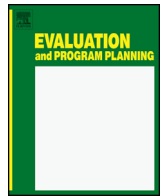




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# Betterment, undermining, support and distortion: A heuristic model for the analysis of pressure on evaluators

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### ABSTRACT

Evaluations can only serve as a neutral evidence base for policy decision-making as long as they have not been altered along non-scientific criteria. Studies show that evaluators are repeatedly put under pressure to deliver results in line with given expectations. The study of pressure and influence to misrepresent findings is hence an important research strand for the development of evaluation praxis. A conceptual challenge in the area of evaluation ethics research is the fact that pressure can be not only negative, but also positive. We develop a heuristic model of influence on evaluations that does justice to this ambivalence of influence: the BUSD-model (betterment, undermining, support, distortion). The model is based on the distinction of two dimensions, namely 'explicitness of pressure' and 'direction of influence'. We demonstrate how the model can be applied to understand pressure and offer a practical tool to distinguish positive from negative influence in the form of three so-called differentiators (awareness, accordance, intention). The differentiators comprise a practical component by assisting evaluators who are confronted with influence.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we propose a heuristic model to systematize the analysis of influence on evaluators and a practical way to distinguish negative from constructive influence. Evidence-based policy making (EBP) has gained in importance not only for research but also in democratic policy making processes over the last decades (Nutley, Morton, Jung, & Boaz, 2010; Pawson, 2002). EBP posits the utility of scientific evaluation results for the political system. It is assumed that scientific evidence generated by evaluation results fosters political credibility and serves as an ideal basis for decision making. EBP, however, assumes that evaluation results are politically unbiased and based on neutral evidence. In practice, evaluations are carried out by evaluators who are hired by clients. The commission aspect of evaluation processes, namely the collaboration between an evaluator and his or her clients must meet scientific principles to allow the provision of evidence-based findings. To be more precise, collaborative aspects must not involve influences by the hiring party to guarantee objective and independent evaluation processes and therefore evaluation results. Questions arise as to whether

evaluation processes follow these principles or not: Do stakeholders intervene in the evaluation process? And if so, how can that influence pattern be identified and defined? Are evaluators confronted with pressure or influenced by stakeholders and what types of influence appear?

Recently, studies from the US, UK, Germany and Switzerland explored evaluator experience with pressure or influence by different stakeholders (Pleger & Sager, 2016a, 2016b; Morris & Clark, 2013; Stockmann, Meyer, & Schenke, 2011; The LSE GV314 Group, 2013). All studies find evidence for existing attempts by stakeholders to influence the evaluation process. The results show that evaluators are repeatedly put under pressure to deliver results in line with given expectations by different stakeholders. Moreover, the commissioner is identified as the main influencing person within the evaluation process. By intervening in the evaluation process, stakeholders compromise the necessary requirements for independent evaluations, objectivity and scientific integrity by the evaluator.

The empirical studies show a broad range of influencing attempts by the commissioner: The range of pressure extends from subtle pressure to change the language, present findings more positively or negatively, to intense influence intention such as the determination of results in advance by the stakeholder (Pleger & Sager, 2016a, 2016b; Morris & Clark, 2013; Stockmann et al., 2011).

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Nevertheless, the results must be treated with caution when considering conclusions concerning the current state of supposedly non-independent evaluation procedures in the international practice and development of potential preventive actions. The empirical findings indicate a lack of consensus within the evaluators' understanding of the terms 'influence' or 'pressure'. Although the terminologies 'pressure' and 'influence' can semantically describe different concepts, here we use both concepts as functional equivalents. We are interested in the effect 'pressure' and 'influence' display on the actual evaluation and we argue that both concepts refer to the same idea but from different perspectives. To be more precise, 'pressure' can be understood as the action performed by the influencing party whilst 'influence', in turn, describes the resulting effect for the influenced evaluator caused by pressure. Consequently, 'pressure on evaluators' captures the clients' perspective whilst 'influence on evaluators' describes the same incident but from the evaluators' perspective. As influence and pressure are understood in this paper as one ethical challenge within the evaluation process, we treat them as being functionally equivalent and subsequently do not distinguish anymore between 'pressure' and 'influence'.

In the various studies from the US, UK, Germany and Switzerland mentioned above, influence is consistently conceived of as a phenomenon to be judged normatively negative. The negative connotation of the term already is determined in questionnaires employed (e.g., Stockmann et al., 2011). However, the results of respective open ended questions in the study among Swiss evaluators (Pleger & Sager 2016a, 2016b), point out a conceptual challenge. Here, evaluators considered pressure to be not only negative but also constructive. As the rest of the results of the Swiss study do not fundamentally differ in kind from those in the other countries (Pleger, Sager, Morris, Meyer, & Stockmann, 2016), it is plausible that a positive perception of influence may be present beyond Switzerland. Consequently, we argue that for an adequate analysis of influence and pressure on evaluators, a clarification of these terms is required.

We therefore developed a heuristic model of influence on evaluations that does justice to this ambivalence of influence: The BUSD-model (*betterment, undermining, support, distortion*). Influence on evaluators belongs to the area of independence of evaluation, which is a twofold concept and refers to formal independence on the one hand and substantial independence on the other. Formal independence means structural freedom from control over the conduct of an evaluation; substantial independence can be described as the objective scientific assessment of a subject, free from undue influence that is meant to distort or bias the conduct or findings of an evaluation. It must be emphasised that the present paper applies to substantial independence only and does not address the problem of formal independence. The model developed here applies to the principal-agent situation after an evaluation has been commissioned. Consequently, we do not treat the actual motivation why an evaluation is undertaken in the first place. Strategic stakeholder interests in an evaluation, therefore, only are addressed when they materialize in the actual commissioner-client relation in the course of the evaluation activity. The paper does not regard considerations that lead to the decision to undertake an evaluation.

The paper starts with a theoretical discussion of the role of program evaluation activities from the EBP perspective in a democratic political system and links it to research on evaluation ethics. We then discuss arising conceptual challenges with the term 'pressure' and introduce the heuristic BUSD-model. This model is intended to contribute to a clearer distinction and understanding of the term 'pressure' in the context of independent evaluations. By the use of examples, we clarify the four different types of influence which arise from the model. We then illustrate

how the BUSD-model can be applied to distinguish different types of pressure by introducing potential preventive strategies. The article concludes with a discussion of the model and its potential future scope of application.

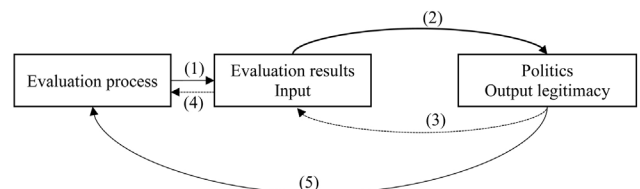
1.1. The interplay between democracy and evaluation results: evidence-based policy making

Evaluations are not self-sufficient but seek to deliver results for the hiring client. They can be described as an "analytical inquiry based on collecting and analysing evidence, and drawing conclusions and recommendations from this evidence" (Valovirta, 2002). Another essential evaluation objective lies in "the production of judgements of worth" (Valovirta, 2002). In democracies, evaluation results gain importance for the political context, especially in the context of public policies. Policy evaluation results enter the policy arena by influencing the way in which decision makers think about policy issues and by providing policy makers with information (Sanderson, 2000). Ideally, results would then be used to weigh up different policies' impacts and to "choose between particular policy options" (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). Program evaluation therefore aims to improve the political system by providing evidence which can be used by policymakers for decision-making.

In recent decades, the incorporation of evidence in the decision-making process became known as evidence-based policymaking (EBP) and has attracted increasing attention both in research and politics (Ham, Hunter, & Robinson, 1995; Head, 2008; Nutley et al., 2010; Nutley et al., 2007; Pawson, 2002; Sanderson 2000; Van der Knaap, 2004; Young, Ashby, Boaz, & Grayson, 2002). There is no uniform definition of EBP but the idea can be described as encouraging "policy-makers and practitioners to look for the best available evidence and place a premium on proof and demonstrable results when developing policies and practices" (Nutley et al., 2010). EBP captures the idea that policy evaluation results, concluded on the basis of evidence, are the best way of "understanding of 'what works'" (Pawson, 2002).

Evaluation processes and results take place within the political context. This paper follows the assumptions by the so-called *interactive model* of EBP, which "portrays research and policy as mutually influential" (Young et al., 2002). It assumes an interplay between decision-makers and researchers, whereby both influence the other's agenda. Before evidence can be used by political bodies, however, it must first be produced. "In order to inform policy, the research must come before the policy" (Pawson, 2002). To provide evidence, evaluations must be conducted by evaluators following scientific guidelines. Meaningful evidence applies only as long as researchers in general and evaluators in particular fulfil their mandate in accordance with scientific requirements for conducting evaluations. Our argument is that scientific quality can be influenced by the politics and evaluation relationship, which is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 shows the interplay between evaluation results and the political context. Five sequences can be distinguished which assist



Note. Dashed lines indicate indirect feedback. Solid lines illustrate direct feedback.

Fig. 1. Interplay between evaluation results and politics.

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