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# Has The Time Come To Evaluate Evaluation?

## (Or Who Will Be Accountable for Accountability?)

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*A review essay of three recent books represents an occasion to examine the very idea of accountability, and to examine what the effects of several decades of emphasis on evaluation have been.*

Gray, S. T., & Associates, A. (1998). *Evaluation with Power*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Martin, L. L., & Kettner, P. M. (1996). *Measuring the Performance of Human Services Programs*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Mullen, E. J., & Magnabosco, J. L. (1997). *Outcomes Measurement in the Human Services: Cross-Cutting Issues and Methods*. Washington DC: National Association of Social Workers.

It is now more than 30 years since the current accountability movement in human services began taking shape, with such early publications as Edward Suchman's *Evaluation Research* and a few pioneering evaluative studies like *Girls at Vocational High*. For many it was the bristle of vexing political and social issues raised by the War on Poverty and well-captured in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's phrase "maximum feasible misunderstanding" which first brought forth the basic notion of accountability: That careful measurement of results by value-neutral professionals, like the officials in a sporting event, could introduce elements of civility, fair play and rational judgement in what was already clearly a long, slippery slope of partisanship, culture wars and the largely unknown territory of racial, ethnic, gender and other divisions.

The accountability movement itself has always been ahistorical and "methodological" in the same manner as other practice research at the intersection of three traditions: the "good government" progressivism which engendered modern public administration, the scientific philanthropy out of which modern social work arose and the research tradition which C. W. Mills labeled "abstracted empiricism". Coming together in accountability, progressive social scientific researchers treated the full sweep of human affairs from the dawn of civilization to the present moment as an exogenous variable. Usually this meant reducing the past to a single sharp dichotomous delineation between a 'political' past and a more 'rational' or 'scientific' future: The past has always been seen by evaluators through the lens of the

morally sordid squalor of 19<sup>th</sup> century American government in the spoils system. Likewise, the future has always been seen as a period under the wise policy guidance of a professional elite (social scientists, in this case, instead of Veblen's engineers). In that fictive past, evaluative judgements on matters of public policy for human services are said to have been "political"; made on the basis of sordid mixtures of interest, passion, and assorted other dubious political motives.

Originally, the ahistoricism of accountability was helped along by the fact that social service providers, stakeholders and most accountability scholars gave no evidence of any familiarity with the rich and long international history of social service, with major periods of disorganization and decline but also astonishing peaks of brilliant innovation reaching back through the English colonial experience back to the Elizabethan Poor Laws and beyond, at least to the Fourth Century and to Antioch, Alexandria and the Byzantine Empire. (Morris, 1986)

At various times along the way, social, nonprofit and government services have been held up by accountability advocates as somehow uniquely susceptible to inefficiency, ineffectiveness and dubious quality well beyond the tolerable limits of other human (and most notably market) affairs. In the future foreseen by believers in this social-science augmented accountability, the base and venal motives of the political past were to be superceded at some unspecified future time by a more rational, scientific decision matrix in which public choice would be both well-reasoned and empirically based, inefficiencies are eliminated, and only effective and high-quality services will be allowed to continue.

This view has never gone unchallenged, of course. It has been at least 20 years since a host of critics began assaulting this view as at least elitist and antidemocratic and at worst, impossibly utopian and totalitarian. In that time period (which also produced the remarkable, and still growing, worldwide phenomena of third sector studies), we have seen the ideology of the American social liberal welfare state implode. We have also seen the virtually complete collapse of the bi-partisanship and a publicly viable political middle-left in the U.S. which produced and gave meaning to this vision of apolitical progressive professionalism. We have seen it replaced by assorted "libertarians", "neo-conservatives", "new Democrats" and "communitarians", the ideological "culture wars", public policy gridlock, and the highly partisan (and notably non-empirical!) critique of the remnant welfare state by assorted self-styled "conservatives." Yet the accountability forces have clung fast to their civil vision.

Throughout the past three decades, practitioners in the social services and social welfare researchers were told repeatedly by a chorus of voices from within the accountability movement that to the extent events are hostile to social services (in the forms of funding cutbacks, program eliminations,

service consolidations, continually escalating reporting requirements and the like) it was because of the original sin of our checkered past: *We* (the managers and service providers) have not been accountable enough and must strive to be more accountable in the future. (The question of why those same venal politicians who have controlled such matters in the past would have been convinced by our rational arguments and empirical evidence if we had presented – or presented them more effectively! – seemed never to arise!)

Full measures of the conventional elements of this accountability paradigm (much of which can be summed up with Moynihan's powerful phrase *The Professionalization of Reform* ) are on display in three recent works reviewed below. It must be said that each is a serious scholarly work produced by people for whom I have the highest personal and professional regard. Their arguments and conclusions are in each case well worked out and supported, given their starting assumptions.

For anyone who is uncertain or unclear about the basic management paradigm of evaluation, Kettner and Martin have been working hard in recent years to concentrate attention on the performance measurement aspect of and this volume (#71 in the Sage Human Services Guide Series) is an excellent place to start. This volume adds the concept of quality to the familiar duo of efficiency and effectiveness and presents an elegant rationale for the conceptualization of evaluation as an issue of performance measurement. For reasons which are not made entirely clear, the authors present "an expanded systems model" of performance which they also call "the new accountability", and which differentiates outputs and outcomes in the familiar manner and adds an additional dimension of "quality outputs." This systems model also links inputs to outputs by "the efficiency perspective", inputs to outcomes by "the effectiveness perspective" and quality to inputs by "the quality perspective".

The model itself is clear, concise and well-grounded in conceptual work done over the past half century. Nevertheless, the authors brought this reviewer up abruptly with their questions in the concluding chapter: "Does performance measurement really contribute to improving the efficiency, quality and effectiveness of human service programs? Are the benefits worth the costs?" Although they cite three studies from Florida, Minnesota and Oregon, one would have to say the jury is still out on this. More troublesome is the conventional restatement of the evaluative outlook which follows: "Without question, the future continuation, growth, development, or termination of human services programs will depend on the use of performance measures and the generation of performance measurement data." This is a conclusion which it appears the authors of both of the following books (and most social science-based accountabilists) would concur. [Martin, 1997, 109] I shall have more to say about this point below.

The management guru Peter Drucker is apparently one among many who believe that current efforts entitled the National Performance Review are bound to fail, because they are too timid and partial. "In fact, there is no point in blaming this or that President for the total disarray of our government today. It is the fault neither of the Democrats nor the Republicans. Government has outgrown the structure, the policies, and the rules designed for it and still in use." (Drucker, 1995, 53-54)

*Evaluation with Power* is a publication based on a conference co-sponsored by Independent Sector. This work is in multiple senses, a committee report: Acknowledgements are offered to 70 committee members and consultants and 15 co-authors. In the Preface, Michael Q. Patton, a former president of the American Evaluation Association, calls this the first book to focus on evaluating the effectiveness of entire organizations. *Evaluating with Power* approaches the process of evaluation from two points of view: Part I lays out a model of evaluation of organizations as a process of practical learning, and Part II brings together what the book refers to as "a chorus" of voices from foundations, corporate giving offices, nonprofit organizations, consultants, university and evaluation communities. I must confess, I was attracted to this work initially by the title, which seemed to promise a reconciliation of key elements of the two moments of accountability history: power from the real politic of the past and solid, factual data from the professional enlightenment of the present. Curiously, despite the title and an occasional passing reference to "empowerment" the role of power fails to make much more than a cameo appearance in the book.

Nonetheless, a number of thought-provoking ideas are broached, albeit within the limits of the underlying committee design. Co-evaluation is said to be a process of learning, consisting of asking good questions, collecting the right information, sharing the information and making decisions. While at one level such an approach is beyond reproach it is also, like much committee work, something of a truism: It's hard to seriously imagine a model of evaluation which opposes learning, and endorses asking bad questions, collecting the wrong information, withholding information and being indecisive. The co-evaluation idea is a potentially useful and provocative one precisely because it approaches the simultaneous judgements aspect of evaluation as a social process with something other than the "group mind" implicit in so much evaluation thinking, but in this case it fails to survive the highly social circumstances of its birth.

I don't doubt for a moment that Gray and Associates are correct in the twin intuition displayed by assembling an authorial team of 85 prominent and powerful professionals to approach the issues of co-evaluation and empowerment. Evaluation is a social or group process and power does matter a great deal (but not exclusively) in reaching evaluative judgements about

organizations. However, Part I fails to rise above the level of a sound committee report and begin to grapple with the tough issues it raises.

In Part II, the authors get down to the business of fitting evaluation to aspects of organization: Three pairs of authors ground organizational evaluation in three key management processes: Dennis R. Young and Humphrey Doermann (Human Resource Management) Richardo A. Millett and Mark A. Lelle (Information Management) and Peter M. Buchanan and Theodore P. Hurwitz (Resource Development).

Judy Belk and Michael Daigneault explore the realm of Ethics and Accountability, placing the latter entirely within an ethical framework. They ask only "Why do good people sometimes make bad ethical choices?" thereby reducing the politics of accountability to morality: Such questions as, if by their choices persons show themselves to be good or evil, how does this relate to any notion of an (ethically) good organization, and what does that imply for conventional evaluative criteria like effectiveness and logical categories like output, outcome and impact? These issues remain to be explored if the model of organizational evaluation is to progress.

Rebecca Adamson and Edward T. Weaver take on the book's theme most directly and by example.

The weightiest volume (in terms of pages and numbers of contributors) is the Mullen and Magnabosco volume published by the National Association of Social Workers. The book also reports proceedings of the National Symposium on Outcomes Measurement in the Human Services, held at Columbia University in 1995. In 30 chapters, 52 authors explore an astonishingly broad range of facets of the outcomes of social service programs. This book is divided into five parts: Part I addresses overarching issues and methods. Harry Hatry of the Urban Institute proposes a research agenda around four themes: breadth of focus; timing of follow ups; response rates and the measurement of prevention. Other authors explore a range of conceptual and definitional issues. In Part II, contributors zero-in on the measurement of mental and behavioral health services outcomes, broaching a host of accountability, managed care, clinical practice and other issues. In Part III, similar assaults are made on issues of family services and Part IV addresses outcomes issues for social services in health care. Part V concludes with discussions of implications for policy, clinical and administrative practice and future research.

Although a model of how to measure organizational effectiveness and outcomes is missing, John A. Seeley offers a straightforward model of program evaluation (complete with brief discussions of outputs, outcomes and impacts – see Martin and Kettner discussion above.) Outputs are said by Seeley to be "quantitative indicators of what a program actually does" while outcomes "indicates a focus on the observable changes in individuals,

institutions, conditions, services, policies, processes, products and so on" and impacts refers to "the longer term, community-based results of the program." Seeley's focus on outcomes reveal the paradoxical nature of evaluation: "First, in the rush to measure and focus on outcomes, the purposes of continuous learning and improvement may be lost. Second, an overreliance on quantitative measure may divert attention from understanding why the outcomes occurred and the meaning of the outcomes for individuals, organizations, and the larger community. Third, the pressures of accountability and a quick assessment may not produce information that is of sufficient quality to be trusted, or that is useful to key stakeholders who may not have been involved in its development. Fourth, in the rush to get on board, organization or program management may be tempted to start from scratch in building an outputs measurement system."

That the kind of professional and social scientific issues and concerns raised in these three volumes and much of the earlier evaluation literature will figure into future managerial decision-making in nonprofit and public settings seems entirely plausible. However, the view that such concerns will be important in the continuation, growth, development, or termination of human services programs seems to be grounded in a profound misreading of the major events of the past two decades.

## Unreviewed References

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