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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/69c9w9wb>

Journal

American Journal of Evaluation, 34(3)

ISSN

1098-2140

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Publication Date

2013-09-01

DOI

10.1177/1098214013490226

Peer reviewed

A Tribute to Carol Weiss and Her Vision

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American Journal of Evaluation
00(0) 1-3
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DOI: 10.1177/1098214013490226
aje.sagepub.com



Carol Weiss was an evaluation visionary. Her work helped to set a substantial part of the agenda for research and writings on evaluation for the last four and a half decades. I will not present a full biographical depiction of her numerous accomplishments. Rather, I would like to create a sense of the impact of her work by examining three early chapters that she wrote.

When I first started in evaluation in the late 1960s, I was aware of Carol's work in evaluation. But, when reading her 1972 book, *Evaluating Action Programs: Readings in Social Action and Education*, I became primarily acquainted with the wisdom of Weiss—the enduring wisdom of Carol Weiss. I was invited to have one of my papers reprinted in this book of readings. While honored to be a part of a Carol Weiss volume, the most significant part of that encounter was that it introduced me to the three chapters written personally by her:

- Utilization of Evaluation: Toward Comparative Study (1972a);
- The Politicization of Evaluation Research (1972b); and
- “A Treeful of Owls” (1972c).

I will focus on evaluation utilization in my discussion of these writings and point out only a small portion of Carol's important observations that helped to shape utilization understandings. (Please note that I view the evaluation world through “use colored glasses.”)

The first of these chapters, “Utilization of Evaluation: Toward Comparative Study” (reprinted from an earlier article), was a classic that changed the field and set the tone for a research agenda on evaluation utilization in those early years. This chapter helped to define evaluation utilization as a major field of inquiry within evaluation. Carol expressed concern about the extent of nonutilization of evaluation and attributed part of the deficiency to a failure on the part of evaluators to recognize the impact of organizational systems on evaluation and its use. She urged that evaluators pay attention to even rudimentary aspects of organizational behavior including the salience of the drive for organizational perpetuation; personnel's need for status and esteem; fear of the unknown consequences of change; prevailing ideological doctrines; and political feasibility. This focus—the need for understanding program context—has become an increasingly strong element in the evaluator's portfolio.

Carol also identified other evaluation procedures, which she felt held promise for utilization and are worth study. One of these is the “early identification of potential users of evaluation results and selection of the issues of concern for them as the major focus of study” (p. 324). She commented that it was typically not possible for a single study to provide information that could be used by an array of audiences and that maximum payoff may require identification of and gearing the study to

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relevant users. The focus of theorists on the use branch of the evaluation theory tree derives from this early insight.

Further, Carol drew attention to the need for more effective methods for presentation of findings. One of these is “the spelling out of the implications that the study offers for action” (p. 325). Implied is the idea that the presentation of the report is not the end point for the evaluators’ involvement. Appropriate evaluator attention to utilization concern extends beyond reporting. Further, Weiss said, “aggressive advocacy by the evaluators for the positions derived from evaluation may gain them a hearing in councils of action” (p. 325). I see within this statement a move away from viewing the evaluator as a noninvolved researcher. Beyond this, I consider her statement as a call for the personal involvement of evaluators in promoting evaluation use—the so-called *personal factor* of the evaluator.

Carol’s article also dispels evaluators of the notion that there is a direct relationship between evaluation and decision making, as portrayed in some early writings of the field. She recognized evaluation’s role as contributing to decisions that occur over time. In that regard, I absolutely love Carol’s term, *decision accretion*. That is, decisions do not happen, they accrete over time.

Another element contributing to nonutilization was generally the way that evaluation was practiced. She said, “Technical competence . . . does not imply the absence of methodological problems” (p. 321) and further noted:

Evaluators usually accept the description of the program given by practitioners as sufficient. They rarely attempt to specify the theoretical practices on which it is based, define the principles that guide its practice, or even monitor its operation so that there is confidence that the program as officially described actually took place. (p. 321)

Carol expanded upon this concern in her later work on better understanding program theory in subsequent journal articles. This early focus on program theory and logic modeling, subsequently elaborated on by Rossi, Chen, and others, became a standard part of the evaluator’s methodology. It too is an important influence on subsequent use.

A second Weiss chapter entitled, “The Politicization of Evaluation Research” (reprinted from a 1970 article) is likewise a classic. Carol raised evaluators’ consciousness about the role of politics in evaluation. We learned that politics are inherent to evaluation. Programs were created through a political process, and that history must be understood by evaluators. The evaluation process is itself political. And, evaluation reports have political implications. Evaluator decisions and actions can enhance or impede utilization. Since people have stakes in the findings, politics in its many forms affect utilization. Indeed, she notes that evaluation use is directly related to the political sophistication of evaluators.

In this chapter, Carol suggested placing “less stress on evaluations that come out with all-or-nothing, go/no go conclusions” (p. 332) at a time when other writers were advocating just such a focus for the evaluator’s role. She recognized that all evaluations are not summative and that utilization might refer to more than impact findings.

The introductory chapter of this volume, popularly called *A Treeful of Owls*, provides a brief discussion of Carol’s views on what evaluation is all about, how to conduct it, and how it might be improved. The chapter also serves as an editorial introduction to the reprinted articles. The major themes are the need to adapt to the realities of program life; that goals are rarely simple and clear cut and there is a need to reach consensus on goals; a concern that evaluation results sometimes do not meet the information needs of decision makers and there is a need to better understand the level of decision maker who will be the recipient; and finally, the need to be attuned to how evaluation results have cumulative impact.

Many of Carol’s evaluation utilization insights are relevant to this day and have not been significantly enhanced on by any writing since these published in 1972.

I must add one further personal note. Around 1985, I completed a series of evaluation studies funded by the National Institute of Education, who wanted me to have a conference with speeches related to utilization as a concluding event. Instead, I convinced our program monitor to allow me to convene a small group of evaluation researchers to discuss and “debate” evaluation utilization issues at a University of California, Los Angeles–owned house right on the Malibu beach. For 3 days, prominent evaluation theorists, including Carol Weiss, Ross Conner, Ernie House, Jean King, Mike Patton, and I, engaged in lively evaluation discourse meandering across the evaluation terrain—but primarily focused on the topic of utilization. When the audiotapes of the meeting were transcribed, I attempted to put these evaluation wanderings into some kind of logical format for a book (*Debates on Evaluation*), preserving the original wording of theorists, but only suggesting very minor modifications when absolutely necessary. What I remember most about that exercise is that Carol’s talking, Carol’s conversation, was *exactly* her writing. Her very accessible casual conversation was at the same time elegant and insightful.

Carol’s brilliant insights and remarkable ability to communicate them with great clarity has shaped many decades of evaluation understandings and will continue to do so. She gave birth to many important ideas that shaped the field. Carol, we will miss your wisdom—we will certainly miss you.

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