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ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming evaluation requires establishing aesthetic and ethical frameworks, as well as knowledge and skills, that make "doing" evaluation seem like the right thing. Evaluators and others have worked hard to institute evaluation as a prudent activity for society to support. The phenomenon of mainstreaming itself, however, poses challenges to good evaluation practice. Stories from program evaluation research in North America and Indonesia in the areas of conservation and natural resource management illustrate the ways in which comforts and rigidities associated with mainstreamed evaluation processes may frustrate high quality evaluation. The stories are couched in neo-pragmatist analysis of the phenomenon of habits (i.e., settled knowledge, cultural ethos) using theories developed by Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty on the nature of stasis and change. Adult education theories related to changing adults' view are introduced as important to the concept of change, which mirrors the concept of main-streaming in this context. A cultural anthropological view further suggests that evaluation can grow to have strikingly different meanings in other settings, complicating the idea of mainstreaming as a preferred steady state. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

# The Rigidity and Comfort of Habits:

# A Cultural and Philosophical Analysis of the Ups and Downs of Mainstreaming Evaluation



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# The Rigidity and Comfort of Habits: A Cultural and Philosophical Analysis of the Ups and Downs of Mainstreaming Evaluation


## ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming evaluation requires establishing aesthetic and ethical frameworks, as well as knowledge and skills, that make "doing" evaluation seem like the right thing. Evaluators and others have worked hard to institute evaluation as a prudent activity for society to support. The phenomenon of mainstreaming itself, however, poses challenges to good evaluation practice. Stories from program evaluation research in North America and Indonesia in the areas of conservation and natural resource management illustrate the ways in which comforts and rigidities associated with mainstreamed evaluation processes may frustrate high quality evaluation. The stories are couched in neo-pragmatist analysis of the phenomenon of habits (i.e., settled knowledge, cultural ethos) using theories developed by Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty on the nature of stasis and change. Adult education theories related to changing adults' views is introduced as important to the concept of change, which mirrors the concept of mainstreamed in this context. A cultural anthropological view further suggests that evaluation can grow to have strikingly different meanings in other settings, complicating the idea of mainstreaming as a preferred steady state.


*So we must face the discomfort of stirring ourselves if we are to avoid being left behind.*

E. Chelimsky & W. R. Shadish (1997). *Evaluation for the 21st century.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. xiii.

## Introduction

My paper argues that the concept of mainstreaming, this year's presidential strand topic for the American Evaluation Association annual meeting, presents certain problems. I do not intend to reject or endorse mainstreaming, either as a concept or as a phenomenon. Indeed, mainstreaming happens, and needs to happen, and it is a credit to dedicated and astute evaluators working in many fields. Rather, my paper offers attendees

an opportunity to think philosophically about the phenomenon of mainstreaming from what is, perhaps, a different point of view. I approach evaluation from the perspective of cultural anthropology, which means that I cannot avoid viewing evaluation as a cultural event. My arguments, therefore, offer as much an "anthropology of evaluation" as anything else. I am also comfortable introducing my ideas through a story, something that anthropologists like to do as well as anyone else. The story centers around a trip to Indonesia in January 2000.

**Indonesia, January 2000**

I secured funds to travel to several islands in eastern Indonesia to witness a large-scale participatory evaluation of an exemplary and well-funded conservation and development project (Fisher, Moeliono, & Wodicka, 1998). I intended to learn how evaluation occurred in a large-scale project that had used participatory evaluation and action research throughout its development (Wodicka, 1999). My excitement was fueled by the idea of witnessing participatory evaluation in a cultural context that was strikingly different from that of my North American-based work. Participatory evaluation has many forms but, typically, features shared control of evaluation processes. Participatory evaluation also intends to involve a wider range of stakeholders in collecting and assessing data than is usual in other approaches to evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998).

I interviewed staff and researchers as we toured islands where villagers raised corn on rainforest hillsides, fished magnificent coral reefs, and complained about Komodo dragons eating their goats. Everywhere was participation: participatory action research with villagers and government to address conflicts over forest boundaries,

trainers and trainees discussing participatory rural appraisal, and social forestry projects. I was privileged to meet participatory non governmental organization (NGO) facilitators and village leaders working to better the lives of people in a country that had seen many years of repression. As a self-professed participatory junkie, I was thrilled and wowed to make this trip.

The story takes a turn here. You knew that, didn't you?

The turnabout surprised me--my biases and assumptions tripping me up again. My unsettling began as I asked about the project's participatory-evaluation-in-progress during personal interviews and through follow-up phone interviews six months later. It seems there were various complaints about the evaluation not being as participatory as people had hoped, or as participatory as people were used to experiencing. An Indonesian national close to the project said, "I think that the evaluation of the consortium is not so participatory." A key staff person confirmed, "We just did an evaluation. We weren't the facilitators of it. We hired outside facilitators, but they were very open in terms of doing a participatory evaluation and really playing the role of facilitators rather than outside legal kind of evaluation and passing judgments." He later added, "the facilitators sometimes responded as evaluators and sometimes responded as facilitators. Sometimes they were really trying to influence the recommendations. They brought in their own biases, their own way of thinking about the network." The outsider process favored "recommendations rather than lessons learned." This produced difficult "arduous discussions" that this and other participants experienced as frustrating, particularly when evaluation facilitators asked for consensus on a key issue, received none, so requested a vote that was overturned the next day (after the facilitators had left). The upshot

portrayed an evaluation process that was less participatory than much of their ongoing evaluative work; therefore, the results were considered less beneficial and the process, less than ideal.

This story is not remarkable in its disarray, or even in its flip-flop processes. Moreover, the story is not unique in showing that evaluation is impure, complex, and socially-constructed, features understood in the evaluation field (see Guba, 19XX; Patton, 1997; and others). At first, I presumed that the failure to employ participatory processes had something to do with the participatory methods themselves. Perhaps participation was feared as dangerously political, too revealing, or even tyrannical (see for example XX and Kothari, 2000). This enormous archipelago, as we are perhaps more aware than in years past, is the largest Muslim country in the world, and continues to experience ethnic and religious conflict (Chambers, 1997; Mayer, 1996). Risks associated with methods of inquiry certainly occur in the real world. We ignore risks at our own peril--more so the peril of our clients--for evaluations conducted in politically unstable areas of the world. I admit, however, that this preliminary and perhaps romantic analysis was colored by the we-would-be-martyrs syndrome that I sometimes exude as I witness the lukewarm reception of participatory techniques in some contexts. But I do not think this was the right analysis. I think a better analysis has more to do with the effect of mainstreaming in evaluation, and the way in which mainstreaming is also another way to say "enculturated."

**Culture and Evaluation**

When something is enculturated, the event or behavior has meaning that is intimately connected to tacit webs of understanding, to paraphrase cultural anthropologist

Clifford Geertz (1973). It is important that we consider that evaluation, like other events and behaviors, is part of culture, and developed by people to have meanings particular to time and place. Such meanings include yet are beyond how evaluation professionals--cultural creatures themselves--define themselves and their activities. We may realize that clients, funders, and organizations are under the spell of conventions, histories, and traditions. *They* have cultures. I submit that we avoid, however, whole-hog analysis of ourselves and our activities as culture-bound. We admit "biases," but these are typically portrayed as individual, as under own control, or as superficial. And so we are able to "bracket" them, as the jargon goes, and get on with the evaluation.

Ernie House and Ken Howe (1999) have pushed this line of thinking for us through their work on values in evaluation. They suggest that we consider two ways of managing key challenges in evaluation.

> There are formal and informal ways of doing so. The formal ways take the form of rules and procedures . . . There is less agreement on deriving criteria and combining results. These procedures have not undergone formalization or rigorous scrutiny. In these cases, we resort mostly to *informal reasoning*. (p. X) (italics added).

What is inside the black box of informal reasoning? I argue that "culture" is inside, and not just culture with a big "C." Commonly, one thinks about culture as long standing historical and ethnic attributes--foods, mannerisms, and customs. Some in our community are also aware that honoring culture involves coming to terms with power (Brisolara, 1998; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Rorty, 1982). In combination, these are important and essential dimensions of culture that press us unendingly. However, on an everyday basis,

even when we believe we have figured out big 'C' stuff, there is always more culture knocking at the door. Notably, local "organizational cultures" occur, in evaluation units as well as in client organizations. Such cultures are surprisingly common. It may be most practical to state that culture "writ large and small" must be considered when unpacking such phrases as informal reasoning.

Eleanor Chelimsky and William Shadish (1999) acknowledge the force of culture, suggesting, "It is often uncomfortable to stir oneself from familiar cultural, topical, conceptual, and methodological niches." They end, "So we must face the discomfort of stirring ourselves if we are to avoid being left behind" (p. xiii). What's underdeveloped among us, suggest Chelimsky and Shadish, is the acknowledgement that we are *part* of culture, and so is evaluation. I submit that not only must we avoid "being left behind," but must strive to avoid other nasties that result from ignoring 'our' culture as well as their culture, such as gathering bad data, ignoring important stakeholders, and overestimating peoples' willingness to assist evaluation. Such mistakes can put contribute to an evaluation that violates professional standards (Sanders, 1994).

**Tacit Knowledge and Habits**

This problem of not seeing culture may be inevitable. In anthropology, culture is talked about using an analogy based on fish and water. We say, *the fish is the last creature to see the water* to indicate the marvelous ability of people to fail to notice the rules that govern them (see also Bateson, 1980). In the professions, attending unconsciously to fundamentals isn't all bad. Part of moving into a professional role is to learn to do the job so well that we don't have to think about it. Donald Schön (1983) enlightened us to the patterned ways in which informal and intuitive professional

knowledge is both tacit and powerful. Personally, I like the feeling of moving seamlessly among tasks, zipping along, unencumbered by hesitation. The concept of mainstreaming can be viewed in this light as processes that evaluators and organizations take for granted.

If we believe Schön (1983), we might further conclude that many of our professional ideas exist at an unconscious level and are nearly unshakable. Moreover, to the extent that evaluators are similar to other professionals, evaluators are unlikely to be able to talk about their unconscious, unshakeable ideas. There is a downside to working from the heart or relying on one's gut instinct. When circumstances change, trouble begins. For example, when faced with *clear evidence* that their ideas aren't working, Schön and his colleague Chris Argyris discovered that professionals typically dismiss the evidence (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Worse, the professionals that were able to accept negative evidence as valid routinely failed to act differently--even when they tried. This may occur among evaluators as well--excluding, of course, other speakers here, our fine president and his executives, and all of you in the audience today.

I ask your patience as I return to the story of evaluation in Indonesia.

The tip-off that evaluation was playing its cultural hand in the Indonesia evaluation setting was the lack of discussion about the pros and cons of participatory evaluation itself. For example, people did not talk about the risks of participatory evaluation, nor did people dwell on practical problems or benefits of participatory evaluation. Moreover, although situated in a nation very different from my own, neither outsiders nor insiders talked about the decision to use an outside evaluation process as "Indonesian" in any cultural sense.

Instead, people said they did not use participatory evaluation because it was the ten year anniversary of the program. Apparently, for ten year anniversary evaluations, a comprehensive, external evaluation felt right.

Now go figure. What would you do with this response?

Early on, I dismissed this "anniversary" explanation. It did not seem worth noticing. Why would a ten year anniversary cause an organization with a remarkable history of participatory education and evaluation to opt for an outsider evaluation process heavy on recommendations? Nonetheless, continued discussions bore this out. A staff person said,

> Of course, we were having had ten years of this consortium. We were interested in knowing what kind of impact we have had so far . . . we were interested in having a kind of independent team, people from the outside coming to the consortium and helping us identify what lessons we have learned from the work that we have been doing over the last ten years.. . . . This was more or less like a ten year anniversary, where we wanted to set some time aside specifically for evaluation.

The notion of anniversary warrants unpacking. Anniversaries are complex and particular to contexts, but their cues are nearly always related to time, ritual, authority, and reconstructing the story. This is not silly stuff. It is, in fact, culture. The prospect of ritual related to anniversaries is powerful not just in Indonesia, but in non governmental organizations and in the workplace in the US. After all, we would not be lauding the concept of mainstreaming as a presidential strand event if we were not at least partly susceptible to the impetus of celebration and ritual as conducted properly by President Sanders. Evaluation enacts culture at the same time that evaluation is an expression of culture.

**Culture and Mainstreaming**

The cultural view bears directly on the issue of mainstreaming. I can argue, for example, that evaluation--of whatever stripe--is mainstreamed when it becomes part of organizational culture. This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that once part of the culture, habits become regular. People enact cultures tacitly, naturally, intuitively. They don't have to think about it. Moreover, culture is durable, so once mainstreamed, evaluation sticks.

The bad news is that once mainstreamed, it is hard to change, even when change is warranted. For example, people's ideas about evaluation are often regrettable. Evaluation can be a way for a business to downsize. Evaluation can be used to unjustly remove particular people or programs. Many of us complain about people in organizations who hate evaluation (and evaluators) and manage to sabotage inquiry. Sometimes, one can scratch the surface of such an organization's lack of cooperation and discover a legacy of accountability that harassed employees. An astute speaker at our conference, Kalyani Rai (2001), revealed that among her Asian immigrant clients, evaluation is equivalent to colonization. In these cases, resistance to evaluation rather than cooperation makes sense. My students are often appalled, on the other hand, by organizations that distribute end-of-meeting forms with mechanical precision but mindless attention. Evaluation, in these cases, is perfunctory. Habits comprise mainstreamed evaluation, but it doesn't matter. When evaluators try to change these types of mainstreamed habits, one learns a lot about resistance.

Metaphors are avenues to understanding what evaluation means to different organizations. About eight years ago, I conducted an evaluation that clients repeatedly

described as "ammunition" for their organization (Grudens-Schuck, 1998). More recently, a prospective client talked about evaluation as a "shield." Such metaphors are crucial to understanding how clients see the role of the evaluator. Chances are, evaluators will come and go but metaphors will remain. I wonder what examples you have your own from evaluation practice.

**Rigidity**

A hallmark of habits is rigidity. Again, this is not so much judgment as it is a practical matter. It is an oxymoron to think of irregular habits or elusive habits. Habits are habits because they have integrity in their sameness, are well-integrated with other parts of the culture, and resist change. Ideas about evaluation that are durable and deleterious to the progress of organizations and to public knowledge and accountability are regrettable. Rigidity can be problematic.

As we examine mainstreaming, we might benefit from consideration of the sister concepts of interruption and change. Organizational habits can change, and thank goodness. Understanding change would help evaluators address several questions related to mainstreaming:

- How may evaluators successfully introduce new evaluation methods?
- What ideas about evaluation do clients hold tightly or lightly?
- How may evaluators assist people to unlearn outmoded habits related to evaluation?
- How might evaluators assist organizations to institutionalize evaluation protocols in ways that prevent relapse, especially in the face of key staff or leadership turn-over?
- What are the limits of training, for ourselves and others, with respect to habits of evaluation that are tacit and rigid?

Remember that the flip side of this issue acknowledges mainstreaming as potentially healthy. Mainstreamed habits reduce thinking. Hey--I am fine with that. However, as my colleague Lynn Jones teaches his students and clients, evaluators are charged with *causing thinking and learning* when they enter an evaluation context (personal communication). Evaluation is a social intervention (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is a way to assist people to interact or process in non-trivial, non-ordinary ways (Bateson, 1980). Evaluation can be an opportunity to structure relationships differently so that the necessary conversations can occur and people can learn.

**Catalyzing Change**

I will not present a comprehensive framework for change of people and organizations, but I will touch upon a few key concepts. First, educational psychology suggests that difference and disorientation are necessary for thinking "outside the box" (Mezirow, 1991). The concept of unfreezing-freezing developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1948) is instructive here. Lewin studied how people might institute new practices in industry and in the home. Lewin knew that habits undermine change--even when change made sense or was anticipated to help. Lewin coined the terms unfreezing-freezing to suggest that new learning had to be preceded by a period of *un*learning. Adult educators continue to find these concepts useful. Adults who need to change usually know the technical aspects of change, but don't know how to make it happen.

Lewin further discovered that learning and unlearning were not discrete, e.g., people did not substitute one concept for another. Rather, in the phase of unfreezing, concepts are loosened and muddled, hence the slushy metaphor. The contemporary term constructivism now enfolds such concepts (see also Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A

constructivist framework assumes that people create new knowledge based on prior knowledge. Specific, even confrontational, methods are required to get people to *unlearn what they already know* about evaluation, marriage, conferences, Aunt Pearl, anthrax, Toronto, or anything else. Adult educator Jack Mezirow (1991) documented the essential role of a disorienting dilemma in catalyzing significant learning. The mistake is to pour new knowledge over old and expect long lasting change.

**Pragmatism, Habits, and Mainstreaming**

John Dewey (1938), and modern neo-pragmatist philosophers like Richard Rorty (1982), drive this point home about the rigidity of habits by presenting habits as steady yet tentative. Dewey's notion of "settled knowledge" advocates for a view of behavior and beliefs as susceptible to change, even when they seem 'rock hard'. For Dewey, there was no final knowledge, no pure essence of truth. These beliefs are what make him a pragmatist, not in the sense of being simplistic or superficial, but as a co-founder of a philosophy that dismisses the search for perfect truth (see Langsdorf & Smith, 1995).

The implications of pragmatist ideas for the concept of mainstreaming in evaluation are two-fold. On the one hand, evaluation can be tentative yet not seem that way because there is a great advantage to viewing settled knowledge as firm and actionable. Additionally, a pragmatist view would emphasize that mainstreamed evaluation practices are enmeshed in present time, situated in particular contexts. As contexts change, as beliefs become unsettled, what is currently mainstreamed may become habits that we would hope become unlearned. Of course, we live this tension in the American Evaluation Association. Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln's (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation* made many evaluators--none present here today--squirm and

become disoriented. Perhaps their strong claims accomplished Lewin's (1948) unfreezing or provided a Mezirowian (1991) disorienting dilemma. Participatory evaluation and otherinnovations may be the new habits in Lewin's refreezing phase.

**A Role for a Cultural View**

How is it helpful for evaluators to frame mainstreaming as a cultural creature? For one, we might listen more carefully to the ways in which organizations and clients talk about evaluation. Instead of simply receiving metaphors as humorous or clever, as I confess I often do, we might use them as a point of serious engagement. Is evaluation, for example, a ten year anniversary? Ammunition? A shield? Colonization? If so, what does that mean? An early qualitative phase of an evaluation, starting with negotiation of the contract (if possible), could document important terms. The terms' frequency of use, application by different stakeholders, and connection to actions could inform the evaluation (or at least, the evaluator). I am considering adding a "client metaphor" category to my client intake form so that I remember to document.

Second, we might view resistance to new ideas and adherence to old (whatever those might be) less as positivist (or relativist) bull-headedness and more as habits in Lewin's frozen mode. Third, we might relax our expectation that clients and participants in programs readily explain why they prefer or require what seem like outmoded, unhelpful, or unethical evaluation processes. Over time, interpretive forms of evaluation can surface meanings, but this is usually not possible at the outset.

If we decide to change evaluation practices that are currently mainstreamed (as participatory evaluators try to do), or attempt to instill a new set of habits (gosh, another thing participatory evaluators try to do), we would do well to consider Lewin's (1948)

unfreezing-freezing model. Such an approach would necessitate an adult education framework that assisted clients to surface, then unlearn, non preferred habits while considering new ones.

Fourth, we might also give in to working with the multi-faceted, culturally-bound purposes of our clients--if these purposes enable us to act ethically and effectively. (An evaluator might refuse, for example, to enhance symbolic dimensions of an evaluation that clients talk about as 'vengeance.'). For more benign purposes, evaluators can help clients think through aesthetic or symbolic dimensions of the evaluation that affect cost, timing, setting objectives, and data collection. If, for example, clients say that evaluation must be a celebration, it would be prudent, for example, to ask how the report might look different from several earlier reports (e.g., higher quality, more copies, **higher cost**?). Different stakeholders might need to be involved. Authority figures might be more important, and results might need to be presented at an upcoming event that would rush data collection. One might also explore how negative findings would be handled in an evaluation that is intended to be a celebration.

The tacit skill of "psyching out" clients is something that good evaluators already do, at least with the clients with which they have learned to succeed. Greater attention to cultural and philosophical dimensions of evaluation area might assist us to succeed with different types of clients, or help clients face new pressures. What is unworthy of us as social inquirers is to underestimate the complexity of mainstreaming, its tacit control over us as well as over "them." One way to surmount this challenge would be to develop a sense of evaluation as an artifact of culture that evaluators shape rather than originate.

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