Factors affecting evaluation culture within a non-formal educational organization

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ABSTRACT

While research has been done on many aspects of evaluation within a variety of contexts and organizations, there is a lack of research surrounding the culture of evaluation. This study set out to examine this evaluative culture in one of the world's largest non-formal educational organizations through the use of an online survey and quantitative methodology. A path model was developed to examine the factors affecting evaluation culture. Results show perception regarding evaluation, program area, college major, location, training in evaluation, degree level, and years of experience explained 28% of the variance within evaluation culture. Results also found that the culture of evaluation is greatly impacted by leadership. By taking a closer look at the evaluation culture of a large non-formal educational organization, much can be learned about how to better develop and support evaluative work in other similar organizations and programs.

1. Introduction

In the past decade we have seen a great deal of research and discussion regarding evaluation activities, evaluation capacity building, training in evaluation, evaluation behaviors, and the progress of evaluation (Arnold, 2006; Baughman, Boyd, & Franz, 2012; Baughman, Boyd, & Kelsey, 2012; Franz & Townson, 2008; Lamm & Israel, 2011; Lamm & Israel, 2013; Patton, 2008). However distinctly lacking from the conversation is talk of evaluation culture. While it has been commented upon by few, it remains an obscure and underdeveloped notion (Patton, 2010). In order to enhance the debate of evaluation culture; what it is, if it exists, why it is important, more research into the underlying factors of this type of culture is needed.

This study was part of a larger overall body of research on evaluation competencies, culture, and behavior utilizing the Theory of Planned Behavior. The organization used for this particular study was Cooperative Extension. This organization was chosen as it is one of the largest non-formal educational organizations in the world and engages in a wide variety of both program planning and evaluation activities (Franz & Townson, 2008; Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997). The focus of this particular study is twofold. First, the evaluation culture of the organization was examined based on a pre-existing cultural subscale and second, factors contributing to evaluation culture were examined using path analysis. As there is a need within the field of evaluation to further define evaluation culture, the findings presented here serve as important first steps in broadening the understanding of what exactly evaluation culture is comprised of within an organization.

1.1. Defining evaluation culture

A key part of increasing an organization's capacity for evaluation lies in the evaluative culture of that organization (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013). The existing structure and characteristics of the organization such as attitudes towards evaluation, leadership, and communication greatly impact the ability and level at which individuals will perform evaluations, thereby driving the evaluative culture of the organization (Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012; Preskill & Boyle, 2008). To date, there has been no major research published on the culture of evaluation within Cooperative Extension or any other similar large-scale, non-formal, educational organizations. Thus, evaluation research surrounding large-scale organizations has focused on the amount of evaluation the organization engages in and at what level, rarely pushing beyond the bare minimum to delve into the higher level components of evaluative work (Baughman, Boyd, & Franz, 2012; Baughman, Boyd, & Kelsey, 2012; Braverman & Engle, 2009; Lamm & Israel, 2011; McClure, Fuhrman, & Morgan, 2012).

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While the concept of "evaluation culture" is used throughout evaluation literature, Patton suggests "evaluation culture" is in danger of becoming a meaningless phrase due to the lack of research and support for the issue (Patton, 2010). By focusing on both defining and researching the culture of evaluation within a large-scale organization, this study strives to add significance and credibility to this area of research by investigating contributing factors to the variance of evaluation culture as well as administrative support within the organizational structure. Without a close examination of evaluation culture, it will continue to lack importance and credibility (Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015; Patton, 2010).

It is likely that evaluation culture stems directly from the culture of an organization, in that most subsets of cultural component comprise the overall culture of an organization. While many definitions of organizational culture exist, the majority indicate that this culture encompasses a set of values, beliefs, and assumptions that dictate the operations and interworking of persons and units within an organization (Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg, & Martin, 1985; Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011; Hogan & Coote, 2014; Schein, 2010). Examining the impact, it has been shown that organizational culture influences a great deal of the operations of organizations, from staff turnover, to profitability, to evaluation capacity building (Hartnell et al., 2011; Hogan & Coote, 2014; Labin et al., 2012; Robinson & Cousins, 2004). The culture of an organization permeates all, and with that, the culture of evaluation coincides.

Organizational culture can dictate how information flows through an organization, and this free-flow or limited flow can directly impact evaluation activities when that information pertains to evaluation use, training and resources (Lamm & Israel, 2011; Schein, 2010). Moreover, when this culture is directed by the administration, the support or lack thereof for evaluation can ebb and flow based on administrative decisions or even the perception of administration attitudes. In order to improve the evaluation functionality within an organization, a firm understanding of both the overall organizational culture and the evaluation culture within the organization must be gained.

Organizational culture directs the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the organization as a whole, and similarly, an evaluation culture, either positive or negative, can dictate the attitudes, beliefs, values, and use of evaluation within the organization (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Schein, 2010; Taylor-Ritzler Suarez-Balcazar & Taylor-Ritzler, 2014). This culture can direct funding either toward or away from evaluation. A positive culture of evaluation would most likely have transparent practices, high levels of evaluation engagement, high levels of use of evaluation, high levels of evaluation training, whereas a negative one would have just the opposite. No one understands why evaluation is being done, no one understands how the results will be used and this lack of understanding leads to apprehension and mistrust of the practice, thereby repeating the cycle of a negative culture of evaluation.

For the purposes of this study, the researchers utilized the cultural definition written by Labin et al. (2012), which can be used to define evaluation culture as "the collective values, attitudes, goals, and practices that can support or hinder organizational change" as these variables relate to evaluation. This definition reminds us to take a critical look at both evaluation behaviors within an organization and the factors that support and motivate those behaviors, both positive and negative. Current literature indicates that factors such as perception of importance of evaluation competencies, location, major in college, years of experience within the organization, program area, degree level and prior training in evaluation can impact evaluation within an organization and subsequently the evaluation culture (Boyd, 2009; Lamm & Israel, 2011; Lekies & Bennett, 2011; McClure et al., 2012; Morford, Kozak, Suvedi, & Innes, 2006; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Suarez-Balcazar & Taylor-Ritzler, 2014; Taylor-Ritzler, Suarez-Balcazar, Garcia-Iriarte, Henry, & Balcazar, 2013).

1.2. Factors affecting evaluation culture

Given that there are a variety of factors and unknown variables that can impact evaluation culture it serves to examine the prominent factors as illustrated in the literature. One such factor can be defined as the perception of evaluation. Given that perceptions are often based on past experiences, if individuals have negative or no experience with evaluation, it is unlikely they will be motivated to participate in evaluative work in the future (Lekies & Bennett, 2011). This lack of experience or negative experience with evaluation can impact the perception of evaluation work throughout the organization. Within Cooperative Extension, Lekies and Bennett (2011) found while experiences with evaluation were mixed, 14% still stated their experiences were negative. Morford et al. (2006) found that 27% of Extension practitioners "prefer to ignore" or "dread" evaluation. These experiences have the potential to negatively impact a variety of aspects of evaluation activity within the organization. If an organization's members have a negative view of evaluation tasks, requirements, or competencies, these individuals most likely will not be motivated to do in-depth evaluations or participate in evaluation capacity building exercises, thereby impacting the culture of evaluation as well as progress within the organization.

A second factor in evaluation culture, as well as culture in general, is location. With regard to evaluation activities, practices and needs differ from program to program, city to city, and from state to state. According to Franz and Townson (2008), some states within the Cooperative Extension system have professionally trained evaluators serving within the organization while other evaluators within the organization operate with little evaluative training. These differences must be examined for their impact on evaluation culture as government mandates drive the demand for evaluation capacity building which also can serve to build evaluation culture (Arnold, 2006; Franz & Townson, 2008; Lamm, Israel, & Diehl, 2013; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). Location in this context is the state in which evaluators currently practice. This factor was chosen because in general, most evaluation training within Cooperative Extension appears to be done "on the job" if training is done at all (Lamm et al., 2013; McClure et al., 2012; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). The location of the evaluator also dictates the capacity that particular area has for supporting evaluation practices with resources, time and staff. While it would have been useful to break location down further to the individual counties or areas that Extension Educators service, this would deteriorate the confidentiality of the survey given that some areas only have one Extension Educator, or only one doing Evaluation. The higher state-level variable allowed respondents confidence that they could not be individually identified.

Area of specialization or program area within an organization can also be a contributing factor to variance in evaluation culture. Evaluators trained and embedded in one particular field may have a better understanding of programmatic activities and perhaps be more proactive and knowledgeable in evaluation behaviors (Lambur, 2008). As Cooperative Extension was the organization of interest in this study, specific program area differences must be examined as the organization is comprised of a wide variety of programs that vary widely across the country. In Cooperative Extension, a program area is an area of focus for the organization. These include but are not limited to agricultural systems, animal science, foods and nutrition, and pest management. Extension Educators will have specialized in these program areas in some way, either through on the job training or a college degree in one of the areas. Given the large geographical reach of Cooperative Extension, some services will be unnecessary in certain communities and therefore not offered. Extension educators often have training and experience in multiple program areas, but given the needs of the community at the time, focus and specialize in one particular area. These foci may also change over time given the climate of the community needs and directives from state and local government.

Similar to specialization in a program area, another factor contributing to evaluation culture is educational background and training