

KEY ISSUES IN EVALUATING SERVICES

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As resources for human services become scarcer, so demands for "value for money" increase, and at the same time interest grows in evaluation and quality assurance. Evaluation has never been a strong point in our services, so a more self-critical approach is a welcome spin off from otherwise damaging policies. However, in the likely rush to begin evaluating services, there is a risk that insufficient attention will be paid to the complexities and subtleties of the evaluation process. The aim of this article is to sketch out some of the issues involved, since it is likely that many of those calling loudest for evaluation (or at least for cost effectiveness) know little about what is involved.

Evaluation tends to mean different things to different people, and a failure to clarify its meaning at the outset of any evaluation work is only to invite confusion and conflict. Programme evaluation is also a big and growing field, and it is not possible to review it in detail in a few pages. One way of organising the various types and functions of evaluation is to ask a few questions:

- \* What is the purpose?
- \* What is the focus?
- \* What are the criteria?
- \* What are the methods?

In fact these questions tend to be linked, so for example, the purpose of the evaluation influences the methods used in the evaluation. It will be sufficient for this discussion to draw attention to the most important distinctions under each question heading.

### What is the Purpose of the Evaluation

Evaluations can be carried out for a number of reasons, and these vary according to who has commissioned the evaluation: "why is the evaluation

being done?" can rarely be answered without considering "who is it being done for?".

**\*Formative Evaluation** is aimed at providing information for improving and modifying a programme. Its consumers tend to be those delivering the service, and those involved in managing its operation. Formative (or developmental) evaluation implies a fairly close relationship between the evaluator and the programme staff, and is often associated with an action-research model.

**\*Summative Evaluation** on the other hand is concerned with determining the results and effects of a programme and tends to take place as if the programme was not in a process of development. Summative evaluation is commonly applied to mature programmes to inform decisions about continuation and funding. The consumers will often be funding agencies.

**Program Monitoring** is perhaps the most practised category of evaluation and may vary widely from periodic checks of compliance with policy to straightforward "tracking" of services delivered and counting of clients. Consumers tend to be senior managers and/or sections of an agency concerned with statistics and publicity. Much information gathering in the NHS fits into this category, both pre- and post- Korner.

#### **What is the Focus of the Evaluation?**

Evaluations may focus upon different aspects of a programme and its relationships with its environment (management, consumers, other programmes, other resources).

**Process-focussed evaluations** examine the strengths and weaknesses of day-to-day operations and the way these processes are perceived by staff, clients and others. They may seek to identify the basic process in

the programme and generate suggestions for improving them. In other words process evaluations look at the operation of the programme.

Outcome-focussed evaluations examine the effects of the programme. They might ask to what extent desired client outcomes are being achieved. They might relate to the goals set for the programme by its staff or managers.

It perhaps makes little sense to carry out outcome-focussed evaluations if processes are not also documented and evaluated: information that outcomes are negative would need to be followed up by diagnosis of the fault in the process that should be producing positive outcomes.

Other foci are possible, for example:-

"Efficiency evaluation " - can inputs be reduced and still obtain the same level of output, or, can greater output be achieved with no increase in inputs?

"Extensiveness evaluation" - how well does the programme cover the target population? What would be needed to help it improve its coverage?

"Awareness-focussed evaluation" - who knows about the programme? What do they know?

"Halo-focussed evaluation" - do we like the staff, the building, the account given by programme staff?  
(also "Personality-focussed or Building-focussed")

Does it have a good feel to it? In the absence of systematic evaluation these tend to be the foci of the implicit evaluations that are always made.

### What are the Criteria on which Evaluation is Based?

A major influence on the development of programme evaluation has been the "scientific model" that while stressing rigour and objectivity has (in most cases) been presented as value-neutral. Yet it is difficult to conceive of evaluation that is value-free: evaluation implies making judgements about the value of a programme or its practices. A failure to state the value base of the evaluation will usually mean that the criteria upon which judgements of worth are made will remain hidden.

Value bases for evaluation, explicit or implicit, can vary greatly, for example: \_

VALUE BASE	EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE CRITERIA
People with unusual behaviour should be made more like the rest of us.	Extent of reduction of deviancy in the clients.
Psychiatric symptoms can be treated in themselves.	Reduction of symptomology.
Mentally handicapped people should learn to be independent.	Number of skills learned by clients, generalisation and maintenance of these skills across time and settings.
	<u>or</u>
	Extent to which programme operates on an educational model.
People who are excluded from society should be enabled to participate more fully in its community.	Extent of participation in community-based activity, number and intensity of contacts with local people.
People should be more self sufficient.	Reduction in G.P. consultations.
Services should be provided as cheaply as possible.	Unit cost. Comparative cost. Total cost.
Imagery is a major contributor to social disadvantage.	Ways in which clients are represented to the public, e.g. in language, signs, programme names etc.
Experts know best.	Compliance of programme with current thinking in services to this client group.
Bureaucrats know best.	Compliance with DHSS circulars.
Consumer satisfaction is an important requirement of a service.	Measures of consumer satisfaction with, support for, knowledge of the service.
Needs can be met through technology.	Amount of hi-tech equipment.

Only when the value bases for the evaluation and the programme have been clarified can methods decisions be taken at all meaningfully. Once this task has been carried out goals for the service can be specified more precisely and assessed in the evaluation process (although also note that "goal\_free" evaluation is a legitimate approach, especially where the task is to describe the impact of the programme without being biased by the programme's belief's about its goals and their relevance - goal free evaluation is unlikely to be value free).

Supposedly value-neutral evaluations might be concerned with financial or operational efficiency, or be referenced normatively - e.g. on the basis of DHSS performance indicators.

Value-based evaluations are likely to stress a "moving consensus" or its "leading edge" with regard to the key rights, interests and desirable accomplishments of the programme's consumers.

Finally, in considering any evaluations it is necessary to ask "whose values underly the evaluation?"

### What Methods will be used in the Evaluation?

In the previous section, it was seen that the natural-science model has been a major influence on evaluation methods. Evaluation according to a natural-science model would stress quantification of data, and the objectivity, and hence distance of the evaluator from the programme. Alternative approaches would stress developing a shared understanding of the programme and its effects, which would use qualitative information, although not exclusively so. Since the late 70's there has been a growing literature on this type of evaluative approach, one that is more conducive to formative evaluation than one using methods modelled on natural science.

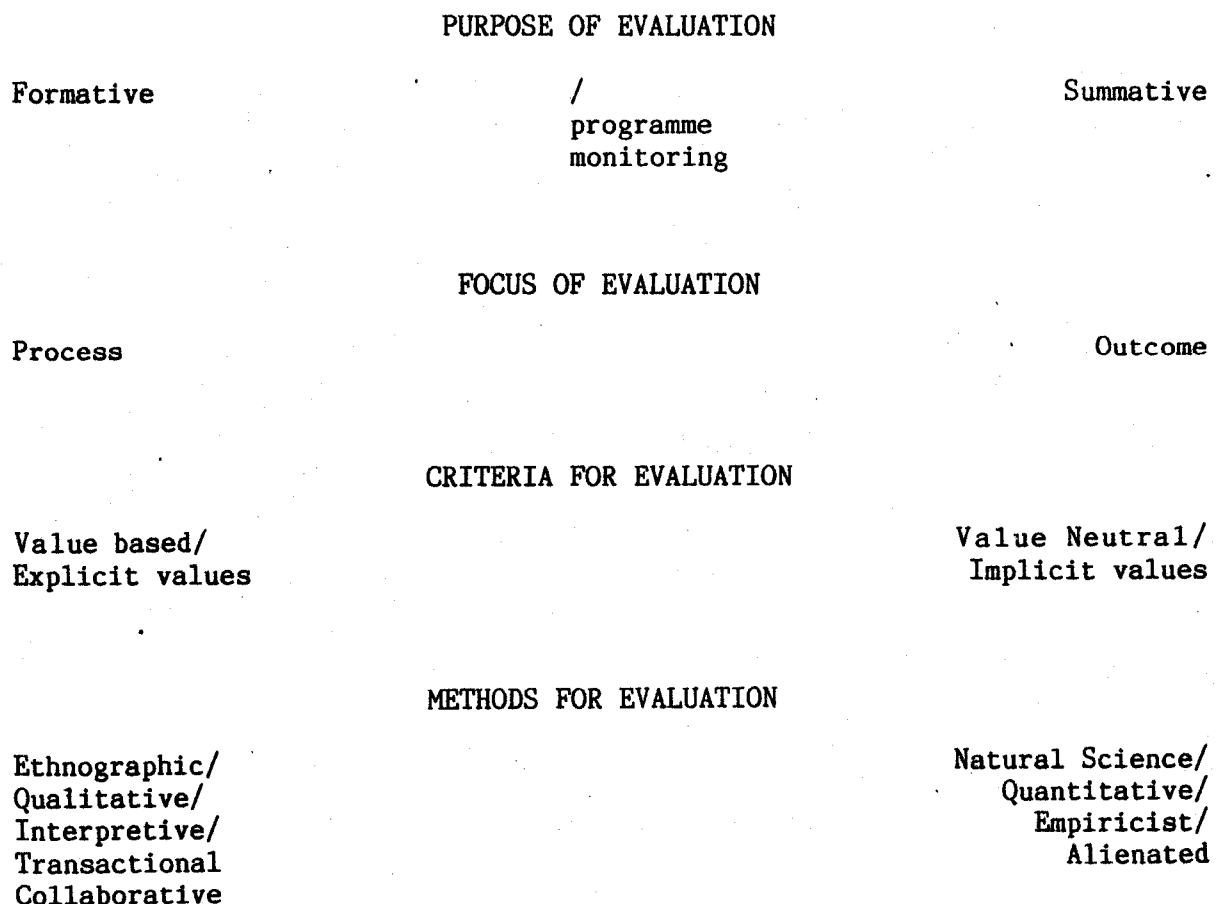
Again, the methods interact with the focus of the evaluation, with foci on such things as the experiences of users, perceptions of staff, group process of a team, for example, leading to more ethnographic and qualitative approaches than would foci on skills acquired, costs, or time allocation of staff members to different tasks.

Summary

Programme evaluation, then, is a varied and fast-developing field, yet much of this diversity seems unknown to service providers, remaining "locked away" in books, journals, and islets of practice here and there.

It is possible to describe the variety of programme evaluation through the use of four dimensions as the following diagram illustrates.

**Scheme for Classifying Evaluations**





This is not the only possible scheme, and the dimensions could be subdivided into factors that while often related are not always so (e.g. Qualitative methods are often found with a transactional style of investigation, but there is nothing to prevent transactional evaluators from sharing quantitative data with those whose programmes they are evaluating, as part of an action-research design).

### Evaluating Evaluation

If evaluation is carried out to assist both staff and managers to improve and develop the quality, impact, and extensiveness of the programme, then we might expect the following types of evaluation to be most helpful:

Purpose: Formative, but including some programme monitoring

Focus: Broad based, to take in both outcomes and the process by which they are generated.

Criteria: Explicitly value based.

Methods: Transactional, in that programme staff collaborate in the evaluations, with support from evaluation consultants.

Interpretive, in that "facts" are seen as socially constructed, and different actors have differing realities.

Qualitative methods would be emphasised, since it is the impact as experienced by service users that is the key to service quality, but

Quantitative methods would also be involved where numerical information will yield useful summary information to document both processes and outcomes.

Further requirements are that evaluation,

- a) is seen to evaluate the programme rather than the people operating it, or those receiving its service
- b) pays attention to the context of the programme, so that its organisational supports and constraints can be identified.
- c) yields information that is of acceptable accuracy and validity (i.e. the information gives a good picture of the phenomena it purports to represent),

and

- d) is feasible and practical to carry out within the resources allocated.

A measure of the resources that could be required to ensure evaluation is done effectively is the common practice of devoting a proportion of the budget for U.S. Federally supported programmes to evaluation.

### Korner Information System

By way of comparison with the above scheme, the Korner information system has the following characteristics

Purpose: Apparently for program monitoring.

Focus: Mostly on process and intermediate outcomes (i.e. primarily staff activity and some of the outcomes produced, but not those related to the impact on client's well being.

Criteria: None/"value neutral" assumptions. Criteria would presumably be applied by those receiving the information.

Methods: Quantitative, and collected by those delivering the service. Their use and interpretation could take place at operational level and at the various managerial levels.

The Korner approach might therefore have some usefulness if it could be effectively implemented (and anyone with experience of research based on self reporting will have questions about the accuracy of any information that is likely to be collected). However, it needs supplementing by approaches stressing Formative purposes, Broadly based foci including outcomes and processes, Value-related criteria, and more truly transactional methods including use of qualitative data.

**Further Reading**

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