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## **Consumer-Oriented Evaluation Approach**

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The consumer-oriented approach to evaluation is the evaluation orientation advocated by evaluation expert and philosopher Michael Scriven. The approach stems from the belief that evaluation ought to serve the consumer, that is, the ultimate end user of the particular object under evaluation, the evaluand—be it a program, a curriculum, a policy, a product, or a service. This entry first discusses the history and the key aspects of the consumer-oriented evaluation approach, including the centrality of the consumer, the goal of the evaluation, and the role of the evaluation and the evaluator. It then looks at the techniques used in consumer-oriented evaluation, the checklist developed by Scriven for this evaluation approach, and the advantages and challenges of the approach.

The consumer-oriented evaluation approach arose in the 1960s in reaction to the then-prevailing stances that saw evaluation as an exercise in value-free measurement of whether program goals were achieved. The consumer-oriented evaluation approach reminds evaluators, and those who commission and use evaluation, that an evaluation ought to produce a determination about the merit, worth, and/or significance of the evaluand and that the basis of evaluation ought to be referenced to the needs of consumers.

### **Centrality of the Consumer**

At the core of the consumer-oriented evaluation approach is the stance that evaluation should be oriented toward the needs of the consumer. Scriven argues that an evaluation's task and goal should be directed toward the consumer (end user) primarily and, to a much lesser extent, the program developers and other stakeholders. Scriven recognizes that consumers' values may not always align with the values of developers, funders, or even the delivery partners. The author also observes that the consumer is not necessarily concerned with goals that program developers set out to achieve with an evaluand nor should they have to contend with what developers' intentions are. Rather, what truly matters to consumers is that an object has value, that is, merit, worth, and/or significance.

### **Goal of Evaluation**

The significance of the consumer-oriented evaluation approach is best understood in context of the historical confluences that gave rise to it. One major source has been the limitations and flaws associated with objective-oriented approaches to evaluation or what has sometimes been referred to as Tylerian approach to evaluation. Proponents of Ralph Tyler's approach to evaluation see it as the determination of whether objectives have been achieved or not.

Scriven's critique of Tyler's approach is that conceptualizing evaluation in a goal-oriented way is narrow, for goals, as prescribed by program developers, can be flawed, incomplete, unrealistic, or inadequate in addressing the social ills that prompted the creation of the intervention in the first place. Evaluating in this fashion ignores the true needs of the consumer. This stance is echoed in contemporary discourse that emphasizes the importance of placing the learner first.

The methodological implication is that evaluation is not merely a technical exercise in measurement between what was set out and what was the case in reality, as is the case with evaluation conducted in the Tylerian tradition, but in bringing evidence to bear in reaching an informed judgment about an object's value independent of what developers set out to do. Scriven implores evaluators to understand all effects of an intervention, unconstrained by what developers had sought to achieve, and assess the needs of the users. On the bases of

these two assessments, the evaluator advances a judgment concerning the value of the object. The determination of merit, worth, and significance of an evaluand is the singular goal of evaluation.

### **Role of Evaluation**

Scriven further distinguishes the goal of evaluation from the role of evaluation. The author identifies two legitimate roles of evaluation, that of summative and formative evaluation. Summative evaluation advances a summary judgment concerning the overall value of the evaluand. For practical reasons, a summative evaluation is performed when the object is ready to be evaluated summatively, that is, when the evaluand has developed fully and when the evaluand is operating with sufficient regularities in its operation and is producing stable effects. To help program developers ready an evaluand for summative evaluation, an evaluation may be conducted formatively to identify shortcomings and deficiencies.

In either formative or summative evaluation, the evaluation activities are not materially different; the two only differ in purpose. Put simply, when the customer tastes the soup, it is summative evaluation. When the chef tastes the soup just before serving it, it is formative evaluation. In this way, summative evaluation constitutes the core of the role of evaluation in the consumer-oriented approach to evaluation.

### **Role of the Evaluator**

Scriven sees that evaluation—and by extension, the evaluator—carries the ethical and moral imperative to determine whether an object contributes to the welfare of consumers. To that end, Scriven sees the proper role of the evaluator to be that of “enlightened surrogate consumer”; the evaluator discharges such responsibility by making informed judgments on consumer’s behalf. In his writing, Scriven often cites the magazine *Consumer Reports* as illustrative of the consumer-oriented approach to evaluation.

### **Techniques**

To aid in putting the consumer-oriented approach to evaluation in practice, Scriven advances several techniques.

#### **Goal-Free Evaluation**

Scriven advances the notion of a goal-free evaluation in an attempt to offer an alternative to goal-based approaches to evaluation. In a goal-free evaluation, the evaluator ignores the stated program goals on purpose. Instead, the evaluator investigates all possible outcomes—both anticipated and unanticipated—of a program. According to Scriven, advantages of goal-free evaluation “are that it is less intrusive than goal-based evaluation; more adaptable to mainstream goal shifts; better at finding side effects; less prone to social, perceptual, and cognitive bias; more professionally challenging; and more equitable in taking a wide range of values into account” (cited in Stufflebeam ... Shrinkfield, 2007, p. 374).

#### **Needs and Needs Assessment**

One of the advantages to adopting program developers’ goals in an evaluation is that

assumptions about what constitutes valuable or meaningful outcomes have been made ahead of time. In the absence of adopting developers' goals in a goal-free evaluation, the quandary arises of whose values ought to be represented in an evaluation and by what means they could be established. Scriven resolves this issue by placing the onus upon the evaluator to explicate the needs of the consumer through a needs assessment.

Scriven is specific in how he defines a need. Consistent with the author's stance on orienting the evaluation toward the consumer, the author defines a need as "anything essential for a satisfactory mode of existence, anything without which that mode of existence or level of performance would fall below a satisfactory level" (cited in Stufflebeam ... Shrinkfield, 2007, p. 375). A need defined in this way carries the notion of what is essential or necessary to the consumer. An example of such a need would be functional literacy. The findings of a needs assessment provide the basis to compare against observed outcomes in an evaluation.

### **Key Evaluation Checklist**

Another major contribution Scriven has made to advance the approach is the creation of the Key Evaluation Checklist. The Key Evaluation Checklist draws together a comprehensive list of considerations and action items that the author views to be essential to conducting evaluation in ways consistent with the consumer-oriented approach. The checklist is organized into four sections and comprises 18 checkpoints. The remainder of this section summarizes each of the major sections.

#### **Section A: Preliminaries**

The first section of the checklist invites the evaluator to consider those issues that would have bearing on the design, execution, and reporting of the evaluation itself. Three checkpoints are identified: creating an executive summary of the most pertinent information concerning the evaluation itself; clarifying the intended audience of the evaluation, the role of the evaluator, stakeholders of the program, and the questions the evaluation is to answer; and, finally, the design and methods that would be employed to answer those questions.

#### **Part B: Foundations**

The second section invites the evaluator to establish a detailed description of the evaluand. Five checkpoints comprise this section: establishing the background and context surrounding the evaluand; defining and describing the evaluand and its composition; identifying the consumers or what Scriven sometimes refers to as "impactees"; uncovering what resources are made available to enable operation; and, finally, what values (needs) ought to be used in the evaluation of the evaluand.

#### **Part C: Subevaluations**

The third section concerns the processes of constructing evaluative claims. Five checkpoints comprise the section: establishing program processes, specifically around the means by which the evaluand achieves intended goals; establishing outcomes; establishing the costs associated with operating the evaluand (which can manifest in different forms, from monetary, nonmonetary, and nonmonetizable costs to direct, indirect, maintenance, and residual costs); comparing observations made of the evaluand to the needs and expectations put forth by consumers; and finally, establishing the extent to which claims can be generalized.

## Part D: Synthesis

The last section concerns the construction of evaluative conclusions and implications stemming from the evaluation inquiry. Five checkpoints comprise the section: advancing a synthesis claim into the overall value of the evaluand; advancing recommendations, explanations, predictions, and redesigns, if appropriate; concerning the evaluand; reporting on the evaluation; and finally, subjecting the evaluation itself to scrutiny by engaging in a meta-evaluation process.

In sum, the four sections of the checklist advance a methodology for conducting a consumer-oriented program. The document that discusses the Key Evaluation Checklist is comprehensive and is freely distributed via the Evaluation Checklist website hosted by Western Michigan University.

## Advantages and Challenges

The primary advantage of the consumer-oriented approach to evaluation is that it produces a comprehensive account and assessment concerning the value of an evaluand. The findings from such evaluations serve an important function in protecting consumer interest, a laudable goal. The benefit of the consumer-oriented evaluation comes from the systematic and comprehensive nature of the approach, which itself is grounded in philosophical arguments concerning the fundamental goal and role of evaluation. The comprehensive nature of the consumer-oriented approach to evaluation also imposes challenges in its execution. Satisfying the approach fully requires a highly competent evaluator and sufficient resources.

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### Further Readings

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