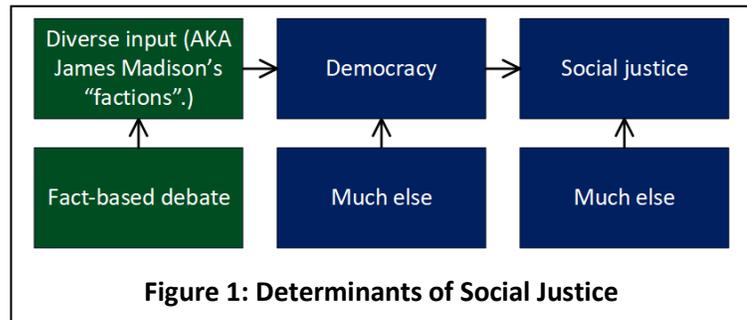


Second Installment: AEA's Potential to Serve the Public Good¹

Evaluation Priorities

What should Evaluation be about? My belief is depicted in the model shown in Figure 1. Social justice requires democracy, and democracy requires fact-based debate that includes diverse input from all groups who have an interest in a societal state of affairs. Obviously, the world is much more complicated than this, but the simple model in Figure 1 presents the



relationships I am working with here. Of course the model is wrong, but it is useful for my present purposes. For anyone interested in a rich discussion of the conditions needed for democracy and social justice, I recommend my go-to source for this kind of information, the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). See their entries on [Democracy](#) and [Justice](#). As for an explanation of the Democracy > Social justice relationship, go to: [Justice and Democracy](#).

The cause of “fact-based debate” is taking quite a beating these days. I think that one of the things Evaluation should be doing is helping to provide facts for debate. Or in the parlance of Stake’s evaluation values, I put a great deal of emphasis on “rationality”.²

As for democracy, I believe that James Madison was right. As I wrote in [another blog post](#): “James Madison saw the United States as a political entity that was suffused with “factions”, or as we might say today, “interest groups”. Madison did not like factions, but he saw them as inevitable, and saw representative government (rather than direct democracy), as a way to keep any one faction from exerting its will on the entire populace. With a diversity of factions, the balance needed for a stable society, and the public good, would be maintained. He did not think that a single, dominant faction was a good idea. That was true in 1788 and it is true today.” Madison did not know about the viability of systems that jointly maximize diverse outcomes, but he had the right idea.

So again in the parlance of Stake’s Evaluation values, I put a great deal of emphasis on “democracy”. As a consequence of my beliefs in fact-based debate as a component of democracy, I also put a great deal of emphasis on a third Stake criteria. “I care about evaluation. I want to see others care about it.” It’s not

¹ Thanks go to Laura Leviton, Bob Williams and several other reviewers for their perceptive critiques of earlier drafts of this post.

² Stake, R. E. (2004). *How far dare an evaluator go toward saving the world?* *American Journal of Evaluation*, 25(1), 103–107. The value list is: 1) I care about the object I’m evaluating 2) I care about evaluation. I want to see others care about it 3) I advocate rationality. 4) I care to be heard. I am troubled if my evaluations are not used. 5) I am distressed by under-privilege. 6) I advocate for a democratic society.

that his other three values are unimportant, but they are not core elements in promoting the democracy that is needed to pursue social justice.

Who are these factions of which I speak? That's a consequential question because it touches on the number of interest groups and the disparity of differences among them. Of late the metaphor of diverging tectonic plates has been cropping up in my imagination. There seems to be so much hardening of positions, and increasing distance between them, that it's hard for me to think in terms of nuance and gradation. But I am making the effort because I am convinced that whatever the hardening and coalescing of positions, there is an overlay consisting of a large and diverse set of positions, for whom "rational information" might matter. A few examples that spring to mind are immigration, pipeline construction, expansion of Medicaid, charter schools, federal regulations, net neutrality, voting by non-citizens, wetlands preservation, R&D funding priorities, over the counter sales of birth control pills, carbon credits, and expansion of high-speed rail. It would be easy to expand the list, but these examples should suffice. Each of these has stakeholders holding a range of opinions that are worthy of respect.

Evaluators, Evaluation, and the American Evaluation Association

I'm about to make some distinctions that cannot hold in the real world, but which have implications for guiding our work. "Evaluators" are people who have their own personal values, and whose behavior is shaped by what they can be paid for, their colleagues, and both the professional and the societal cultures in which they reside.

"Evaluation" is what evaluators do. That varies greatly, but for the most part the work involves working with stakeholders to design models, to develop methodologies to assess those models, and to interpret data in such a way as to meet stakeholders' needs. There is also a good deal of effort to shape what those stakeholders ask for. That's an important activity because we know that the programs that are implemented, and the questions that are asked, are all too frequently not the ones that are most likely to improve the social good.

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) is a professional association to which many evaluators belong. The organization's essential nature is shaped both by the interests of its members, and the environment in which it resides. The [aforementioned blog post](#) goes into this matter in some detail, but suffice it to say, AEA's members have been instrumental in forming a professional association that has considerable influence on what the world thinks that "Evaluation" is.

The upshot is that AEA's position on the nature of Evaluation is a powerful influence on the work that evaluators do, and hence, on how the public perceives the field of Evaluation. So what are the consequences of AEA's positions on the model I depicted in Figure 1? Not sanguine I'm afraid. Read on.

How might the World Perceive AEA?

When I think about the place of Evaluation in society, I like to imagine the questions in Table 1 and the data that might reside in Table 2. Were such data collected over the past few decades, I'm sure that in some cells the scores would always have been low, and most likely, that nothing could have been done to raise them. But I think the scores would have gotten lower over the last five years or so. In any case, it seems to me that although the scores in some cells will never be high, AEA as an organization should place a value on the belief that in an ideal world, scores in all cells should be as high as possible.

From the point of view of Evaluation, is this pattern of data OK? I think it is not OK because I believe the model depicted in Figure 1. It is not OK because too many factions will not trust facts that emanate from the field of Evaluation, and it is not OK that AEA is perceived to support the generation of those untrusted facts.

From the way AEA is acting, I do not think it cares about what the data in Table 2 would look like. What makes me say this? Read all those ballot statements and tell me they are not suffused with contemporary values that are emanating from a small and highly unrepresentative slice of the US population in the early part of the 21st century. I can't speak for the membership of AEA but I do know the values of those who are the products of what the Officer Nominating System of the AEA has produced. I have to believe that what that leadership says reflects both their personal values and their belief that the membership agrees with those values.

A Possible Future

How might one go about figuring out what AEA might do about it? The best I can do is to propose a three-part starting framework: 1) set an end goal, 2) build on AEA's commitment to data for decision making, and 3) assume stakeholder legitimacy.

End goal:

In the various discussions and deliberations that take place within AEA, the consequences of a "social justice" focus should be considered with respect to its implications for diverse stakeholder groups and how the positions of those groups play out in the push and pull of policy making.

The question is not whether AEA should change its course. The question is whether there is awareness of the implications of the choice. As an example, I know advocates of big government who are well aware of the downside of too much government regulation. It might not change their positions but it does temper their thinking at the margins. Or as another example, I have a friend who is a dyed in the wool Conservative who rails at the lack of federal government support of health care. He understands that (very) occasionally, a contrary position is justified.

AEA's commitment to data for decision making

Two of the six of [AEA's end goals](#) are:

- 1.5) Evaluation contributes to increased public understanding of challenging issues and solutions.
- 1.6) The public (government, communities, and the philanthropic sector) understands the value of, engages in, and learns from evaluation.

I'd like to see these goals as explicitly playing a larger role as AEA deliberates what it is and where it should go. These deeply held goals provide a strong foundation to build on.

Assume stakeholder legitimacy

I think that conversations and deliberations within AEA should begin with the assumption that all respondents in the survey described in Tables 1 and 2 are intelligent, well meaning, and desire a good and just society. I would also assume that all respondents have agency and a culture that must be respected. I would assume that their diversity must be respected. I admit that this is a tough case to make because it is not true that respecting all points of view means that we must accord all points of view equal legitimacy. There are many theories of justice and morality that can be invoked to argue against universal

4.669... Evaluation and Planning

12/18/22
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acceptance. Still, I do believe that our society is filled with stakeholders who hold different but defensible positions on a wide range of topics. (See my list above.)

Evaluation can do more good by adopting the starting point I presented in the previous paragraph. So doing would turn us away from a dismissive, judgmental stance. We would come to understand more if we started from the assumption that a framework is legitimate and worthy of respect, than if we began by dismissing it.