



Independence in Evaluation and the Role of Culture

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The idea of independence has a long association with evaluation. In many quarters, a requirement for independence is seen as an essential element of good evaluation practice. Evaluation policies of government departments, government and international organizations, frequently call for independence of evaluation from programming.

But just what is meant by independence. Who seeks independence and who has the power, authority or will to grant (or obtain) independence? Is it structural independence that is sought? Or freedom from conflicts of interest? Or to be of an independent mind?

Organizations undertaking evaluation and related results measurement activities have various forms and degrees of an evaluation culture, i.e., norms, values, attitudes and general practices that support (or not) the measurement of the performance of the organization and the use of this information for managing and for accountability. At first blush, evaluation independence in an organization may not seem as critical if there is a strong evaluation culture present. Is this the case? And what about the inverse? Is independence more critical if there is a weak evaluation culture? These are the questions this Note addresses.

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Abstract

Independence is usually seen as an essential element of effective evaluation. However, it is not always clear just what is meant by independence nor what purpose independence is meant to serve. Further, the culture in an organization may more or less support the idea and practice of independence in evaluation. How can independence be enhanced and under which circumstances? What role does the evaluation culture of the organization play? This note explores the interplay between independence and culture in an organization and discusses ways to enhance independence.

[This is a Note from a chapter in the forthcoming Jean-Claude Barbier and Penny Hawkins (eds). *Evaluation and Culture*, Transaction Publications, where more detail and discussion can be found.]



Independence of whom from what?

Independence in evaluation can refer to:

- the evaluators conducting an evaluation being independent,
- the evaluation unit in an organization being independent, and/or
- ‘independent’ persons playing a review and/or challenge role as part of the evaluation process

In different circumstances each of these forms of ‘independence’ can play an important role. And each of these forms of independence has its strengths and weaknesses.

Key to understanding independence in evaluation is to understand why independence is needed. Table 1 sets out four possible reasons for the call for independence in evaluation.

Each of these purposes is a different issue, and hence dealing with each entails different approaches, including different types of ‘independence’. A key point to remember though is that independence is not an end of itself; it is a means to achieve some or all of the purposes in Table 1 with a view to enhance the quality of evaluation.

Table 1: Reasons for Independence in Evaluation

Purpose for Independence	Issue
To counter deliberate efforts at biasing evaluation findings	Risk of deliberate bias
To counter unintentional biasing of evaluation findings	Risk of unintentional bias
To bring an outside perspective to bear on the program and its rationale	Desire to have an outside perspective
To ensure the appearance of independence	Without the appearance of independence, the evaluation will not be believed

Bias in Evaluation

Bias can arise in evaluation in quite a few ways. In carrying out an evaluation there are a number of decisions that need to be taken, shown in Table 2. For each, there is the potential for bias.

Table 2: Key Evaluation Decisions and Possible Resulting Bias

Key Evaluation Decisions	Possible Bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which program to evaluate? • What evaluation process to follow? Who to involve in the evaluation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • program selection bias • evaluation process bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which issues about the performance of the program to address? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • issue bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How credible need the evidence be? • How much time and resources to spend on the evaluation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • methodology bias • methodology bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are decisions to be made on the methodology used (evaluation design, data gathering and analysis)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • methodology bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations get agreed or approved? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • findings, conclusions and recommendations bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What gets reported to whom and when during and at the end of the evaluation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reporting bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the Terms of Reference for the evaluation set up? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • terms of reference bias

Any or all of these possible biases may arise in an evaluation, deliberately or unintentionally. The result is most likely an evaluation of lesser quality, one that doesn’t provide the insights it might.

Situational factors to consider

There are a number of aspects of the evaluation context that could affect the aims of independence. In particular:

- the primary purpose of the evaluation—for accountability or for learning,
- the nature of the findings of the evaluation—positive or negative—especially if the findings question the basic beliefs about a program or policy,
- the extent of experience with evaluation, and
- the extent to which there is an evaluative culture in the organization

An evaluative culture supports evaluative norms, attitudes and general practices, such as inquiry, reflection, and learning from examination of empirical evidence. Mayne (2008) has suggested that an organization with a strong evaluative culture is one that:



- engages in self-reflection and self-examination,
- engages in evidence-based learning, and
- encourages experimentation and change

In such an organization, it makes sense to assume that efforts at deliberately biasing evaluations would be lessened considerably, since the organization actively seeks to find out what works well and what not so well, and to learn from this information so as to improve its performance. On the other hand, since it wants to learn, such an organization would be concerned about unintentional bias, and welcome and, indeed, actively seek out outside independent views. Ways to address these issues—i.e., ways to enhance these types of independence—would be sought.

How to enhance independence

In an organization, what can be done to strengthen independence in its evaluation practice? In two words: transparency and challenge. Transparency exposes the evaluation and how it was conducted to those with an interest in the findings. Challenge allows a variety of persons to critically question and demand explanations as to why the evaluation is being done the way it is. Bias and a limited perspective arise when evaluations are done behind closed doors, away from critical eyes threatening not only the appearance of independence but independence itself.

At least four general types of independent practices are possible:

- using independent evaluators
- using external reviewers
- involving a broad range of stakeholders in the evaluation process
- governance/oversight of the evaluation function

Using independent evaluators

External evaluators. Where independence and the appearance of independence is seen as critical, an obvious way to enhance independence is to use external evaluators to carry out the evaluation. However, external evaluators are being paid by the organization, and probably would like to get further

work from the organization. They are clearly subject to influence by the organization, and hence not completely independent. Someone still needs to decide on the issues listed in Table 2, and it is rare that all such decisions are left to external consultants.

Structural separation. Where organizations use an internal evaluation group, having it organizationally separate from the programs being evaluated is the usual structural form to get a degree of independence. However, internal evaluators may be independent from the program, but are part of the program's organization, and hence subject to the influence of managers and especially senior managers in the organization.

In other cases, such as in many UN agencies the evaluation function reports to an external board, providing strong organizational separation and enhancing appearance of independence.

Authority for evaluation. Independence would be strengthened if in an organization the head of the evaluation function (or the team conducting the evaluation) had the authority to carry out evaluations in a manner he or she saw fit, had a strong say in the issues to be evaluated and had the authority to approve evaluation reports. But external evaluators face the same situation. How much authority they are given may be quite limited, such as when there are very limiting terms of reference used—terms of reference bias.

Using external reviewers

This practice can involve using external subject matter reviewers, quality reviewers to assess the evaluation process and/or the final report, and/or getting some form of audit assurance on the evaluation report.

Involving stakeholders

If those with a legitimate interest in the evaluation have a real role to play in the design and conduct of the evaluation, independent views are brought to the table to question and challenge the evaluation decisions being taken. Perhaps the best way is through use of an advisory committee.



Using governance/oversight

An evaluation function in an organization gets its strategic direction from somewhere, be it a policy, senior management or a more formal governance mechanism. Oversight could play a strong role in addressing how evaluations in the organization are being carried out including how evaluators are selected and the general conditions that control evaluation contracts.

Independence, Self-evaluation and Results Management

On the surface, independence in self-evaluation and in results management, appear as contradictions. How can self-evaluation be independent?

A variety of practices can be introduced to enhance the quality of such evaluations, similar to the ones discussed earlier to build in challenge, and bring in outside independent voices. But to remain self-evaluation, many of the key decisions, such as the evaluation issues to address and resources to spend would have to be left in the hands of the managers. The risk of deliberate bias is usually seen as the main downside of self-evaluation and results management.

The role of culture

If an evaluative culture is quite lacking and not actively supported, self-evaluation and results management would likely have only modest returns. Only the exceptional manager would really want to seek the 'truth' about his or her program. There would be little interest in bringing in any independent views to the evaluation process.

An effective self-evaluation and results management regime would seem to need as a basic and a priori requirement a reasonably strong evaluative culture, where seeking the 'truth' about one's program is seen as the sensible thing to do, is good management practice and is rewarded. In such cases, managers would want to introduce positive independence into the evaluation process, and the practices that support such an approach.

In the case of results management, some of the same approaches as earlier discussed can be used to introduce a degree of independence:

- using external consultants to help develop the monitoring system
- using additional reviewers for a further independent check
- involving those with an interest in and using the monitoring information
- undertaking an independent review of the system every few years

So again it seems that bringing more independence into the development and use of results monitoring would produce a more robust results management regime.

Evaluator Independence

As noted earlier, professional standards call for evaluators to be impartial, neutral and objective and for the evaluation process to exhibit these characteristics also. However, those with a vested interest in the evaluation may be working to ensure that the findings, conclusions and recommendations are generally positive and do not reflect badly on those who have designed and those who have delivered the program. What can be done to ensure that the evaluator has an adequate degree of independence?

Depending on the situation, in an evaluation study:

- the evaluators can be given more authority over the design and reporting of the evaluation
- external reviewers can be used, and
- broad-based advisory committees can be used

In the end, there is a need for some balance to be struck. Granting too much authority to the evaluator may result in as many problems as too much authority over the evaluation. Key may be setting out at the outset of the evaluation in some form of independence accord, identifying just how 'problems' are going to be dealt with—some form of a dispute resolution mechanism.

Conclusions

What have we seen then? I suggest a number of conclusions about independence and organizational culture in evaluation follow:



- There are multiple reasons for seeking independence in evaluations.
- All evaluations would benefit from some form of independence.
- There are several approaches to enhance independence in evaluation.
- There is a need for independence 'fit for purpose'.
- Determining the independence structure up front is useful.
- Self-evaluation would especially benefit from a strong evaluative culture.
- Setting up a results management regime can also benefit from independence.
- A weak evaluative culture requires stronger across-the-board independence.
- A strong evaluative culture would strive for independence and the perspective it brings.

Independence will not ensure a quality, biased free evaluation, but can greatly enhance the likelihood for such evaluations. The absence of independence will almost certainly result in an evaluation of poor quality.

References

Mayne, J. (2008) *Building an Evaluative Culture for Effective Evaluation and Results Management*, ILAC Brief No. 20: The Institutional Learning and Change Initiative. Available at http://www.cgiar-ilac.org/files/publications/briefs/ILAC_Brief20_Evaluative_Culture.pdf.

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