Objectivity in Transformative Evaluation

Frank G. Cookingham…October 2016
TE adapts sound evaluation practices so that they are consistent with Biblical principles and kingdom-of-God values that transcend doctrinal differences.
Christian First, Evaluator Second

- As Christians our purpose in life is to be Christ-like in all aspects of living, including our professions.

- Thus, the Christian evaluator adapts evaluation theory and methods to be consistent with a Christian worldview.
Objectivity in Christian Worldview

- Objectivity is viewed differently across approaches to evaluation.

- In TE objectivity is viewed somewhat as in other transformative approaches, but aligned with the understanding that there are different kinds of knowledge alongside empirical knowledge.
Objectivity is not…

• … the opposite of subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to individual preferences; they are always present even when an evaluator is performing objectively.

• … absence of emotion while engaged in inquiry.
Objectivity is…

• … a collection of qualities of public evidence that supports the rationality of some claim and makes the claim credible.
Three Dimensions of Objectivity

- 1. Rationality of Response to Independent Critiques
- 2. Scope of Cultural Differences
- 3. Bias/Prejudgments
1. Independent Critiques

- The scope of competent independent critiques of methodology and findings, and the rationality of the evaluator’s response to them, is a dimension of objectivity in TE. Without such critiques there either is no objectivity or the strength of objectivity cannot be determined.
2. Scope of Cultural Differences

- Objectivity is strengthened as
  - the evaluation team includes diverse perspectives on evaluation approaches, and team members work collaboratively
  - diverse stakeholder groups participate substantively in each aspect of the inquiry, and their views are respected and represented
Respect for Other Faith Traditions

- God is creator of all persons; God loves all persons regardless of their faith.
- Being Christian first involves humbly respecting persons of all faith traditions.
- In TE the perspectives of those in the community who do not hold the Christian worldview need to be invited to participate in the evaluation exercise; the evaluation team should expect to learn something about God’s work in the community from them.
3. Bias

- In social research “bias” refers to systematic error, or error that will have adverse consequences to people. Such errors are often due to a tendency to prejudge issues based on emotions or beliefs that are wrong or irrelevant.
Bias/Prejudgment

• The bias displayed in describing the evaluand; implementing data collection, analysis and interpretation; and reporting findings is a critical dimension in TE objectivity, as it is in any approach to evaluation.
Primary Sources of Bias in the Evaluator

- In addition to the typical sources of bias in any approach to evaluation (e.g. personal involvement with evaluand, lack of technical expertise, conflict of interest, selection bias due to flawed sampling procedures, failure to control for contaminating or confounding factors, etc.), there are several sources that are highlighted in TE.
Primary Sources of Bias in the Evaluator (2)

- The evaluator’s worldview, and self-understanding of that worldview, particularly regarding spirituality and epistemology (little self-understanding → stronger bias).
- Exercise of power by the evaluator throughout the inquiry (little sharing of power → stronger bias).
- Evaluator’s willingness to being critiqued by qualified persons (reluctance → stronger bias).
- Evaluator’s cultural competence (low competence → stronger bias).
Principle of Bias Control – Strive for Balance

- The purpose of bias control in evaluation is to limit the influence of premature or irrelevant views, not to exclude the influence of definite views. The general principle of bias control is to balance program bias in a group of evaluators rather than trying to eliminate bias.
# Degrees of Objectivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NO Critique</th>
<th>Competent Critique &amp; RATIONAL RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MONO-cultural</td>
<td>MONO-cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW Bias</td>
<td>UNDETERMINED</td>
<td>UNDETERMINED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH Bias</td>
<td>NO objectivity</td>
<td>UNDETERMINED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
May you be open to evolving insights about objectivity; may you pursue objectivity with passion.
For more information

- See relevant posts at www.EvalFrank.com