Human Systems Management 1998 No. 2. pp. 155-160.

# Norms, Goals, and Stakeholders in Program Evaluation

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**Abstract**

**Evaluation research favours goal based evaluation. However, the achievement of the stated goals of interventionists, problem solvers or program managers is not a sufficient condition for a good decision or a successful program implementation. The value of a program, an intervention or a decision is determined not only by the achievement of its stated goals but also by its intrinsic ethical value and its performance for the stakeholders. Hence a program or a decision can be considered as successful if it meets the applying ethical norms, works well in achieving its stated goals, and produces satisfying results for the stakeholders.**

**Keywords:**

**rationality, goal free evaluation, stakeholder theory, deontology**

**Bios**

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## 1. Introduction

In the Fall Semester of the Academic Year of 1996/97 we were fellows at the *Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study* (NIAS) of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Wassenaar. The institute proved to be an extremely inspiring place for co-operative, inter-disciplinary research. One of us arrived with a plan to write a book on evaluation research while the other was engaged in a project about rationality and responsibility in complex choice situations. After some discussions we realised that both evaluation research and decision theory have similar deficiencies that have the same roots, namely the goal-rationality assumption of human behaviour.

In line of the *goal-rationality assumption*, the standard methodology of evaluation research and evaluation practice as well, concerns *goal based evaluation*. In this kind of evaluation the goals of a program or an intervention are taken as a given and the achievement of these goals is used as the sole criterion for judging the success or failure of the program. This is for instance the case in research aimed at assessing the effectivity of a public policy against unemployment or of the redesigning of an organisation. More generally, a considerable part of evaluation research aimes at finding out whether a program or an intervention reaches the goals set in advance. Preferably this is done by means of an experiment or a quasi-experimental design. In this kind of research the researcher tries to find out whether the situation after the intervention is closer to the target(s) than the situation before the intervention and whether this goal achievement is a causal effect of the intervention.

As a consequence of our discussions on the goal-rationallity assumption we reached a preliminary conclusion that the achievement of the stated goals of the decision makers or program managers is certainly not a sufficient condition for a good decision or a successful program implementation. In our view the value of a program or a decision is determined not only by the achievement of its stated goals but also by its intrinsic ethical value and its performance for the stakeholders. In this article an intervention, a program or a decision is considered as successful if it meets the applying ethical norms, works well in achieving its stated goals, and produces satisfying results for the stakeholders. We first scrutinise the problems and deficiencies of standard goal based evaluation. We then develop some ideas about an alternative way of evaluation.

As will be pointed out below, there are three categories of *deficiencies* of goal based evaluation:
(a) The unrealistic assumption of goal rationality of human behaviour.
(b) Pure goal rational behaviour may lead to injustice, to loss of human capital or to unethical situations.
(c) There are several practical problems with goals as a basis for evaluation, such as vagueness and lack of consensus.

## 2. Deficiency of the goal rationality assumption

The principle of goal rationality of human behaviour as it was first described by *Max Weber*, is an implicit assumption of goal based evaluation. This assumption states that all human

behaviour can be characterised as the strive for certain goals, with the aids of certain means, which means are derived on a rational basis from the goals.

A first drawback of this assumption is that it denies the intrinsic value of social behaviour or of a social program. An example of the intrinsic value of human behaviour is a group of individuals all striving for the same goals. This collaboration creates a feeling of solidarity. This solidarity, that has to do with emotions and feelings rather than with rationality, may be seen as a very important side effect of goal oriented human activity. Moreover, the strive for common goals and the evaluation thereof gives an impulse to respect the will and the meaning of all the individuals concerned and may thus constitute a democratic value. Of course solidarity and democracy have an instrumental value, as they may facilitate all kinds of group processes, that in their turn may help to achieve certain goals, rather than the intervention goals per se. But for most people they have an intrinsic value as well.

The assumption of goal-rationality, that is shared by many social and political scientists, also may have consequences for the way public policy is conceptualized. On the basis of the goal rationality assumption this conceptualization is made in the framework of an ends-means model.

This model has two main characteristics.

(1) It is closed, which means that the motives of human beings in general and of the managers of social programs in particular, are presupposed to be determined by prefixed goals.

(2) The intervention or the social program is logically derived from the goals. We call this feature the linear derivation of means from ends.

There are several deficiencies of the assumptions underlying the *ends-means model* as it is applied in organisational management and in public policy. As to the closedness of the model, one of the major objections is that human beings mostly have mixtures of motives for their activities instead of one sole motive. Human beings have many needs, wants and desires that they continuously want to fulfill, preferably more than one at a time. Moreover, in most interventions and social programs there are several stakeholders, each with her or his own (mixture of) motives. So, as there is no closed ends-means model at the level of an individual, there definitely is not one at the level of an aggregate of individuals.

Another argument against the validity of an ends-means model is that it does not quite well fit the way human beings operate. The last few decades there is a growing belief that everyday human behaviour and social programs as well fit the linear ends-means scheme much less than it is often assumed. One of the main reasons for this is that the solving of complex social problems is something like a multi-person game. Every strike of player *A* invokes a reaction of player *B* that is part of *B*'s rather than *A*'s rationality. For that reason both players normally are very uncertain about the coming few strikes, despite both try to operate following a strict strategy set in advance. This means that within a few strikes each strategy can be completely superseded. This may be the very reason why computer chess programs do not operate following the detection of strategies. They rather evaluate on its own merits each individual situation after a strike of the opponent.

In part social and political human behaviour is like that of chess players. What people do at a certain point in time may depend on what others do. That means that peolple often can not define their goals in advance, but that they have to define and redefine them continuously during an action.

For that same reason human behaviour often is circular and iterative from an ends-means point of view. As it was pointed out by *Schön* [10], in thinking about and in executing means the problem-solver gets new ideas about what the real problem (i.e. the goal) is and he or she adjusts the chosen means. This means for instance that in case of organisational change, a linear innovation model has to be replaced by a more dynamic one. In this model the manager is not controling peoples' activities, but rather stimulates open ended problem solving behaviour.

The ends-means model not only is invalid as a representation or explanation of human activities, it may also be risky to strive for it. The reason for this is that it might be a threat to the democratic functioning of organisations and of public policy. In organisations a strategic management oriented at certain organisational goals mostly is formulated at the top. Likewise public policy is developed on the level of a state. But both have to be carried out on a lower level of dispersed and smaller units. This often means that a strategic management or a central policy is more abstractly formulated than it is interpreted and carried out in the smaller units. Moreover, in carrying out the centrally formulated policy the smaller units will encounter problems that were not foreseen at the central level, so that the social situation often will ask for adaptation of the means and even of the goals. For obvious reasons this puts a serious problem to goal based evaluation.

A last limitation of the goal-rationality assumption here to be mentioned can be found in the theory of rational choice. The *rational choice model* has been widely used in economics and political science as a normative model of human choice behaviour. This model states that an agent should maximise her or his utility function in order to be considered as a rational being. [12]

One of the central assumptions of the rational choice model is that an individual has *perfect information* about all the alternative possibilities and that she or he can compare all those possibilities with one another. The latter point was attacked relentlesly by *Herbert Simon*, as he states that people have poor cognitive capacity. Especially the human mind has too little capacity to compare all the gaines and losses of all the alternatives. "Faced with a choice situation where it is impossible to optimise, or where the computational cost of doing so seems burdensome, the decision maker may look for a satisfactory, rather than an optimal alternative. Frequently, a course of action satisfying a number of constraints, even a sizable number, is far easier to discover than a course of action maximising some function." ([11], p.244) Instead of the rational choice model Simon introduced the theory of *bounded rationality*. The hard core if this theory is that instead of maximising, people make satisficing choices. That is, they usually choose the first available alternative that comes up to their needs.

## 3. Losses of goal based evaluation

Not only is the ends-means model a weak basis for the description and explanation of human behaviour, and consequently for the evaluation of human behaviour. There also are several reasons why goal based evaluation may lead to losses of possibilities and chances, of human resources and of money. First of all goal based evaluation may lead to injustice. As *Scriven* pointed out, goal based evaluation may have as a consequence that only or mainly the goals of program managers are served and not or less the real needs of the target population. With the words of Scriven: 'It is crucial to see that the evaluation point of view is not the managers' point of view, and it is not simply the consumer's point of view; it is a point of view which should stand identification with either of these parties, but that make clear to each the importance of the other" ([8] p.103).

Perhaps the most important objection against an uncritical acceptance of program goals as a basis for evaluation, is that we do not take into account the possibility of alternative goals that may have a higher profit than the ones that were chosen. That is to say, a basic question in evaluating human behaviour and social programs often is whether the program managers could not produce more values by choosing other goals to be achieved. This is the well known question of opportunity costs. It is amazing that this concept of opportunity costs, that is very common in economics, is used so little by evaluators in other domains. In case of using the criterion of opportunity costs the evaluator has to do quite another job than in the case of other forms of product evaluation such as cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiviness evaluation. He or she has to find out what are the long term goals and values of the program or the intervention. Next he or she has to find out what would have been the best choice of (sub)goals.

Several authors on the subject of evaluation have stressed that there may be practical problems with evaluation research that takes the stated program or intervention goals as the basis of evaluation. One of these problems is that goals are often vaguely formulated. This is a serious drawback, as in goal based evaluation the intervention or the program goals constitute the criterion for judgement. Goals are often vaguely formulated in order to get consensus, to give space and freedom to managers or to make the organisation immune for a negantive evaluation ([5] p.457). For the same reason managers also often specify modest goals so as to succeed at something less important rather than fail at something more important. Moreover, managers often find themselves stuck with unrealistically high goals that overpromise to secure initial funding. Or they formulate extremely ambitious goals, just to enlarge their chance for a high subsidy. In all those cases the evaluator will have problems in operationalising the goals as the basis for judgement.

Even if goals are stated clearly this is no guarantee that there is no problem in using them as a basis for evaluation. In many programs and inteventions there is not one single goal but a whole complex of goals. In that case the evaluator needs an order of priorities of the goals. If not, which is often the case, the interventionist will be immune for a bad evaluation, as she or he can always argue that the goal the evaluator choose was not of a high priority to her or him.

The goals of a program or an intervention may also be contradictory, as they often are the result of a political compromise between stakeholders with opposit interests. So the evaluator has a problem which one he should choose. Chosing the one may give quite opposite results of chosing the other, which makes impossible doing justice to all the stakeholders.

Another practical problem with goal based evaluation is that goals may draw the attention of the evaluator away from side effects. Because they are fixed at the goals as formulated in advance, they even do not notice these side effects. Regardless these effects are positive or negative, this means a loss of important information to the evaluator. As *Patton* pointed out, this neglect of side effects may especially be a problem in case of new policy or new management [4]. In that case we not yet know much about the functioning of the intervention or the program.

Another well known problem is that goals very often are changing during the intervention. One of the main reasons for this is that internal and external conditions are changing during the program or the intervention. In most cases it may be wise to adapt the goals. Moreover, as has been pointed out already, a more basic reason for changing goals is the iterative way they often must be stated. In all those cases the evaluator has a problem in choosing the appropriate goals as a criterion for evaluation.

A last practical problem with goal based evaluation is the high risk of taking for granted the goals in an uncritical way. There may be several reasons why the goals that are chosen before the intervention or the program, are deficient and should be redefined once the program has started. First of all the goals chosen in advance may appear to be too difficult or too expensive to achieve. Before a program or an intervention starts, people in general are not yet quite aware of the difficulties that may arise during the implementation of the program or the intervention. A second reason for deficient goals may be that they are contradictory with some ethical values or higher goals.

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In conclusion, the practical problems with goals mentioned above have important consequences for goal based evaluation. First of all, a measurement of the goal variable, i.e. the variable for which a certain score after the intervention is aimed, is difficult. This is so because the researcher will have difficulties in operationalising this goal and thus to gather relevant data. For some reasons this is not only the case for the ex post measurement, but also for the measurement before the intervention or the program starts. Besides, as far as there are often several different goals, depending on local circumstances or the stage of the program, the evaluator has a problem in choosing the appropriate goals for evaluation. A last problem with goal based evaluation to be mentioned here is that the evaluation results may be superseded before the evaluation is accomplished, as the formulation of goals is a continuous process.

## 4. The idea of goal free evaluation

As goals are not always favorable as a criterion for evaluation, we have to look for other criteria. There is no universal agreement among evaluation researchers how to replace goals in program evaluation by other criteria for judgement. Several candidates have been proposed. First, we are focusing on proposals that favour to evaluate in terms of stakeholder performance. One of the first and most prominent proponents of this standpoint is *Scriven*. His basic idea is that evaluators should ignore goals and to match effects of the intervention or the program against the needs of those who are affected. More particular, Scriven proposes to focus evaluation on needs assessment [6][7][8][9]. In order to make this *stakeholder orientation* possible Scriven argues that goal-free evaluators should begin evaluation totally blind to the stated goals of the

program. In his opinion 'blind is beautiful'. He even refers to medical research aimed at assessing the effects of a new therapy or treatment of patients. This kind of research, Scriven argues, often is double blind, where neither the patient nor the physician knows which drug is which, nor which drug will produce effects. Following Scriven, in goal-free evaluation evaluators are not told the expected effects of the program.

Although in our view stakeholder performance is an important criterion for evaluation, it has its own problems. First of all, in programs usually there are a lot of stakeholders, and it is not very easy to define which parties are really affected by the program and which are not. The effects may also be ambiguous and unforseable, there may be differences in the degree stakeholders are affected by the intervention or the program, and the program might produce long-term effects for which accurate present assessment is almost impossible.

Another question in stakeholder evaluation is who decides whether the stakeholders interests are fulfilled; the stakeholders themselves or the evaluator. If the evaluator decides, this may be more objective than in case the stakeholders decide themselves. The judgement of the stakeholders may be subjective. But subjective criteria for evaluation are not always of less value than objective ones. For instance, if all professionals in a hospital are sure that they deliver an excellent care and cure, but at the same time all patients say that both are very bad, what whould the evaluator say? Or, if the education and research of a university comes up the the highest scientific standards, but the students are very unsatisfied about what they get, then there is a problem anyway. If people define their situation as a real problem, it is real in its consequences.

For instance, target groups like patients and students may abandon the organisation and choose for other ones.

Although subjective standards may be of more value than objective ones, the opposite may be also the case. For instance, do stakeholders or target groups always know what is in their interest? Filosophers and psychologists often have pointed out that human beings may have a biased or even a false consciousness. This asks for an external judgement on the basis of professional criteria. But *who* is going to be the external evaluator? How does she or he know whether there is a false consciousness, on the basis of what criteria?

One of the possibilities in stakeholder evaluation is the use of the so-called *pluralist-elitist-equilibrium* theory. According to this prevailing political theory of democracy, individual demands are fed into groups, and group leaders articulate these demands to political officials and program planners who adjudicate them. Hence, the entire system is kept in equilibrium recognising different interests of diverse groups and accounting for conflict among groups. But sometimes this may lead to injustice. The interest of the poor and the powerless often are neglected or overridden, as in the larger society, whereas those of the powerful are given priority. To illustrate this point *Hause* recalls the case of minority groups. [1] The usual way of dealing with minority groups is to treat them like other groups. However, they are not like other groups. Following *Kymlicka* [2] we can say that there is an obligation for managers and program leaders to recognise the views and interests of these groups. And in circumstances where the basic issue is the maintenance of the minority group culture, they should even give some priority to these groups in the evaluation, even to the degree of invoking minority group rights to override other considerations. This argument may occasionally also hold in the case of

other vulnerable stakeholders, including the poor and disadvantaged, women, children, nature, and future generations.

The issue of goal based versus goal free evaluation has some connection with two well-established traditions in ethics, i.e. consequentialism and deontology in evaluation. *Consequentialism* bases the evaluation of an intervention or a program solely on its actual consequences. In this view the value of an intervention or a program depends only on the goodness of its consequences. Contrary to this, *deontology* favours the evaluation of an intervention or program on the basis of its correspondence to relevant ethical norms. In this view the value of an act or program depends on its rightness disregarding the actual, real-world consequences.

Goal free evaluation, as it has been proposed by Scriven, is certainly a consequentialist enterprise. The value of a program is determined by its service to the stakeholders. A program can be considered as good if it meets the needs, wants and ideals of the affected parties. The limitations of this approach can be surpassed if we introduce deontological considerations into the goal free evaluation.

Certainly, a program must satisfy the basic ethical norms that are commonly accepted by the moral community. This community consists of the program managers, the stakeholders, and the general public. These ethical norms represent imperatives that are called *duties* or obligations. Discharge or disregard of the relevant ethical norms should be included in the evaluation of a program. The evaluator should make clear that any program should satisfy a variety of duties;

perfect and imperfect, as well as universal and special duties [12]. How well a program comes up to these ethical norms constitutes (part of) the intrinsic value of the program.

Desirable properties of the set of ethical norms considered in assessment of the intrinsic ethical value of a program that the evaluator should take into account, are as follows:

(i) *completeness*, that is, all the relevant ethical norms should be included;
(ii) *discreteness*, that is, double counting of ethical norms should be avoided;
(iii) *unambiguity*, that is, norms should be clear in their meaning;
(iv) *strictness*, that is, norms should be defined in narrow rather than broad terms.

In conclusion, we believe that a comprehensive goal free evaluation consists of both deontological and consequentialist assessments. By deontological assessment the evaluators can judge the intrinsic ethical value, while consequentialist assessment implies judging the external stakeholder performance of the program. We then have an evaluation on the basis of two out of three kinds of values that value philosopher *Lemos* [3] distinguishes, i.e. the intrinsic and the contributory value of a program or an intervention. The third one, the instrumental value, can be assessed by means of a conventional goal based evaluation.

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