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Dismissing the goals: A comparison of four goal-dismissive goal-free evaluations

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a descriptive review of four goal-free evaluations (GFE). GFE is an evaluation model where the evaluator conducts the evaluation without knowledge of or reference to the evaluand's stated goals. The four non-randomly sampled evaluation approaches represent articulated evaluation models in which the evaluators ignore the goals of the intervention or project. Data collection consisted of document analyses supplemented by semi-structured interviews with the models' creators. The findings from these case studies include descriptions of the evaluation models, the models' relationship to GFE, and eight commonalities shared among the four models. The conclusion of this study is that these GFEs are similar to other GFEs described in the literature in that they examine outcomes as reported by the intervention's consumers, focus on collecting qualitative data, and use their evaluations to supplement a larger goal-based evaluation strategy.

1. Introduction

Goal-free evaluation (GFE) refers to an evaluation in which the evaluator conducts the evaluation without knowledge of or reference to the evaluand's stated goals and objectives. In program evaluation, the goal-free evaluator examines the program's actual outcomes rather than its intended outcomes. Historically, goal-free evaluators blind themselves from the stated program goals and objectives by establishing one or more goal-screeners who serve as liaisons between the GFE team and the program's upstream stakeholders, e.g., program funders, administrators, managers, and staff, among others (see Davidson, 2005; for a full description of upstream stakeholders). However, this paper introduces a sub-type of GFE—one in which the evaluator dismisses the goals without much effort to proactively avoid them. But why should the evaluator disregard the goals in the first place? There are several theorized and actualized benefits of GFE (House, 1974; Manfredi, 2003; Scriven, 1973, 1974, 1991; Thiagarajan, 1975; Youker & Ingraham, 2013). However, its primary justification is best articulated by Scriven (1991), who argues that once one learns the program's stated goals and/or objectives there is a tendency to experience tunnel vision toward those goals, resulting in overlooking other relevant program outcomes. Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2004) summarize the goal-free evaluator's rationale for avoiding program goals as they write:

First, goals should not be taken as given; like anything else, they

should be evaluated. Further, goals are generally little more than rhetoric and seldom reveal the real objectives of the project or changes in intent. In addition many important program outcomes are not included in the list of original program goals or objectives. (p. 84)

Scriven (1972) first proposed GFE in the early 1970s, and GFE's development has since been slow. Initially, following introduction, there was moderate interest in and use of GFE as evidenced by the handful of publications on the goal-free approach (e.g., Alkin, 1972; Evers, 1980; House, 1980, 1991 (written in 1973); Salasin, 1974; Scriven, 1973, 1974; Thiagarajan, 1975; Welch, 1976). However, enthusiasm and interest waned, leaving few practitioners. Then in the 2000s, there was a small resurgence of interest in GFE (e.g., Belanger, 2006; Berkshire, Kouame, & Richardson, 2009; James & Roffe, 2000; Manfredi, 2003; Youker, 2005). In a literature search of GFE from 1972 to 2012, Youker and Ingraham (2013) uncovered roughly a score of evaluators who purport to have conducted a GFE or others identified them as having conducted a GFE. Unfortunately these goal-free evaluators left few clues as to their specific methods or procedures and therefore the question of how to conduct GFE remained unanswered. Therefore the skeptics, throughout the years, accuse GFE of lacking methods by which to conduct it (Morell, 2010; Patton, 1997; Scriven, 1974; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Smith, 2009; Stufflebeam, 2001).

To further operationalize GFE, Youker (2013) examined the GFE literature and technical GFE reports and used them to draft principles for conducting GFE. The resulting four general principles were then critiqued and ultimately approved by ten expert evaluators (see Youker, 2011). The following principles form the foundation for GFE:

- Identify relevant effects to examine without referencing goals and objectives.
- Identify what occurred without the prompting of goals and objectives.
- Determine if what occurred can logically be attributed to the program or intervention.
- Determine the degree to which the effects are positive, negative, or neutral. (p. 434).

Youker, Ingraham, and Bayer (2014) further described GFE in practice by presenting case studies of four non-randomly selected GFEs and their technical evaluation reports. There were several commonalities shared among the four. First, the evaluators reported assigning screeners to shield the evaluators from the goals of the intervention. Second, the GFEs were used for both formative and summative purposes. Third, the GFEs exclusively focused on assessing program outcomes as they were experienced by consumers. Fourth, the evaluators primarily relied on collecting qualitative data through interviewing, direct observation, and document analysis; and they gathered data mostly from program consumers. Lastly, all of the evaluations complemented or supplemented goal-based evaluation. Although these cases provide additional clues as to how these evaluators dealt with GFE design, data collection, and contextual issues, the sample was limited in that it only considered evaluations by evaluators who labeled their evaluations "goal-free." Nonetheless, evaluators who explicitly proclaim their evaluations goal-free do not conduct all GFEs. Some evaluators subscribe to models that are goal-dismissive, in that they literally disregard the goals by maintaining a stance of indifference and disinterest in terms of project goals.

Around the turn of the millennia, there sprang a small contingent of GFE models hidden in plain sight in the practice of international development evaluation. The evaluators using Most Significant Change (MSC), Outcome Harvesting (OH), Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev), and Qualitative Impact Protocol (QUIP) focus their attention and effort in search of a diverse array of potentially relevant outcomes from multiple sources, and then in trying to attribute these outcomes to the intervention. These goal-dismissive evaluators pay little to no attention to goals and objectives, which is unlike the goal-free evaluators described in Youker et al's. (2014) case studies who designed their evaluations with specific methods and procedures to prevent goal contamination. The goal-dismissive goal-free evaluators further de-emphasize goals by dismissing the design of any goal contamination procedures as well.

The following is a presentation of four of these goal-dismissive GFEs. The purpose for presenting these cases is twofold: (1) to further operationalize GFE by describing the design, methods, and procedures used by goal-free evaluators, and (2) to demonstrate that evaluators have been successfully using relatively articulated GFE models for decades.

2. Methods

The sample of GFEs in this IRB approved study consists of MSC, OH, PADev, and QUIP. Data collection methods included document review such as examining scholarly articles, websites, briefs, evaluation reports, and evaluation guidebooks and instruments. Supplementing the document analysis, the researchers conducted semi-structured video chat (i.e., Skype) interviews with the founders of these evaluation models. The interviews occurred between October 2014 and January 2015 and the average length per interview was approximately 45 min. The interviews were recorded using Debut Video Capture Software, transcribed in Microsoft Word, and uploaded into QSR NVivo 10 (2015) data analysis software. The analysis consisted of directed content analysis to extend GFE's theoretical framework. The coding schemes included a combination of pattern coding and open coding. Youker et al's. (2014) case studies served as the basis for the initial list of codes and then open coding was employed to identify potentially relevant patterns and emergent themes that did not fall under predetermined codes. The research team identified interviewees through a combination of a literature review as well as through snowball sampling during interviews with professional evaluators and evaluation scholars; recruitment of interviewees occurred via email. The research team selected this purposive sample as the evaluation models adhere to Youker's (2013) four GFE principles, were conducted multiple times, and have published instructional guidebooks. In addition, all of the models' founders agreed, during preliminary emails, that their respective models are indeed goal-free and indicated their willingness to discuss the approach. Therefore, the questions under investigation are: What are the evaluation models and in what ways are they goal-free?

3. Findings

The findings of this study consist of a brief description of each model, a summary of the model's typical design and data collection methods, and an identification of the model's goal-free nature.

3.1. Summaries of goal-dismissive goal-free evaluation models

Table 1 compares the models by founder, approximate year of the model's founding, and references their associated guidebooks.

To demonstrate that the aforementioned models are in fact used, Table 2 presents several examples of their evaluation clients.

3.2. Most significant change

Rick Davies, from the University of Wales, United Kingdom, developed MSC in the mid-1990s as an outcome monitoring and evaluation model. The goal-dismissive goal-free MSC evaluator collects

Table 1
A Comparison of the Models' Founders, Year Founded, and Associated Guidebooks.

Model	Founder	Year Founded	Guidebook Title, Authors, Publication Year, and Link
MSC	Rick Davies	Circa 1996	The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use (Davies & Dart, 2005) http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf
OH	Ricardo Wilson-Grau	Circa 2000	Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012) https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/Outome%20Harvesting%20Brief%20FINAL%202012-05-2-1.pdf
PADev	Ton Dietz	Circa 2008	PADev Guidebook (Dietz et al., 2013a) http://www.padev.nl/other_output/PADev_guidebook_2013.pdf
QUIP	James Coperstake	Circa 2014	Full guidelines for the Qualitative Impact Protocol QUIP) (Coperstake, 2014) http://opus.bath.ac.uk/36678/5/QUIP_Guidelines_Oct_14.pdf