflection about our interest in a particular problem or issue and try to determine whether we have underlying motives. Our underlying biases are easier to address through problem definition and the selection of methodology if they are at least partially known to us and acknowledged to our stakeholders.

Understand the problem from more than one vantage point... Do an initial literature review of what other researchers have found when they have studied the same or similar problems. There are often unexpected elements in what is found through such reviews. The effort to synthesize results from multiple studies, and to understand the methods other researchers have used to approach the issue, can broaden our perspectives. Another great way to get a different perspective on

the issue is to have conversations with the people who are most directly impacted or affected by the program or problem we are studying, preferably in the setting or context of the study. The incorporation of multiple perspectives should be carried over into data analysis and not limited to the study design.

Encourage multi-method approaches that can shed light from different vantage points... When we collect data using multiple methods and from a variety of people, we are more likely to see a particular problem or collect observations that disagree with each other, which ultimately allows us to consider alternative interpretations of the facts. Efforts to build in counterpoints, counterfactuals, and diverse viewpoints increases both the credibility and the long-term value of the research activity.

B. Allow our values to shape our selection of projects and how we use and communicate research findings.

Be selective in who we choose to work for and what we choose to work on... At the front end of projects, we are often driven in the selection of our study problems by the types of organizations and clients we work for. (This includes both the company/employer we choose to work for and the clients we choose to take.) We often have underlying expectations that the results of our work will be used to secure resources or improve problem-solving approaches for disadvantaged groups, including those who have been treated unjustly, those who are unable to adequately address their issues on their own, or those who lack the basic resources needed to solve day-to-day problems (like food, housing, mental or physical illness, etc.). We can choose *not* to work on a project or for a particular organization if the organization's mission, or the purpose of the project or research questions, are counter to our values.

Clarify the intended use of the research we undertake... It is important to negotiate with clients and their stakeholders on the scope of a specific project, and to agree up front how information will (and will not) likely be used. It

is sometimes helpful to ask questions directly such as, "If the results show that there is little evidence that a given program is working, would you still plan to disseminate the results?" "If the findings reveal something unexpected, are you prepared to adjust your programming or strategy for addressing this problem?" "What resources is your organization prepared to devote toward addressing any needs or gaps that are identified with this study?"

Synthesize and triangulate findings from multiple studies and/or communicate important findings to key stakeholder groups... Have you ever wondered if anyone actually read that evaluation report you wrote that shed light on a particular social problem or issue? Did you ever feel like your research findings went unrecognized or unattended to by the original funder or client, because they never followed through on any of your suggestions? In some cases, it may be appropriate to repackage and present the findings from your previous evaluations or research studies for a different audience that may be more likely to be receptive to and take action on your recommendations.

C. Ensure that the concept of “rigor” is one that is culturally informed and culturally responsive.

Incorporate diverse perspectives and voices at all stages of study design and implementation...

The inclusion of diverse voices is one of the most powerful ways of bringing cultural awareness and responsiveness into our work, thereby making the methods a better match for the subject matter and context of the study.

Build capacity and voice among historically underrepresented groups... We can build

components into our research projects that provide technical assistance or coaching to small, community-based organizations. Sometimes we can involve them in research design, data collection, and data analysis in ways that both strengthen the cultural appropriateness of the methods and build capacity among community organizations to do and use high-quality research more independently in the future.

Selected resources

For understanding your own attitudes and beliefs, some of which are likely to be out of sight of your own awareness: Project Implicit (Harvard University): <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>

Linda Tuhiwai Smith. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London, England: Zed Books.

New Directions in Evaluation, Summer 2014 issue on “Revisiting Truth, Beauty, and Justice: Evaluating with Validity in the 21st Century.”

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