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The Evaluator's Role in Valuing: Who and With Whom

Marvin C. Alkin, Anne T. Vo, Christina A. Christie

Abstract

The act of valuing in an evaluation may be perceived in different ways. We consider the multiple theoretic perspectives that govern an evaluator's behavior and present a typology of evaluator valuing roles. Within this typology we describe three ways in which value judgments are typically reached—by stakeholders alone, stakeholders and evaluators in consort with each other, or by evaluators only. This heuristic offers a more explicit understanding of how valuing occurs in evaluation. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Evaluation scholars and practitioners have dedicated much energy and effort to shaping and defining the program evaluation profession. This observation is evidenced by the array of evaluation theories that are described in the literature and the ongoing research activities and conceptual papers that continue to deepen our understanding of evaluation theory and practice. However, careful review of the program evaluation literature turns up only a few resources that describe value judgments, and operationalize the ways in which they are reached and who is involved in this aspect of the evaluation process.

When considering some of the complexities involved in the valuing process, many issues come to mind. For example, how positive do the findings related to a specific study question have to be to warrant a

statement of *good*? Or, conversely, how negative must they be to be considered *bad*? Are criteria sufficiently well established to legitimize such judgments? How are judgments to be made about the overall program given the different value-laden information sources? Additionally, what if the answer to some of the questions (or issues in the evaluation) is good and to others the answer is bad? Are some questions more important than others? How much more important? Just these few questions raise many important issues related to the mechanics of the valuing process. We recognize and appreciate the challenges that accompany difficult-to-make decisions. However, because of page limitations, we have chosen to focus only on those aspects of valuing related to *who* values and how those who are doing valuing are involved in making value judgments. We address these questions. Who decides value? Is it the evaluator who decides? Who else might be involved in the decision?

Michael Scriven has been considered a central figure in calling attention to the role of valuing in evaluation. He argues that, “evaluation is not just the process of determining facts about things (including their effects) . . . [rather] an evaluation must, by definition, lead to a *particular type* of conclusion—one about merit, worth, or significance—usually expressed in the language of good/bad, better/worse, well/ill, elegantly/poorly, etc.” (Scriven, 2003, p. 16). For Scriven, “valuing” is the central component of evaluation and is what distinguishes evaluation from other kinds of systematic inquiry. We, as do many others, agree with Scriven’s assertion, which Fournier (2005, p. 140) summarized as: “It is the value feature that distinguishes evaluation from other types of inquiry, such as basic science research.”

In a similar vein, Scriven (1986) maintains that it is the evaluator’s job to value, to determine whether a program is good or bad. This simple assertion about who determines the merit and worth of an evaluand has prompted much debate over the years. We argue in this paper that the act of valuing may be perceived in many different ways. Although Scriven and some others view valuing as lying solely in the purview of the evaluator, many other evaluation writers do not perceive the valuing act in the same way. Namely, that valuing is not just the prerogative of the evaluator. Rather than leaving the valuing act to the evaluator, some writers (e.g., Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Stake, 2012; Weiss, 1999) argue for the involvement of others in the valuing process and that there are many different ways in which others might be involved in the valuing process. With this being the case, we consider the ways in which valuing might take place.

Different evaluation conditions will call for different approaches to valuing. Consider the influence of context on the evaluation process. As Scriven notes in this volume, *good* and *bad* are context-dependent concepts. Thus, important dimensions of an evaluation’s context include the social and political conditions under which the program is being evaluated, the issues and questions that should be addressed, and whether these questions

are answerable given the evaluation's resources and constraints. Scriven describes in his writings (e.g., Scriven, this issue) how evaluative claims are established and validated.

As part of the total context in which evaluation takes place, and of particular relevance to our discussion on valuing, we consider the multiple theoretic perspectives that govern an evaluator's behavior. Each has within it an implied direction that valuing might take. We call this the *evaluator context*. At present, there are certainly various conceptions of evaluator context in the field. Some suggest that evaluators must bring to bear their methodological and interpersonal skills, content knowledge, values, and theoretic orientation when conducting evaluations (Alkin, 2012; Vo, in press). Broader definitions of the idea may include the discipline, local setting, or geographic location in which the evaluator is situated. We do not take particular issue with the appropriateness of these operationalizations here, as additional work in this area will surely lead to the development of a widely accepted definition. Rather, for the purposes of this article, we define *evaluator context* as the dispositions that may influence the way in which evaluators go about the valuing process. Specifically, this refers to the theoretic dispositions that an evaluator might have. It is the evaluator context that we are concerned with here.

Specifically, we consider how the *evaluator context* influences the valuing process and use a teaching analogy to describe the multiple approaches to valuing. Based on this analysis, we present a typology of evaluator valuing roles. This heuristic offers a more explicit understanding of the ways in which the valuing activity is framed by a theoretic lens. In general, we hope to provide a framework through which the act of valuing can be further studied.

Evaluator Contextual Influence on Valuing

By evaluator context we mean the individual evaluator's point of view, preferences, etc. Consider that there are multiple theoretic perspectives on evaluation—evaluation theories, if you will (Alkin, 2004). Alkin and Christie (2004) argue that all theorists consider valuing, along with methods and use, as part of their conceptualization about what evaluation is and how it should be conducted, regardless of whether valuing is addressed explicitly or not. Thus, each evaluation theory may carry with it implications for the way that valuing should take place within that theoretic perspective. Although theoretic approaches to evaluation may capture a portion of what we have referred to as *evaluator context*, it does not quite capture the potential variations in valuing preferences. That is, although many prescriptive theories contain clear descriptions of the various ways in which evaluation can be conducted, issues pertaining to the valuing process—who should value, with whom, to what extent, and under what conditions—are more clearly articulated by some theorists than others. We offer three broad categories

for describing how valuing takes place during the evaluation process; namely, by stakeholders only, by stakeholders with the evaluator, or by the evaluator only.

Modes of Valuing

Providing go/no go—good/bad judgments is an insufficient description of the evaluator's valuing role. The evaluator's role in valuing, as it is intended based on different evaluation perspectives, is varied. We struggled with a way to characterize these differences. In doing so, we searched for a meaningful analogy that might help to better demonstrate what we have referred to as evaluator context and what helps define the valuing mode that is described and endorsed in different theoretic writings. And, we found one. We were inspired by Cronbach's depiction of evaluation as teaching (Cronbach & Associates, 1980). Cronbach maintains that the evaluator teaches so that growth in understanding will occur. Gowin and Millman (1981) describe Cronbach's point of view as: "The evaluator is an educator working so the social order learns" (p. 86). But what specifically is the process by which the evaluator acts to help members of the policy-shaping community to deepen their understandings of the program? That is not clear.

Others too have referred to evaluation as teaching. Most directly, Wise (1980), in a *New Directions for Evaluation* volume, spoke of the evaluator as educator. He noted that there are elements of evaluator as teacher in the interactions that occur. There are many others who describe one of the key roles of the evaluator as that of teacher.

Now, think for a moment about the way that teaching takes place. In formal terms, the varying approaches to teaching are categorized by Fenstermacher and Soltis (1992) as the executive approach, the facilitator approach, and the liberationist approach. As an executive, the teacher's purpose is to "acquire the specific facts, concepts, skills and ideas" (p. 4), which s/he then communicates to students. The facilitator approach depicts the teacher "as an empathetic person charged with helping individuals grow personally and reach a high level of self actualization, understanding and acceptance" (p. 4). Finally, the teacher as liberator is concerned with freeing the individual's mind for the various aligned purposes, such as "development of intellectual skills, including the skills of learning" (p. 4).

When considering different teaching processes, we envisioned similar processes for the evaluator. For instance, teachers are commonly thought of as lecturers. This is an authoritarian role, implying that the teacher is the source of knowledge, and lectures are the vehicles by which that knowledge is delivered. Another kind of teaching role is one in which the teacher engages students in discussion and guides them in reaching conclusions so that final understandings are a product of the teacher and the student.

Table 3.1. Typology of Evaluator Valuing Roles

<i>Valuing By</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Exemplars</i>
Stakeholders	Stakeholders establish standards a priori	Tyler/Popham
	Evaluator provides data to identified stakeholders	Stake
Stakeholders and evaluator	Evaluator provides data for use by broad audiences	Cronbach/Weiss
	Evaluator guides stakeholders by establishing a framework for valuing	Alkin
	Evaluator guides stakeholders by guiding the valuing process iteratively	Fetterman/Patton
	Evaluator participates with stakeholders in valuing	Cousins/King
Evaluator	Evaluator valuing strongly based on the promotion of evaluator values (e.g., morals)	House
	Evaluator valuing based upon evaluation expertise	Scriven
	Evaluator valuing based primarily on program expertise	Eisner
	Evaluator valuing based upon scientific appraisal	Boruch/Cook

Teachers may also create situations in which students learn by doing. In essence, teachers provide the context and mechanism for learning to take place. This might be done by the creation of case studies and other kinds of activities where students' learning take place through the process of engaging with materials or activities initially produced by the teacher. In this role, the teacher is the inspirational leader and social conscience of students. The learning tasks are at hand, whether in textbooks or programmed materials, and the teacher provides encouragement and attempts to instill confidence in students. Students are being equipped to take control of their own learning.

We believe that Cronbach was really onto something. We see where evaluation (and particularly "valuing" in evaluation) is like teaching—at least as far as providing a vehicle for recognizing the diversity of evaluation perspectives. Aided by the teaching analogy just presented, we will examine the various roles of the evaluator and present a typology of evaluator valuing roles.

Table 3.1 provides an indication of the ways that value judgments are reached by *stakeholders* alone, *stakeholders and evaluators* in consort with each other, or by the *evaluator* only. The second column provides a description of the nature of the engagement in the valuing process. Lastly, we have listed evaluation theorists whose approaches we believe exemplify the valuing processes described in the first two columns.

However, providing an indication of who is to be included in the valuing process, while important, is not enough. The question remains about

the nature of that engagement. That is, what specifically are the roles of evaluators and stakeholders in the valuing process? In many ways, our three overarching valuing categories—(a) stakeholders, (b) evaluator and stakeholder, and (c) evaluator only—correspond to the teaching approaches—(a) liberationist, (b) facilitator, and (c) executive, respectively.¹

Valuing by Stakeholders

Identified others themselves establish the standard *a priori*.

Evaluator provides the data but leaves the valuing to the identified primary stakeholders.

Evaluator provides the data but leaves the valuing to the general/broad others.

Let us examine each of these modes of inclusion of others in the valuing activity. First consider the situation in which “identified ‘others’ themselves establish the standard *a priori*.” This instance is most clearly demonstrated when the evaluation question specified by stakeholders has within it a specific standard for judging a program’s worth. Take, for example, an afterschool program where program success is indicated by a score of 75 or above on a particular assessment. Alternatively, perhaps a stipulated percent of participants achieving a specified level on a criterion-referenced test serves as the measure of program success. In these cases, the standard is either met or it is not. The valuing criterion has been well defined. An example of this kind of valuing is evident in objectives-based evaluation approaches, which focus on generating information for accountability and decision making by developing and measuring the appropriate objectives for these purposes. Tyler initially established this type of approach as an acceptable method for evaluating programs in education in his 8-year study. Later, Popham extended this approach, focusing primarily on specifying behavioral objectives. This approach to valuing relies heavily on measuring educational outcomes and as such de-emphasized the focus on the instructional process. With more precise, unambiguous objectives, it is argued that one could determine with more confidence when program outcomes have been met.

Other evaluation writers advocate for the evaluator to provide systematic data to a group of identified stakeholders so that those in this specified group can make value judgments about the evaluand. Many of those who describe the valuing process in this way are guided by a more relativist approach to evaluation. These theorists argue that the value of something changes depending upon particular circumstances, and the beliefs, values, and perspectives held by individuals. Here, it is the role of the evaluator to collect data that is contextually grounded systematically, so that stakeholders can place value on the program based on the particularities of the specific evaluand being studied. Stake, for example, argues for using a

responsive evaluation, which often utilizes case studies as a method for studying the merit of an evaluand, in particular situations where a contextually grounded understanding of an evaluand is warranted. He maintains that the evaluator should offer a “thick description” of the evaluand for use by stakeholders to promote understanding of the “merit and shortcoming” of the evaluand (Stake, 2012). Stake acknowledges (personal conversation) that frequently his ideal valuing cannot be attained and he must value based on stakeholder values as he perceives them.

A third scenario where stakeholders alone place value on the evaluand is when the evaluator provides systematic data, but leaves the valuing to general/broad audiences. In this case, the evaluator is typically focused on those in the policy-making community more generally and not any one identified group of stakeholders. It is not clear when or in what specific decision-making context(s) the evaluation information might be used, and so it is the evaluator's role to offer the best systematic information possible so that when it is needed, evaluation information can be used to inform decisions. This might be seen in studies of more general issues that are of concern to federal policy makers, such as those examining early childhood development programming.

Both Cronbach and Weiss advocate for providing information for these audiences, although they describe different processes by which this information informs valuing in the policy and political contexts. Weiss argues that evaluation brings “data and generalizations based on the data into the policy system” (Weiss, 1999, p. 471). While Weiss acknowledges that this information occasionally makes a splash, much more often evaluation information slowly makes its way into the policy arena, which cumulatively and subtly influences policy. Cronbach reasons that “generalizations decay”; therefore, evaluation should be conducted to promote stronger social programming by describing program components that work under specific conditions with particular groups. This information should then inform the political community, where the “logic of science” meets “the logic of politics” (Cronbach & Associates, 1980, p. ix).

Valuing by Evaluator and Stakeholders

Evaluator provides the data and helps to establish a framework that might be used for valuing by others.

Evaluator provides the data and guides others in the valuing process iteratively.

Evaluator participates with others in the valuing act.

One way that evaluators participate with stakeholders is to act as a guide in assisting them to value. As we have noted, there is a certain amount of evaluation guidance employed in the previously discussed section on

valuing by stakeholders. That is, even when the evaluator provides the data for stakeholders to make judgments based upon their own frame of reference, the evaluator—in structuring the presentation of data—is in fact participating to some extent.

One form of joint participation by the evaluator is when stakeholders (or “identified others”) are guided by the evaluator in establishing a standard for judging results. Alkin (2004, 2011; Alkin, Christie, & Rose, 2006) suggests one example of this kind of inclusion, whereby the evaluator works with stakeholders *a priori* to develop a framework for judging results during the question identification phase of the evaluation. He suggests that evaluators “work with primary stakeholders in getting them to depict more fully the parameters of acceptability related to each question. That is, what were their views (before any data were collected), as to what would be an acceptable set of findings for each question?” (Alkin, 2004, pp. 189–190). Valuing, thus, is in large part performed by primary stakeholders before they might be biased by examining actual findings. This is done by introducing scenarios of possible findings to determine acceptability from the perspective of these stakeholders. Where qualitative instrumentation is likely to be employed, the development of a qualitative description of success might be used as a basis for a subsequent valuing comparison. This approach to valuing is well suited for evaluations guided by user-focused, context-sensitive evaluation (Alkin, 2012) frameworks.

Although not ideal, a judging framework for use by stakeholders also might be constructed following the collection of data. That is, the evaluator might at the conclusion of the data-collection process sit with stakeholders to discuss the manner in which judging could take place and even construct a valuing framework as above.

Perhaps the evaluator does not aid the stakeholders in developing a specifically defined standard for judging, but still provides guidance in valuing. We find in some of the theorists’ writings, and in our conceptualization of possibilities, a position whereby evaluators provide the data and work with stakeholders in examining data and providing constructive procedural steps that might be taken in making valuing judgments. We find evidence of this level of participation in Fetterman’s writings. “In empowerment evaluation, the stakeholders with assistance of the empowerment evaluators, conduct the evaluation and put the findings to use” (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, p. 31). This iterative assistance in guiding stakeholders is also found in Patton’s work, particularly in his increasingly more salient emphasis on developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011).

But, where does “guiding” stop and “full participation” begin? We don’t know but can, for the sake of argument, create this new category. We certainly see evidence of full participation by the evaluator in King’s work (2005). For example, King noted in an interview conducted by Fitzpatrick that “our role [as evaluator] was facilitating” and included the “role of making sure that any claims made were proper” (Fitzpatrick, Christie, & Mark,

2009, p. 199). Cousins and Shulha (2008) also describe an evaluator valuing role in collaborative evaluations, where valuing is performed “in light of *joint* understandings of how all value positions are likely to affect the evaluation” (p. 144).

Valuing by Evaluator

Valuing strongly based on the promotion of evaluator values (e.g., morals).
 Valuing based on evaluation expertise.
 Valuing based on program expertise.
 Valuing based upon scientific appraisal.

A bit further on this continuum is the case of the evaluator who engages in the valuing process without stakeholders' participation or input. Evaluators who value independently tend to view the task of judging an evaluand's merit or worth as their primary—and in some cases—sole responsibility. Scriven uses product evaluation to illustrate this process. Several factors shape these kinds of value judgments, including those related to the evaluator's personal values, their evaluation experience, their program expertise, and their commitment to the scientific method. Let us explore these factors in turn.

Evaluators' personal sense of what is ethical and correct shape a fair amount of the way in which many go about their practice and subsequently arrive at conclusions about what they have been charged to evaluate. These judgments are primarily based on the argument that if evaluation is indeed a value-laden activity, then it is the evaluator's fundamental responsibility to “be uncompromising about morally objectionable claims” (House & Howe, 1999, p. xxi). The striving for and attainment of social justice, in this case, are key criteria for what is considered morally correct. As such, the evaluator's role is usually cast in terms of being spokespeople of the underrepresented, powerless, and poor. Additionally, the interests and needs of these groups are weighted more heavily during the valuing process for evaluators who align themselves with this particular point of view. Evidence of this approach to valuing can be found in the works of scholars such as House, Howe, and Hopson who believe that value should inherently be defined as what is “right, fair, and just, not in terms of good or bad” (Alkin, 2004, p. 41).

Nonetheless, judgments of what is considered “good” or “bad” are possible and there exists a class of evaluators who believe that making these kinds of valuing decisions is the only activity in which evaluators should be engaged. And, because these decisions were made based not only on whether a program or product worked, but also the extent to which it was cost effective and the degree to which it produced unintended, negative effects, etc., they are the kinds of decisions that will most benefit the public. Moreover, the ability to arrive at these unbiased judgments—unbiased because stakeholders were not involved in the evaluative process and were unable

to influence the evaluator's decision—calls for a different kind of appreciation for and understanding of evaluation. Most importantly, it requires evaluation expertise. The primary idea here is that everyone, rather than particular groups, will benefit from knowing what is good, bad, for whom, and under what conditions. We suggested earlier that Scriven is a strong proponent of this method of valuing and hope that we have provided adequate description for this positioning.

Yet another approach to arriving at value judgments is one that involves the ability to notice fine differences in type, quality, construction, and design. Elliot Eisner's theory of evaluation, which takes connoisseurship and criticism as its cornerstones, is an example of such an approach. Specifically, Eisner argues that to be a true connoisseur, one must have “worked at the business of learning how to see, to hear . . . to be aware of and understand the experience” (Eisner, 1991, p. 174). Eisner describes this in the context of education and art, and specifically art education. It is the extensive background knowledge—program expertise, if you will—that informs the value judgments at which evaluators arrive. However, it should be noted that this method of valuing does not apply strictly to summative judgments. Rather, it is used at every juncture in the evaluation process, including articulation and prioritization of questions, selection of data collection tools, creation of those instruments, analysis, etc.

Nonetheless, there are also evaluators who value based on their ability to explain why different social phenomena occur and how. Unlike the valuing approaches that we have previously described, value judgments of this ilk stem directly from scientifically based conclusions. Namely, appraisals that are rooted in results of a scientific study that used sound research methods. We found evidence of this kind of valuing in the works of theorists such as Robert Boruch and Thomas Cook. Boruch and Cook believe that employing randomized controlled experiments to gather valid and reliable evidence is the best route by which one can arrive at unbiased value judgments (Boruch, 1997). In this case (and presumably in cases where impact estimates are desired), judgments are considered unbiased because the process of randomization ensures a fair comparison. Although methods-based evaluators rely heavily on the scientific process to inform their final decision about merit and worth, that is not to say that they do not value stakeholder input en route to that decision. Boruch (2004), for example, has indicated that, “[Stakeholders] are partners . . . whose cooperation is necessary in the trials. Investing in these people, when they can be trusted and can trust the evaluator, is part of better understanding what leads to better trials” (p. 120). In this case, the stakeholder's role is to inform the evaluator of what questions they would like addressed, but it is the evaluator's responsibility to determine how best to answer those questions, and the answers are grounded in research methods. The evaluator, as the analyst and interpreter of research findings, communicates with stakeholders about what has been learned. Therefore, the valuing act rests with the evaluator.

We have explored valuing based on the use of quantitative methods. However, we were also troubled by whether there is a theorist who makes value judgments based strictly on qualitative or descriptive methods. To some extent, Eisner is heavily dependent on qualitative methods, but perhaps not solely dependent on those judgments. We thought about Jennifer Greene, who employs mixed methods, but we are not entirely convinced that she is not oriented toward participating with stakeholders. Perhaps she provides them data so that they can form their own value judgments, but we leave that as an open question.

In Summary

Have we placed theorists properly? In examining evaluator context, we placed theorists as exemplars for certain categories. This was a difficult task and we can well imagine many of our colleagues bemoaning their improper placement. We understand some of the potential concerns with this exercise, but in our defense, note that absent from many theorists' writings are detailed descriptions the specific role the evaluator (and others) have in the valuing act. As indicated, the evaluator still intercedes in some manner even for those theorists who argue that stakeholders should have a key role in the valuing process. So clearly substantial overlap exists and certainly, the larger evaluation context, which we do not address in this paper, has an influence on the evaluator context as we describe it.

Final Comment

Conclusion: the evaluator engages in a process, a major element of which is assuring that valuing will occur. We must recognize the diversity of contexts, both evaluation context and evaluator context, and not insist that all evaluators perform valuing in one (presumed) "right" way.

It is clear to us that there is no singular way of portraying the role of the evaluator in valuing. There are a variety of evaluator approaches and each carries with it different implications for the way that valuing transpires. Evaluators can be engaged in valuing by guiding stakeholders in the process of reaching conclusions about value. Evaluators can be engaged in valuing by acting as a social conscience in reflecting on the meaning of findings. Evaluators can assist in valuing by providing stakeholders with the opportunity to actively engage in evaluation and, in that process, themselves determine the worth of an enterprise. And yes, evaluators can perceive their role as personally making a decision of merit or worth.

Based on what we have now seen, let us expand on Scriven's definition of valuing and redefine the role of the evaluator in valuing. It is our view that the role of the evaluator in valuing is to activate, facilitate a structure, be engaged in, and contribute to the process of determining merit or worth.

Moreover, attention to different program contexts may lead evaluation theorists to modify their mode of valuing based upon the demands of the particular context. As a result, an evaluator is never solely in one category. It is also likely, though, that evaluators choose to work in evaluation contexts in which their approach can be best implemented and will be most useful. What we have attempted to do is to portray theorists in what we believe to be their most prevalent mode based on our understanding of their writings.

Note

1. There are indeed other implications of these teaching approaches that can help illuminate discussions on evaluation theory and practice. To address this would be beyond the scope of this article. See Christie and Alkin (2012) for a more in-depth discussion of the relationships among the key dimensions of evaluation theory and practice, methods, valuing, and use.

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