Australasian Evaluation Society
Can Evaluation be Politically Grounded, Policy Relevant, Participatory
AND
Objective and Independent?

The Premise
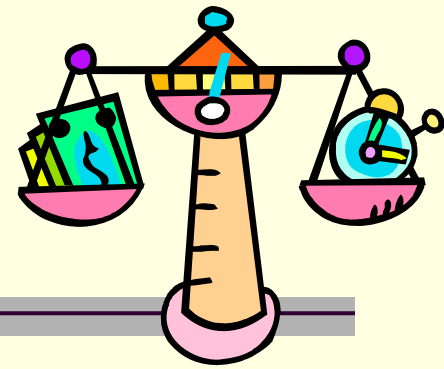
- Evaluation takes place in a political context
- Evaluation supports stakeholder involvement
- Naïve to suggest evaluation can operate in a political domain without being influenced by it
- Impact of political and stakeholder influences can lead to compromises to *Independence* and *Objectivity* and *Credibility* of Evaluation

The Premise

- Strategies need to be developed to ensure Evaluation is:

Politically Grounded

Policy Relevant

Participatory

AND

Objective and Independent

THERFORE

Credible

The Political Context

Evaluation is a:

- Political act as well as an investigatory process (Guba & Lincoln,1989)

- Process where evaluators are 'power players in a game where the rules are subject to manipulation….' (Patton, 1997)

- Process 'saturated with political concerns' (Berk & Rossi 1990)

- Socially constructed and politically articulated process (Taylor and Balloch 2005)

Political Influence

- Pressures from government agencies & politicians
- Requirements of funding or regulatory agencies
- Pressures from stakeholders
- Differences of opinion within an evaluation team re evaluation approaches or methods
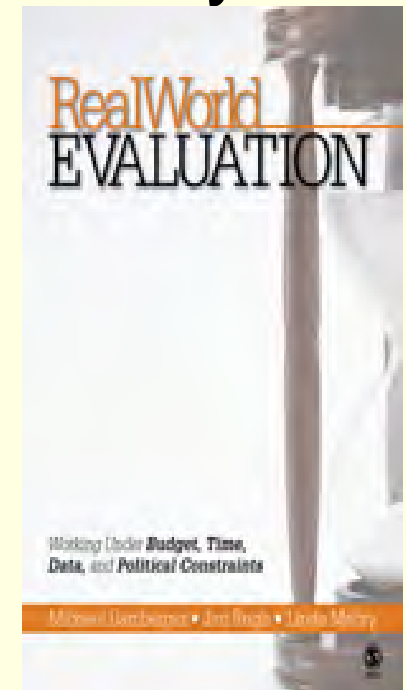
Michael Bamberger (2006) "Real World Evaluation"

The Stakeholder Context

Evaluator: retains firm control or hands control to stakeholders and beneficiaries?

No Participation → Information → Consultation → Partnership → Control

Challenge for Evaluation

To balance

the inevitable

influences

resulting from political and policy

considerations, together with interests generated by active stakeholder

involvement, with the **credibility** of the evaluation, particularly in relation to its findings

Credibility of Evaluations

It has been long warned that political and commercial pressures on evaluation clients and on evaluators lead to a priori bias in evaluation reports

(Chelimsky, 1987; Palumbo, 1987; Schwartz, 1998; Weiss,1973; Wildavsky, 1972)

Mao Tse-tung

Churchill

Lenin

Credibility of Evaluations

- "Why do many international development evaluations have a positive bias? Should we Worry"? Michael Bamberger, Evaluation Journal of Australasia (2009)
- Budget and time constraints
- Limited access to data
- Way evaluations are commissioned & managed
- Political and organisational constraints and pressures

© Julie Smith, 1907

Political Influences: Design/ Implementation/Reporting

- Selection of evaluators/ their orientation
- Choice of evaluation design/data collection
- Choice of stakeholders to involve or consult
- Selection of internal/external evaluation
- Allocation of budget and time
- Changing role of evaluator & relationships
- Selection of audiences for reports & findings
- Contents and language of reporting

Michael Bamberger (2006) Real World Evaluation

Concerns of Evaluators: Australasian Evaluation Soc.

Survey of Members (2003) re Ethical Issues:

- Managers or funders trying to influence or control evaluation findings, sometimes including pressure on evaluators for positive results (cited repeatedly), sometimes including pressure to provide "dirt" on a program

- Political interference

- Dissemination or suppression of reports

Concerns of Evaluators: American Evaluation Assoc

Survey of AEA members identified:

- Pressures by stakeholders to alter findings
- Misuses of findings by stakeholders
- Evaluators pressured by stakeholders to violate confidentiality
- Findings modified prior to release, suppressed or ignored
- Stakeholders declare certain research questions 'Off Limits'
- Legitimate stakeholders omitted from planning process
- Before evaluation, stakeholder already decided what "should be"
- Evaluators reluctant to present findings fully
- Evaluators unsure of their ability to be objective
- Evaluators concerned about reporting findings

Credibility of Evaluations

'The success of the current boom in the use of evaluative information will remain largely dependent on its credibility….. Perceptions that evaluative information misrepresents reality (intentionally or not) are likely to render it useless—other than as a tactical weapon in political and bureaucratic skirmishes. There is some evidence suggesting the risk of a credibility crisis regarding much evaluative information' (Schwartz and Mayne 2005).
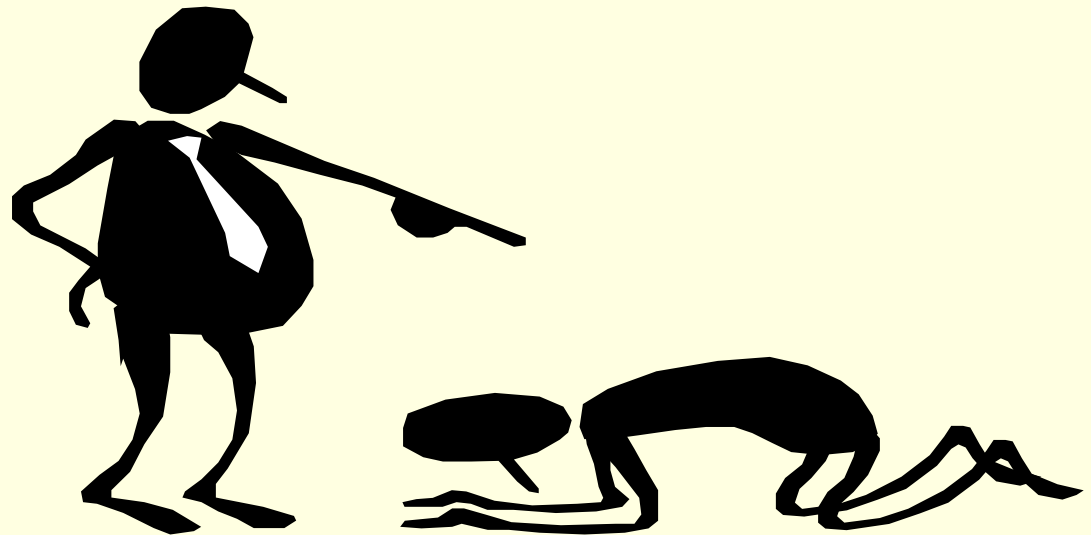
Independence and Objectivity

- Credibility maintained through adoption of concepts of independence and objectivity

- Terms independence & objectivity often used interchangeably to depict process of adopting an autonomous & impartial position

- They are distinct but inextricably linked concepts

Independence

- Evaluator being awarded freedom to conduct the evaluation without undue control exerted by the commissioners of the evaluation, the organisation or program delivery personnel

Objectivity

- The evaluator's capacity to undertake un-biased and objective assessments and form conclusions during the evaluation
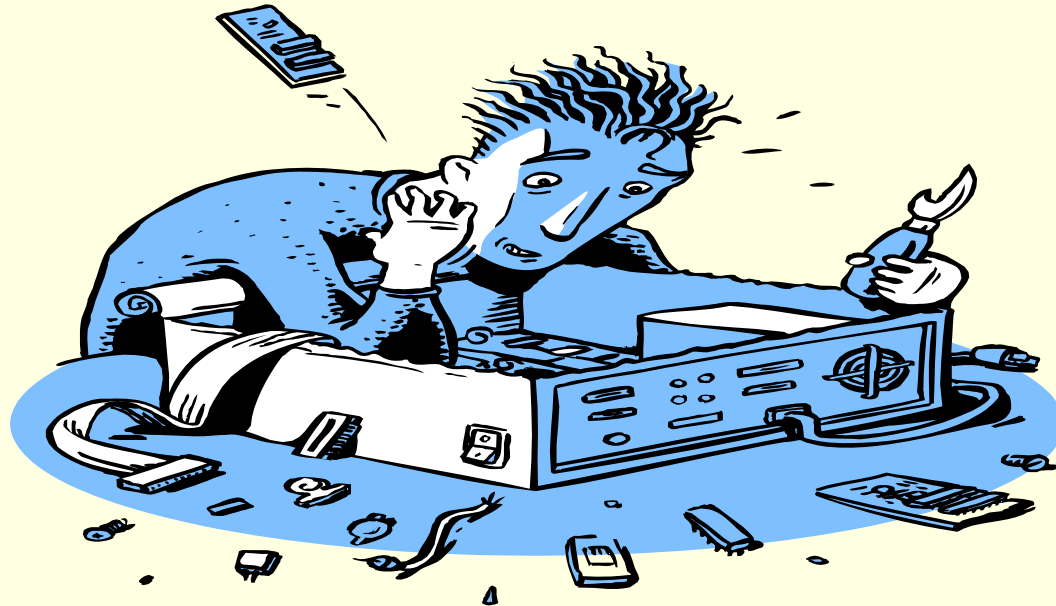
Independence & Objectivity

- Independence: freedom of the evaluator to pursue the rigour of the evaluation without compromise to imperatives and pressures from the political and organisational context, the commissioners or stakeholders

- Objectivity: impartiality exercised by the evaluator in their selection of evaluation methodology, approach to the conduct of the evaluation and the interpretation of findings

Challenge for Evaluation

Adopting a politically grounded, policy relevant & participatory approach to evaluation whilst also pursuing credible collection, analysis and reporting of evaluative data

Case Study 1

- Evaluation commenced 12 months prior to completion of pilot period of funding
- Program found to be to be largely underperforming according to its stated goal and objectives
- State election announced and government showcased 'successful' strategies on this particular social issue
- Evaluators pressured to reframe data, rephrase findings and re-word recommendations to provide a more positive evaluation than the data supported

Case Study 2

- During evaluation it became clear that the commissioning client had decided to cease funding - program staff given notice and midway during the evaluation program ceased to operate

- Findings were that program had been performing well and had developed a great level of support from the target communities

- Pressure placed on evaluators to adopt a more critical response to the program and identify greater areas of under-performance than data supported

Pressure Tactics

- Soft negotiation ('could you please reconsider/change the emphasis?')
- Medium level negotiation/persuasion ('I would like you to alter or remove the following sections/recommendations')
- Hard level persuasion ('Change or remove certain recommendations within the document… or else?).
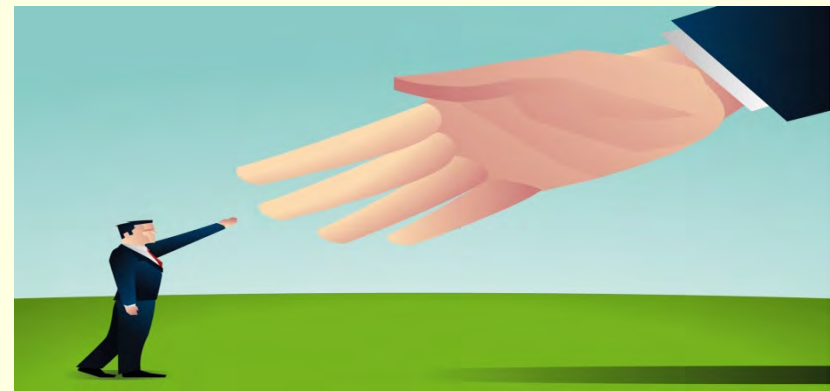
Discuss in a small group

Have you had any experiences in the context of evaluation where you have felt pressured or influenced to:

- Highlight positives and dilute/reframe negatives?

- Highlight the negatives and dilute/reframe the positives?

- If so, how did you respond?
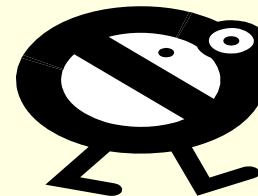
Is Independence Possible?

- Relationship that exists between commissioner and evaluator - preserving a **commercial business relationship**

- "Insider" relationship of internal evaluator - preserving **position of employment & career**

Is Objectivity Possible?

- Interpretations of data are subjective, arising from our personal position, values and orientation in life
- Same set of data can be interpreted in different ways depending upon the paradigm used to interpret it
- Patton (1997) replaces the notion of pure objectivity with fairness and balance
- Objectivity could include concepts of impartiality and accuracy

Paradigms in Evaluation

■ Scientific realists who argue for an independent reality capable of objective description (evaluators as independent judges)

■ Social constructionists who argue that all knowledge is contextual, relative and subjective (evaluators as facilitators and negotiators)

■ Is there a mid point???
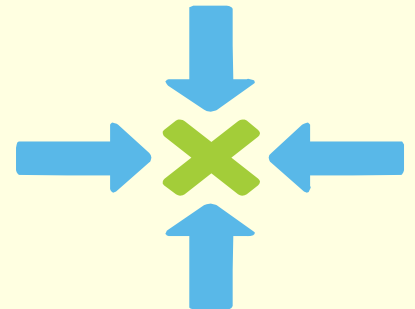
Common Evaluation Standards for Product Quality

- Types of standards: product quality, process quality and usefulness.

Product Quality:

- Substantiated and impartial/objective findings/conclusions.

- The findings and conclusions presented should be supported by the evidence gathered (data and analysis) and should be presented in an impartial (objective) manner.

Swartz and Mayne (2005)
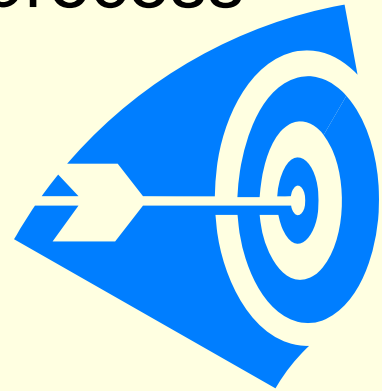
AES Code of Ethics

- **Integrity:** Members should practice with honesty and fairness.

- **Truthfulness:** Members should not knowingly make or prepare or certify as true any oral or written statement which is false, incorrect, misleading or incomplete

- Do they go far enough in providing guidance?

Guiding Principles: Integrity and Honesty

AMERICAN EVALUATION ASSOCIATION

- Not to misrepresent procedures, data or findings & prevent or correct misuse of work.

- If misleading information or conclusions are likely, they have responsibility to communicate concerns & reasons for them.

- If discussions with client do not resolve concerns, evaluator should decline to conduct evaluation or consult colleagues/relevant stakeholders about ways to proceed.

Norms for Evaluation - UN

- Evaluators must have personal and professional integrity.

- Evaluators must respect the right of institutions and individuals to provide information in confidence and ensure sensitive data cannot be traced to its source.

Framework for Assessing Evaluation Validity

- **Confirmability & Objectivity:** Are conclusions drawn from available evidence and is evaluation relatively free of bias?

- **Reliability & Dependability:** Is process of the evaluation consistent, stable over time and across researchers and methods?

- **Credibility & Internal Validity:** Are findings credible to the people studied and to clients and readers?

- **Transferability & External Validity:** Do conclusions fit other contexts and how widely can they be generalized?

- **Utilization & Application:** Were findings useful to clients, researchers and communities studied?

(Michael Bamberger 2007)

Increasing Rigour & Trustworthiness of Participatory Evaluations

- Communication & mutual trust
- Use of multiple theories and methodologies, sources of data & methods of data collection
- Meta-evaluation & critical reflection
- Assessment of intended/unintended impacts
- Use of rigorous data analysis & reporting
- Participant reviews of evaluation case studies, impact assessments and reports.

June Lennie (2006)

Suggested Strategies

- Outline **requirements** for independence & objectivity specifying compliance with code of ethics/practice guidelines

- Discuss importance of preserving independence & objectivity for **credibility** of evaluation

- Establish

conflict resolution

processes

Long Term Strategies

- Opportunities for **education/awareness raising** as to what is involved in commissioning an evaluation.

- Ensuring all contracts offered specify that the contractor is to **abide by a code (s) of professional ethics, conduct or standards** such as that available through the Australasian Evaluation Society.

Question & Answer

- **Is evaluation really an independent and objective process or can it be bought for a price?**

- Answer is that currently evaluation is often used to achieve the latter purpose but we should strive as practitioners and commissioners of evaluation to ensure it is used for the former purpose.