UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Further reflections on evaluation misutilization

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3303v4wd>

Journal

Studies in Educational Evaluation, 25(1)

ISSN

0191-491X

Authors

Christie, CA

Alkin, MC

Publication Date

1999

DOI

10.1016/S0191-491X(99)00006-1

Peer reviewed

PERGAMON

Studies in Educational Evaluation 25 (1999) 1–10

**Studies in
Educational
Evaluation**

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON EVALUATION MISUTILIZATION

Christina A. Christie and Marvin C. Alkin

*Graduate School of Education and Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles*

While the conversation on misutilization is grounded in ethical issues, it differs from typical discussions of program evaluation ethics. Most of the evaluation ethics literature focuses on the practices and principles of the evaluator. Misutilization examines evaluation ethics through a different lens. Here, we consider the ethics of those using the evaluation, be it the commissioning of an evaluation, the evaluation process itself, or the evaluation findings. Perhaps the focus on ethical considerations of the user rather than the evaluator provides a plausible explanation for the sporadic attention which misutilization has received in the literature.

Utilization Roots

Researchers' interests in understanding evaluation utilization have evolved over the years. Consideration of evaluation use was stimulated by Weiss' (1972b) influential article, *Utilization of Evaluation: Toward Comparative Study*. Alkin, Koescoff, Fitz-Gibbon, and Seligman (1974) further examined the issue and a subsequent study by Patton, et al. (1977) sparked a number of additional research investigations by Alkin, Daillak, and White, (e.g., 1979), Braskamp, Brown, and Newman (e.g., 1978), King and Pechman (e.g., 1982) and others.

These earlier theoretical discussions of utilization focused on describing and categorizing the dimensions, variables, and complexity of use. Much of the inquiry surrounding utilization has focused on predictors of use, the factors that affect use, and the context and conditions in which use can be optimized.

For those who have most vigorously engaged in research on the topic of utilization, attainment of evaluation use is viewed as a main thrust of that work. While discussions over the past decade have focused on the nature, causes, and consequences of use, more recent work has focused attention on the role of context in utilization (Shulha & Cousins, 1997).

Central to the discussion of evaluation misutilization is recognizing that misuse is inherently rooted in earlier considerations of evaluation utilization, yet is dramatically different. The construct of misutilization was alluded to in the evaluation literature as early as the 1960's (Suchman, 1967). During the 1970's and 1980's (Alkin, 1975; Weiss, 1972), considerations of misutilization were often outgrowths of discussions of evaluation utilization. Patton (1988) described misutilization as a dimension separate from utilization and therefore would be better understood if investigated as a separate continuum. He describes misutilization in contrast to non-misutilization and utilization in contrast to non-use. The distinction between the contrasting pairs is critical to the understanding of misutilization.

The utilization continuum extends from non-use (non-utilization) to use (utilization) and reflects the extent to which the evaluation is utilized. The misutilization continuum extends from non-misutilization to misuse and "is a measure of the manner of its use depicting an ethical dimension" (Alkin, 1990, p. 290). Thus, each continuum can be viewed as having *active* and *passive* ends. Active in this context means that both utilization and misutilization are conditioned upon the *active* participation of a user. Use is then viewed as the active extreme of the utilization continuum, with non-use as its contrast (*passive*). Similarly, misuse is the *active* extreme to non-misutilization (*passive*). Users actively use or misuse evaluation findings.

Intentionality: A Context for Misuse

Active engagement of users/misusers implies intentionality. This notion of intention has been a central part of the utilization literature. While all evaluators seek to have their evaluation results have impact – be used –, Patton (1997) in his discussions of Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE), particularly emphasizes the evaluator's obligation to seek utilization by intended users. Here, Patton defines intended users as those who are expected to be such in the future. Since the aim of the evaluation is use by intended users, the usefulness of an evaluation is dependent upon the intention of the user. It is the responsibility of the evaluator to help primary users define the evaluation's intended use(s). Therefore, when discussing intention as it relates to misuse, it is necessary to first consider the role of the evaluator.

Before misuse can be determined, it must be established that the evaluator's objective was to design an evaluation to be used by intended primary users. If the evaluator was not acting with this aim, the possibility of misevaluation, and not misuse, should be considered. Some may consider this an extreme view, but we would maintain that the evaluator must act in ways which facilitate maximized use.

Likewise there is the issue of intentionality with respect to potential users. The user can inadvertently or deliberately adapt information to support a position (King, 1988). However, without intentional acts to divert the evaluation, its process, or findings,

misutilization does not occur. For example, the false commissioning of an evaluation is certainly directed misuse. Likewise, the selective reporting of results indicates that a direct intention to misuse findings exists. On the other hand, misuse can occur spontaneously out of naive expediency. In this case, the intent of the user to misuse is less contrived and could be thought of as more a response to a circumstance or event. With this, the issue of context is raised. Context plays an important role in determining intention to misuse, just as it does with utilization. Chelimsky (1998) has noted an innate relationship between context and politics, which influences use. Similarly, this relationship exists with misutilization.

What Does Misuse Look Like?

When misuse does occur, what does it look like? Alkin and Coyle (1988) systematically delineated aspects of misutilization. Misutilization can be divided into three categories: 1) misuse of the commissioned evaluation; 2) misuse of the evaluation process; and 3) misuse of the evaluation findings. Each dimension delineates the stage of an evaluation during which misuse is possible. We will examine each of these commenting on user actions that might be taken and the outcome (or consequences) of each (see Figure 1).

Evaluation Stage	User Action	Outcome of Findings
1 – The Commissioning of the Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political gain • Publicity • Gain funding • Public relations • Professional prestige • Justification of prior decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misuse
2 – The Evaluation Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay critical decisions • Using political influence to sabotage evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misuse • Incomplete evaluation
3 – The Evaluation Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusions rewritten • Selective reporting of results • Oversimplification or exaggeration of results • Dismiss null results • Ignore results • Inaccurate transmission of results • Attribute findings that deviate from actual results • Incomplete, premature dissemination • Casual misrepresentation or communication of results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misuse • Blatant non-use

Figure 1: Dimensions of Misuse

User actions describe the behaviors of the potential users, which would lead to misuse. Examples include: commissioning an evaluation for political gain, for publicity, or to gain funding only; using evaluations to delay critical decisions; using evaluation results selectively, or exaggerating, over-simplifying, or ignoring findings. Each user action then has a corresponding outcome. We have classified these outcomes as misuse, blatant non-use, and incomplete evaluation. Misuse occurs when a user engages in a particular action where misuse is the desired outcome. Blatant non-use is deliberate inaction when results of an evaluation could inform program decision making. An incomplete evaluation occurs when the evaluation process is disrupted to such an extent, that the evaluation cannot be completed.

Misuse of the Commissioning of the Evaluation

This dimension of misuse can be summarized simply as the commissioning of an evaluation for any purposes other than to help inform decisions about programs. Central to this dimension is the user's deliberate intention of misutilization. Upon commissioning the evaluation, users either have no real intention of using the evaluation findings or the decisions about a program have been previously determined (Alkin, 1975). The most common scenarios are those evaluations that are commissioned for justification of decisions that have already been made; for political purposes only (e.g., to satisfy funding sources or to remove or place oneself into the public eye); for public relations; and for professional prestige (Alkin, 1975). Results from such evaluations can be rendered meaningless. In a similar view, Suchman (1967) described six situations of *pseudo-evaluation*: 1) eye-wash: selecting only the parts of the program that look good; 2) white-wash: covering up program failure; 3) submarine: attempt to destroy a program regardless of its worth; 4) posture: using an evaluation to look good to the public; 5) postponement: delaying needed action through evaluation; and 6) substitution: disguising program failure.

When an evaluation is commissioned and funded with the absence of legitimate intent for use there is potential for substantial financial loss. One could argue that the total cost of the evaluation is forfeited once the intention of misutilization from the outset has been determined. The financial losses incurred with misutilization of the commissioning of the evaluation warrants both recognition and serious consideration.

Misuse of the Evaluation Process

The implementation of a commissioned and designed evaluation constitutes the second stage. Recognition of misuse during this implementation or process stage is challenging. Below, we have identified and will discuss three of the ways in which the evaluation process is misused.

The evaluation process may be used to delay decisions. Suchman (1967) referred to this as *postponement*. Essentially, the user is using the evaluation process to delay or avoid a known necessary action. Since an evaluation is time consuming, there is the hope that once the evaluation has been completed, the urgency to act will have subsided. Hence, a delay or possible avoidance of the burdensome action has been achieved. As an extension of this idea, it is also probable that a user would deliberately extend the length of an

evaluation to delay or avoid decision-making. For example, the user could express a need for additional data or even go so far as to ask that an additional time consuming component be added to the evaluation. Here, evaluation findings would not be utilized for decision making and non-use is the likely outcome.

Decision-makers can also use political influence to subvert or sabotage an evaluation by not supporting elements of the evaluation process (King, 1988) which would result in an incomplete evaluation. This is often the case when an administrator anticipates findings that are not satisfactory. Unsatisfactory results could be seen as jeopardizing the life of a program, the reputation of an agency, or the political standing of the administrator. Thus, subverting a part of an evaluation could make the evaluation less meaningful and its credibility subject to attack.

Process misuse may also be related to financial aspects of conducting an evaluation. For example, funds intended to support the evaluation might be diverted from the evaluation to provide support to the program, or as we have seen, to other programs. A common scenario of misallocated evaluation funds is as follows. An institution receives resources to hire evaluation staff and the personnel hired either do not work on the evaluation at all and are assigned to other responsibilities, or spend only a minimal portion of their designated time working in the evaluative role.

As discussed under the misuse of the commissioning dimension, financial losses may be incurred by misusing the process of an evaluation. In the situation where the evaluation process has been delayed, there is an extension of the targeted completion date for the evaluation. The extension of a timeline is likely to exhaust the allocated resources for the evaluation, and it is probable that additional costs will be incurred. In the instance where the evaluation has been sabotaged, it is likely that most, if not all, of the finances intended for the evaluation will be lost. In this case, resources are used to support an evaluation with inconclusive results. Therefore funds used to support this evaluation could be considered wasted.

Misuse of the Evaluation Findings

The misuse of evaluation findings has received considerable attention in the literature over the years. Borgatta (1966), Weiss (1972b), Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980), Cook and Pollard (1977), and Alkin (1975) have all addressed the topic. Alkin and Coyle (1988) outlined seven ways in which evaluation findings can be misused. We have delineated several of these points and expanded upon others

Evaluations sometimes yield results that are undesirable to the user. In this case, the user is likely to modify findings so that they better suit their agenda. There are several ways in which this is done. Evaluation conclusions can be rewritten (House, 1980). Results can be selectively reported (House, 1980; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980), oversimplified, exaggerated, or inaccurately transmitted (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980).

Beyond the above conditions under which evaluation results can be misused we note several other possibilities. An almost effortless way of misusing results is to simply dismiss them. Users will often dismiss null results (Cook & Pollard, 1977). Sound results can easily be ignored (Patton, 1988). Moreover, in an attempt to substantiate the dismissal

of results, the evaluation itself may be charged with being methodologically unsound. Misrepresentation of results is an additional manner of misuse. In the case of misrepresentation, findings may be attributed to an evaluation that deviates from the actual results (Cook & Pollard, 1977). It should be considered misuse when incomplete results are disseminated before a final evaluation report is complete (Cook & Pollard, 1977). The early release of findings can result in misinformed decision making and an erroneous semblance of a program.

As the designation *casual misrepresentation* suggests, informal actions by would-be users occur in less formal situations such as nonchalant or casual conversation. Informal actions may lead to misuse as well. Weiss (1972) has cogently asserted that utilization occurs through the process of knowledge accretion. That is, information comes to the potential user (or misuser) in various and subtle ways, and over time. Casual misrepresentation is one of the information sources potentially contributing to misuse.

Use, Misuse and Misevaluation

A clear distinction should be made between use, misuse and misevaluation. We have already commented on the differences between use and misuse, they are different continua. Use and misuse are attributed to the user, however misevaluation is attributable to the evaluator (Alkin & Coyle, 1988).

Regarding misevaluation, the American Evaluation Association (1995) has outlined five guiding principles for evaluators. These principles are: 1) systematic inquiry; 2) competence; 3) integrity/honesty; 4) respect for people, and 5) responsibilities for general and public welfare. If any of these principles are violated misevaluation can occur. Likewise, the Joint Committee on Educational Standards (1994) has designed criteria for examining the adequacy of the evaluations. These standards specifically address evaluation utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy and may be used to judge whether misevaluation has taken place. In essence, misevaluation is designing an evaluation with flawed methodology, careless data collection, sloppy analysis, and/or poor reporting.

In an instance where misevaluation has occurred there is no logical reason to utilize the evaluative findings (Alkin & Coyle, 1988). Not until the integrity of the evaluation is determined can one be confronted with the potential of misutilization. Consequently, in most cases the possibility of misutilization is contingent upon the absence of misevaluation.

Figures 2a and 2b depict the distinctions between these three dimensions and the implications of various actions. In Figure 2a, we consider an evaluation that has been designed, conducted, and findings reported soundly. In this case, evaluation findings can potentially become a pivotal part of a process where users gain an enhanced understanding of, or make more informed decisions about, a program. Conversely, findings can have no impact whatsoever because the potential user is choosing to ignore or subvert the evaluation findings. When findings can potentially have impact, they can be utilized either inappropriately or appropriately. User action would then determine the evaluation outcome. Misuse is conditioned upon an inappropriate user action such as those previously described while utilization is the optimal, yet expected, result.

When considering findings that have not been used to inform a program, we must be mindful of the user's intentionality. Unintentional non-use is just that.

Figure 2a: Various Outcomes of Evaluation (adapted from Alkin and Coyle, (1988))

Figure 2b: Various Outcomes of Misevaluation

Nevertheless, who are unintentional non-users? We may only conjecture at various possibilities. What if key potential users leave the program? What if pressing problems come to play within an organization putting the program being reviewed in deferment of consideration leading to the subsequent ignoring of possible program changes? These are just a few questions needing further consideration. There are far fewer questions however when considering findings that are intentionally not used. When sound findings have been blatantly ignored misutilization must be concluded.

Figure 2b depicts the possible scenarios in which misevaluation takes place. We distinguish between findings that are used by unaware and aware users. User awareness refers to whether or not the user was cognizant of the misevaluation. In the instance where the user is aware that misevaluation took place, utilization of findings should be considered misuse. Consider a poorly designed evaluation that renders positive results. The use of such "positive" findings will lead to inaccurate/misleading conclusions about the effectiveness of a program. A user who is mindful of misevaluation yet attributes merit to the findings is indeed misusing results. On the other hand, utilization by the unaware user is simply a mistaken use of results. Of course, when considering misevaluation, non-use is justified.

Need for Further Research

Various misuse situations have been categorized in this paper. The notion of financial misuse has been introduced. Insight into why misuse takes place has been explicated. The distinction between misuse and misevaluation has been clarified. However, the need to better understand misuse still exists.

As researchers, we need to continue to investigate the various contexts in which misuse occurs. To do so we must first understand how and why misuse occurs. To gain new insight into misuse, studies should include more intensive surveying of users and evaluation professionals about instances of misuse. As evaluators, we need to be aware of the possible misuses of our evaluations and their results. Our goal should be to create decision making environments at all levels where appropriate use of evaluation information is more likely to occur and be rewarded (King, 1988).

References

- Alkin, M. (1990). *Debates on evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Alkin, M. (1975). Evaluation: Who needs it? Who cares? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 1 (3), 201-12.
- Alkin, M., & Coyle, K. (1988). Thoughts on evaluation misutilization. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 14, 331-40.
- Alkin, M.C., Daillak, R., & White, P. (1979). *Using evaluations: Does evaluation make a difference?* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Alkin, M.C., Koescoff, J., Fitz-Gibbon, C., & Seligman, R. (1974). *Evaluation and decision making: The Title VII experience*. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Evaluation.

American Evaluation Association Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators (1995). Guiding principles for evaluators. *New directions for Program Evaluation*, Summer, 19-34.

Borgatta, E.F. (1966). Research problems in evaluation of health service demonstrations. *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 44, 182-96.

Braskamp, L.A., Brown, R.D., & Newman D.L. (1978). The credibility of a local educational program evaluation report: Author, source, and client audience characteristics. *American Educational Research Journal*, 15 (3), 441-50.

Chelimsky, E. (1998). The role of experience in formulating theories of evaluation practice. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 19 (1), 35-55.

Cook, T.D., & Pollard, W.E. (1977). Guidelines: How to recognize and avoid some common problems of mis-utilization of evaluation research findings. *Evaluation*, 4, 161-64.

House, E.R. (1980). *Evaluating with validity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. (1994). *The program evaluation standards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

King, J.A. (1988). Research on evaluation and its implications for evaluation research and practice. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 14, 285-99.

King J.A., & Pechman, E. (1982). *Improving evaluation use in local schools*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

Patton, M.Q. (1988). Six honest serving men. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 14, 301-30.

Patton, M.Q. (1997). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton, M.Q., Grimes, P.S., Guthrie, K.M., Brennan, N.J., French, B.D., & Blyth, D.A. (1977). In search of impact: An analysis of the utilization of federal health evaluation research. In C.H. Weiss (Ed.), *Using social research in public policy making*. New York: D.C. Health.

Shulha, L.M., & Cousins, J. B. (1997). Evaluation use: Theory, research, and practice since 1986. *Evaluation Practice*, 18 (3), 195-208.

Suchman, E.A. (1967). *Evaluative research: Principles and practice in public service and social action programs*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Weiss, C.H. (1972a). Evaluating educational and social action programs: A tree full of owls. In C. H. Weiss (Ed.), *Evaluating action programs*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Weiss, C.H. (1972b). Utilization of evaluation: Toward comparative study. In C.H. Weiss (Ed.), *Evaluating action programs*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Weiss C.H., & Bucuvalas, M. (1980). Truth tests and utility tests: Decision makers' frame of reference for social science research. *American Sociological Review*, 45, 302-13.

The Authors

CHRISTINA A. CHRISTIE is currently a doctoral student in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and a researcher holding positions at the Center for the Study of Evaluation and the UCLA School of Public Policy. She was previously the evaluator of a program providing services to high-risk adolescents.

MARVIN C. ALKIN is a Professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He founded the Center for the Study of Evaluation in 1966 and directed it for a number of years. He is best known for his work on evaluation utilization and evaluation theory.