

Comments on the 2009 Claremont Debates on “The Promise and Pitfalls of Utilization- Focused and Empowerment Evaluation” *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, Vol. 6, No. 13 (2010)

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Contributing to the “Claremont Debates”

1. The transcript of the 2009 Claremont Debates makes fascinating reading highlighting especially, as it does, the exchange of views between two giants of the Science and Practice of Evaluation, professors Michael Q. Patton and Michael Scriven. Both relate that those responsible in Program Agencies for the commissioning and the execution of evaluation assignments - Scriven calls them “desk evaluators” without any “interpersonal skills” (do I perceive correctly that tiny pinch of scorn or...???)—have been among their principal discussion partners. Having been, alas (!), one among those unfortunate dry-boned bureaucrats (with never a smile on their faces), I still feel encouraged to continue and enlarge, by the following observations, the stimulating debate that followed those giants’ Claremont presentations.

Benefit Focused Evaluation

2. My reasoning starts from a general statement of fact to which, I think, there are no exceptions; but if ever there were, then it still remains true that this statement of fact covers the overwhelming percentage number of all cases that can be called “Projects, Programs and Policies” (PPP’s) financed or co-financed by public authorities. This statement of fact, then, is the following:
3. “All Policies, Programs and Projects (PPP’s) pursue the objective of creating sustainable benefits for their target groups.” This seems to be true (illustrating my point by three examples), starting with the sinking and exploitation of a well (a small “Project”) in Peru , via an anti-HIV/AIDS campaign (a “Program”) in South Africa, up to President Obama’s Public Health Care and Insurance Policy (as that’s what it says: a “Policy”). All three of these examples, illustrating all those PPP’s they

- exemplify, are designed to create (a) given durable (or sustainable) benefits (regular potable water consumption; less HIV/AIDS cases; larger numbers of healthy people), for (b) given groups of intended beneficiaries, the “target groups” (peasant families within a maximum 5 km radius around the well in Peru; people, especially certain age-groups, liable to contract HIV/AIDS in South-Africa; those 30 odd million Americans not covered by health insurance).
4. The huge majority of evaluations are concerned with any of such PPP's. That majority includes also those cases that seem to be, *prima facie*, exceptions to that rule, like evaluations of products, of professional staff or of organizations. Products serve to satisfy needs (i.e., create benefits); professionals, if they want to serve themselves, must necessarily also serve their “clients”, the “target group”, if they are to do a decent job; and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for organizations.
 5. Planners and Implementers of PPP's should therefore be judged by one, and only one, principal criterion: did they, and in what measure, succeed in realizing interventions that led to the creation of sustainable benefits for those (the target group) that they were designed to serve in enhancing their quality of life? Those who formulate that judgment are called Monitors/Evaluators. For the sake of simplifying the argument (without losing any of the substance), let's forget about the short term (Implementation/Monitoring) and just stick to those concerned with the FUTURE, that is the Planners, and those concerned with the PAST, the Evaluators. Strictly speaking, only
- Planning is concerned exclusively with the future and only Evaluating is concerned exclusively with the past, while Planners try to learn from the past and Evaluators formulate recommendations for the future, thus making (“friendly”!) incursions into each others' territories of: “Planning” and “Evaluation”.
6. This does not mean that there could be any mix-up of responsibilities of Planners on the one hand and Evaluators on the other: on the contrary, optimal results of their common commitment to effective and efficient PPP's will only materialize if Planners decide freely which of those recommendations they want to apply and which to ignore; while evaluators will be respecting the common cause ONLY if they make absolutely sure that they don't formulate judgments and recommendations coloured by what they might surmise planners want to hear. As Planners and Evaluators accumulate knowledge and experience that way, the quality of PPP's will improve. This means that:
 7. *Planners and Evaluators have one, and only one, Common Objective; the creation of sustainable benefits for the target groups of Policies, Programs and Projects. Thus, if we may label Michael Q. Patton's approach “Utilization Focused Evaluation” that of Michael Scriven “Utilizability Focused Evaluation”, then the particular “brand” I should like to introduce into the debate would be “Benefit Focused Evaluation”.*
 8. Other than both, the Patton and the Scriven “brands”, Benefit Focused Evaluation is not a “stand-alone” affair: it is closely integrated into an “amalgamated” approach to both, Planning and Evaluation. This implies

that the standard documents accompanying the Planning and Evaluation processes present a common structure with one major difference: that Planning is looking forward towards the future, while Evaluation is looking backwards at the past: Planning will be “affirmative” while Evaluation will be “inquisitive” questioning, in turn, each of Planners’ affirmations. This means that the Terms of Reference for Planning as well as for Evaluation (that will structure all of the standard documents accompanying the PPP cycle), are to be roughly the same as to their principal content: Pre-feasibility and feasibility studies, implementation reports etc on the one hand and monitoring and evaluation reports on the other. Following such common structuring, each individual document, on the basis of its specific Terms of Reference, will then take into account the specifics of each individual case.

9. Such structural amalgamation of Planning and Evaluation will not only have the advantage of concentrating stakeholder’s minds on the only objective that counts but will allow, moreover, to operationally deal with a particularly thorny problem that has exercised planner’s and evaluators’ minds for decades on end without finding a satisfactory solution: “Forgetting” is regularly proceeding at the same pace as “Learning”, evaluation feedback is irregular or non-existent as unread/unheeded evaluation reports gather dust on forgotten shelves. Benefit oriented amalgamation of Planning and Evaluation, as it grows into an ever improving system, might put a stop to this sad state of affairs. Here’s how:

10. As Planners and Evaluators start thinking, together with implementers and monitors, along similar lines, concentrating on the creation of sustainable benefits for target PPP groups, they will not only accumulate new knowledge together but also create a common support structure designed to render that knowledge *operational*. The general structure for the Terms of Reference for Planning and Evaluation will be split up into more specific sets of reference per sector, per theme, per instrument; and all of these will then be adapted to national/regional/cultural specifics. Starting from the basic structure containing the most important elements, this master set of reference will thus evolve, incorporating ever more detailed information, into a vast *Database* at the disposal of all: starting with specialized professionals up to the interested general public. This database would come under periodic review to be constantly kept up to date. In spite of its vast volume, its utilization would be easy as the most important elements – and thus a workable volume of information – would always be concentrated “up-front”. And that might put an end to haphazard, steadily-start-anew Planning and Evaluation. (For details, please refer to my article: “Planning and Evaluation, two Sides of the same Coin”).

Utilization- and Utilizability-Focused Evaluations

11. Let us now have a closer look at the Patton and Scriven evaluation models, as presented during the Claremont Debates, in the light of “Benefit

Focused Evaluation"! I will have a look at each of the two presentations and comment on those passages that seem important to me.

The Patton Approach: Utilization-Focused Evaluation

12. In his presentation, Patton underlines that utilization focused evaluation can serve any evaluation purpose, formative, summative, developmental, knowledge generating and accountability. Most of these categories have been present in the debate for many years, and neither Patton nor Scriven question their justification. I must admit that they make me feel uneasy: Of course, formative evaluation is for "learning", and who would question that that's a good thing? True, but it's going half of the way only! Learning and doing are two different worlds, and learning without application is as frequent as it is useless. The same goes for "knowledge generation". Summative evaluations will suggest if a Project, Program or Policy should be continued or not. Useful? Of course! But what a poor result for so much work! It does (almost) nothing to get us nearer the best solution! "Developmental" evaluation gets us nearer to reality but not to best solutions. And what a poor relation is evaluation for accountability as it may satisfy (or not!) funders while the intended beneficiaries drop by the wayside (except for those rare cases where they are the ones to demand where all that money has gone...). No, all of these purposes remain highly questionable in the measure that they don't address the MAIN PROBLEM of whether the

intended beneficiaries are, or are not, receiving sustainable benefits as a consequence of the Projects, Programs and Policies concerned!

13. I quite agree with Patton when he underlines that good evaluations may be based on any kind of reliable data, employ any kind of design and pay special attention to certain parts of the evaluation, *as long as the main focus remains on the creation of sustainable benefits for target groups*. It thus appears perfectly acceptable to lay special stress on, say, cost or process analysis, if that is what the client (or "primary users") want, as long as it remains clear that paying extra attention to such areas of special interest do not interfere with the focus on sustainable benefits without which an analysis of cost, process etc. doesn't make any sense in the first place.
14. I also agree with the research findings/conclusions Patton mentions that underline the importance of stakeholders' involvement which is crucial in facilitating evaluation use (and, I should like to add, in establishing and structuring the evaluation to begin with). The same goes for Patton's emphasis on the need for evaluators' interpersonal and communication skills, as long as these are employed above all to build consensus around the objectives of PPPs in terms of benefit creation: if such consensus can be established, then the discussion on the ways and means to realize them becomes much easier. And conscientious application of Stufflebeam's Evaluation Standards, mentioned by Patton, of "feasibility, propriety and accuracy" will certainly enhance evaluations' usefulness or "utility"! The competence enhancing role of the *process of evaluation*

before any findings are formulated is another important point highlighted in Patton's presentation. Indeed, people doing evaluation work will experience learning by doing, and that's already a good deal better than learning without doing...

15. I am quite impressed by what Patton has to say about the need to go "beyond the current dominance of linear logic models". The dynamics that characterize complex interventions across their lifetime and that Patton addresses by what he calls "developmental evaluation" is captured in "benefit focused evaluation" by its allowance for flexibility: the Terms of Reference will come under periodic review during the "ping-pong" dialogue between planners and evaluators, allowing a periodic adaptation of the structure of the intervention to evolving circumstances. This makes it possible to cut down a complex PPP into smaller segments that allow the application, step by step, of those outmoded linear models, re-introducing them, as it were, through the back door. That way, they permit to avoid dealing with circular causation models which are hard to grasp for simple minded decision makers.
16. As to the evaluation "gold standard" of RCT's, I am glad to share the company of two such distinguished scholars in deploring its limited capacity for solving real life problems, and in embracing the "Platinum Standard" of "Methodological Appropriateness". Long live common sense!

The Scriven Approach: Utilizability-Focused Evaluation

17. Scriven starts out by recalling those pioneer efforts when evaluators thought that "program evaluation was just about goals... as if somehow it was obvious"; those being the days when evaluators "were really backward in program evaluation". So, it seemed to him to be time to bring in "goal-free evaluation, a tough alternative". Well, dear Michael, to my great shame and consternation I must confess that I have not as yet seen the light as I am still living in those backward, dark ages when PPPs were still about goals, and very specific goals at that: the creation of sustainable benefits for target groups (SBTG), *always and without exception*. If you can identify *any* publicly financed and promoted PPP that would not pursue SBTG, I'll start questioning my opinion, not before! And as to "goal free evaluation", I must admit that in my view those two words simply don't go together. For me, it would be like measuring the atmospheric pressure in a vacuum.
18. As to the categories of "formative" and "summative" evaluations, I have already commented on them above. Scriven limits the "learning" (and the corresponding improvement) as well as the PPP's future fate (go on or not?) to the individual PPP under evaluation. And unquestionably is it desirable to improve the PPP while that is still possible and then to decide, when the time has come, if that PPP should go on or if it has run its course, either because it has been successful or because it has turned out to be a flop.

But the decisive criterion of whether, subsequent to learning, a PPP has been improved or if a PPP should be discontinued because it has been a success (no need to do more) or a failure (no more squandering of resources on that hopeless case!): that decisive criterion should always be the quality of the PPP evaluated in terms of the creation of SBTG

19. I note that both, Scirven and Patton, think that “it’s good to have the client’s point of view”, and I quite agree: It is perfectly reasonable for evaluators to make an extra effort to satisfy any special interest of clients as well as of other stakeholders and thus to apportion intended use to intended users. Is there a special interest in “accountability”; in “process”; in “cost analysis”, in adaptation to specific cultural settings? Fine! Those interests can and should be satisfied and be given special emphasis in the Terms of Reference of the evaluation! And that will, *at the same time, make it easier to rally general consensus on the need to never forget the ultimate purpose for which the entire intervention, the PPP under review, has been prepared, implemented and evaluated in the first place: the creation of SBTG.*

20. When I came upon the passage of Scirven’s where he enumerates what he considers “most of evaluation”, I must admit my heart missed a beat (or two). When considering that list of evaluations “for the employer”, “for oneself” and (horrible dictu: a last ‘crescendo’!!!) “for the record” (i.e., for nobody!), I gave up and concluded that by then we had really arrived in “Anything-Goes-Land”. But then, I found myself hesitating: and if Professor Scirven was right? I have to think about that... I trust that I have

trained and accustomed myself to cultivate and to nurture, over the years and as every evaluator should, a particular suspicion concerning my own opinions... After extensive head-scratching, here’s the “compromise” I propose: maybe we could agree on calling “Appreciative Inquiry” every evaluation that does not concern PPPs. Then we could even indulge in working “for the record”! Wow!

21. Still reeling after that “For-the-record-Knock-Out”, I find myself swamped by jealousy for not having been the first to formulate the following opinion of Scirven’s (quote): “...for me, what’s really important ...is the consumer, the impactee of the *Program* (bold italics are mine). So, I want to hear not just about the intended use or users of the *evaluation*. I want to find out about impact on intended and actual impactees—the targeted and accidental recipients of the *Program*, not just the people that get the evaluation. So, I consider my task as an evaluator to find out who it is that this program is aimed at reaching and helping...”. That’s the target group, isn’t it?! Well, professor Scirven, why don’t you simply join the camp of “benefit focused evaluators of PPPs”?! That leaves you free to formulate different rules for “Appreciative Inquiries” (i. e. non PPP evaluations), for example those “for the record”!

As to the highly important needs assessment, I find myself in total agreement with Scirven. Never take for granted what planners say! Have a second look at what they pretend are the problems to be solved, the opportunities to seize, the “needs” to be satisfied! Again, I find myself unable to express my views in more convincing terms than those

employed by Scriven (quote): “...I consider my task as an evaluator to find out who this program is aimed at reaching and helping and then get... a needs assessment... for those people, and *then* have a look at what the intended plan will do for those needs if successful. Then, if it can be implemented, I’ll have a look at what the actual effects are and get back to the clients...” If they agree to change the program according to suggestions of the evaluator, then the latter may “follow up with another evaluation”. This goes, as Scriven underlines, for evaluations where the client genuinely wants to help consumers (i. e. the target groups). What more can I say, *This IS Benefit Focused Evaluation!*