



# The logic of evaluation professionalism

Evaluation

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## Abstract

This article draws on the sociological literature to (i) explore the intersection between evaluation and professionalism; (ii) identify the extent to which evaluation fulfills the main attributes of professionalism; (iii) apply logical models of professionalism to the practice of independent and self-evaluation; and (iv) speculate about the future of the discipline. It rests the case for evaluation professionalism on the imperative of occupational self-management without which specialized evaluation knowledge is highly vulnerable to capture by vested interests.

## Keywords

autonomy, credentials, ethics, evaluation, expertise, knowledge, professionalism

The professions dominate our world. They heal our bodies, measure our profits, save our souls. Yet we are deeply ambivalent about them. *Andrew Abbott*

## Introduction

According to Steve Jacob and Yves Boisvert (2010), the intensity of the professionalization debate surges when evaluation has achieved a certain level of maturity, while professionalization actions taken on the ground are shaped by the cultural context and the leadership orientation of the local evaluation community. For example, despite many political obstacles, a ‘long march’ towards professionalization is underway in Quebec, whereas heated doctrinal disputes within the membership of the American Evaluation Association have blocked progress in the USA.

In compiling their literature review, Jacob and Boisvert faced insuperable difficulties in bridging diverse points of view regarding the boundaries of the evaluation discipline, the attributes of professionalism and the balance of costs and benefits of professionalization. Hence they enjoined their readers to judge for themselves whether the pros of professionalism outweigh the cons in their particular circumstances.

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Their agnostic stance regarding professionalism is widespread among evaluation practitioners. It evokes the well established notion that in evaluation as elsewhere ‘all politics is local’.<sup>1</sup> A pragmatic ambivalence as to whether evaluation professionalization is justified or not is also consistent with a major finding of the sociological literature according to which no single sequence of actions holds the key to the transformation of a knowledge occupation into a profession.

Undoubtedly, evaluators in different countries must forge their professional identities through indigenous institutions adapted to local conditions. But evaluation practice world-wide is also affected by an emerging operating environment in which the demand for cross-border evaluations is growing and the evaluation of domestic programmes can no longer ignore global policy changes and external shocks (Chelimsky and Shadish, 1997).

In an increasingly interconnected global system, evaluation internationalization is inevitable. Already the pressure to harmonize evaluation principles and standards across national boundaries has risen and professionalization issues that used to be the privileged province of academics have come to the centre stage of evaluation policy debates within the enlarged European Union and the far flung development evaluation community. Hence it is hardly tenable to keep evading generic questions about the rationale of evaluation professionalism. Is evaluation a profession? If not, should it be?

## What is evaluation?

According to Jacob and Boisvert (2010), a key obstacle to broad based agreement about evaluation professionalization issues lies in the uncertain identity of the discipline. To be sure, different evaluation scholars use different definitions of evaluation. But as for other expert occupations, the lack of a monolithic definition does not undermine the legitimacy of a genuine knowledge-based practice.

Admittedly, each definition displayed in evaluation textbooks fits within a distinctive perspective about the major intent of the function. Some authors concentrate on the experimental tradition of the discipline, for example Rossi et al. (2004) who define evaluation as ‘the systematic, rigorous and meticulous application of scientific methods to assess the design implementation, improvement or outcomes of an activity or a program’.

Others hold the view that the evaluator is merely ‘an educator (whose) success is to be judged by what others learn’ (Cronbach et al., 1980). Closer to the mainstream, Chelimsky and Shadish (1997) stress the normative, proactive and socially useful characteristics of the evaluation discipline and its three-fold mandate:

- *accountability*: to measure results or value for funds expended; to determine costs; to assess efficiency;
- *knowledge creation and dissemination*: to generate insights about public problems, policies, programmes and processes; to develop new methods and to critique old ones; and
- *developmental*: to strengthen institutions; to build agency or organizational capability.

Arguably, therefore, the elasticity of the evaluation term reflects the eclectic, diverse and adaptable character of the evaluator’s craft and does not point towards an existential crisis within the evaluation community. In fact, the diverse definitions of the term articulate alternative answers to the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ questions regarding evaluation<sup>2</sup> rather than the ‘what’ considering that Michael Scriven’s famous and unambiguous formulation (1991) has gathered near universal support

within the evaluation family ('the process of determining the merit, worth or value of things – or the result of that process').

## Evaluation: a profession?

By now evaluation has acquired all the characteristics of a distinct discipline in its own right: it has assembled a body of knowledge, a set of specialized skills and a compendium of ethical guidelines that must be mastered to do what evaluation peers will consider to be good work. Equally, evaluation enjoys trans-disciplinary features that allow it to support other social sciences through a vast repertoire of well honed methods and processes (Scriven, 1991).

Doctrinal conflicts still erupt at the contested boundaries between qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods (Donaldson and Christie, 2005), but the passions evoked by the 'paradigm wars' of the 1980s have largely abated. For example, the skirmishes that recently flared in the development evaluation field were peacefully settled through the good offices of the Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (Leeuw and Vaessen, 2009).

Of course, the standards that guide evaluation practice differ somewhat from country to country given the wide range of cultural environments within which evaluators operate. But the guidelines issued by evaluation associations have much in common. The values espoused by the AEA Guiding Principles (AEA, 2004) resonate across policy documents issued by evaluation networks worldwide (e.g. OECD, 2010). They include a commitment to systematic inquiry and integrity; an abiding respect for diverse peoples and cultures; an eagerness to achieve results; and an unwavering public interest orientation.

This said, the divide of opinion among those regarding evaluation professionally remains wide and deep (Bickman and Reich, 2005). For Michael Patton evaluation is 'a demanding and challenging profession' (Patton, 1990). Ernest House concurs: he views evaluation as a 'new profession' (House, 1993). On the other hand, Lincoln (1985) calls evaluation 'a fledgling profession' while Rossi et al. (2004) opine: 'evaluation is not a profession at all'.

## What then is a profession?

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language a profession is a 'body of qualified persons in a specific occupation or field'. The New Shorter Oxford English dictionary defines a profession as 'a vocation, a calling, esp. one requiring advanced knowledge or training in some branch of learning or science'. In contemporary usage, the term profession has a prosaic, market-oriented meaning: 'any occupation as a means of earning a living'.

Nevertheless, a definite aura remains associated with the term, reflecting late Middle English usage according to which a profession was 'a declaration of belief in and obedience to a religion' or to a 'vow made by a person entering a religious order'. Equally, the prestige accorded to medicine and the law has enhanced the value of the professional label: it evokes special privileges and a franchise to operate with autonomy in the public interest.

*Trait theory* identifies and measures habitual and relatively stable patterns of behavior, thought and emotion. Applied to the study of professions, it postulates that an occupation becomes a profession when members of an occupation group opt to acquire certain traits and respect some behavioral norms, e.g. comply with ethical codes; master a distinct body of knowledge; demonstrate loyalty to colleagues; and achieve agreed quality standards in the conduct of their craft, etc.

Thus, Millerson (1964) identified 23 characteristics of the professions highlighted by 21 authors. The six most frequently mentioned characteristics were: possession of a skill based on theoretical

knowledge; provision of training and education; testing of competence of members; professional organization; adherence to a code of conduct; and altruistic service. From the early 1970s, this descriptive sociological approach gave ground to *control theory* grounded in political analysis and critical examinations of professional groups' self serving claims of altruism, occupational relationships to the labour market, monopoly characteristics and systematic efforts to secure influence over clients.

Nevertheless, the literature of the professions converges on a broad based consensus: the 'professional project' (Macdonald, 1995) sought by knowledge-based groups responds to a rising demand for specialized expertise in modern economies. Given an effective or induced demand for the distinctive knowledge services delivered by the occupational group, success in achieving high professional status is measured by the extent to which *prestige and status* emerges in the division of expert labor.

## The analytical framework

Many cultural, economic and institutional factors intervene in facilitating or hampering ascent to the top tier of the occupational ladder but high professional status is far less likely to materialize if the occupational group has failed to assemble the required assets predicated by trait theory or if it fails to overcome the competitive challenges of other occupational groups as envisaged by control theory. What then should an evaluation professionalization agenda include?

### *Ethical dispositions*

First and foremost, the disposition to work in the public interest is a distinguishing characteristic of professionalism. This is why bankers perceived to have been motivated by greed rather than public service have lost much of their professional status in the wake of the recent financial crisis. But orientation towards ethical service (consistent with the notion of services endowed with public goods characteristics) is not unique to the professions.

Other psychological traits must be added to the list of dispositions frequent among professionals to facilitate the coalescence and coherence of a successful occupational group. Loyalty to the group, commitment to a life-long career, collegial behavior, occupational solidarity and responsibility for the quality of one's work are critical dispositions. While empirical verification of such traits is not straightforward, they are vital dimensions of professionalism and cannot simply be written off as self-serving myths manufactured in order to con a gullible public.

### *Expertise*

Abundant evidence has been adduced by scholars to demonstrate that the ascent of the professions is partly explained by the specialization that characterizes modern and efficient economies (Macdonald, 1995 and Freidson, 2001). Developed economies are those that have been able to invest in human capital by responding to the rising demand for formal training and systematic practice without which complex and strategically important social functions (medicine, the law, accounting, etc.) cannot be performed effectively. Professionalization is also connected to the close relationship between trust, personal welfare and social cohesion. In high trust societies, individual rights are respected, transaction costs are low and professionals are well rewarded.

Since no one would willingly agree to have one's heart surgery performed by a plumber, it makes eminent sense for professional work that involves sensitive and complex tasks that impact

on human security to be performed by selected individuals who have undergone specialized education at the tertiary level followed by substantial exposure to expert practice. In fact, a dominant characteristic that has set professionals apart from ordinary workers relates to the years they have spent in formal education and training. Of course, there are limits to a conception of professionalism predicated on the acquisition of a degree: in a competitive and technologically dynamic economy, education and training are not one-off events.

Keeping abreast of new knowledge and sustaining one's competencies through practice are lifelong endeavors that most professional associations are mandated to nurture. The spread of higher education, the reduced costs and explosive increase in the availability of information, the advent of the internet, etc., have all acted as countervailing influences to hinder the monopoly of knowledge of professionals. On the other hand, the state of the art is advancing rapidly in all knowledge fields so that specialized, cutting edge expertise remains at a premium.

Hence, expertise honed by constant practice remains widely and rightly perceived by sociologists and historians as a common denominator of the professions on the premise that professional work is not 'ordinary' and presumes theoretical and up-to-date knowledge, specialized skills and sound judgment.

### *Professional autonomy*

All contemporary models of professionalism stress the importance of self management and autonomous control over occupational practices. In its ideal form, it is the profession itself that directs all aspects of its governance through controls on recruitment, quality of training, approval of professional guidelines, enforcement of ethical standards, etc. This allows regulation of the supply of professional services, prices and fees.

Professional autonomy helps to tap economies of scale in professional administration and to manage the risks to society involved in weak standards, capture by vested interests or state interference. It implies setting administrative rules, carrying out peer reviews of work quality; disciplining members and in extreme cases stripping them of their designation. These measures can be considered monopolistic within a particular area of expertise. But they are justified by the need to control the market disorder that inevitably prevails when quacks and amateurs are allowed to enter the fray with inevitable consequences: distrust, confusion and poor service quality.

### *Access to the practice*

Professionalism cannot be divorced from the institutionalization of occupational expertise through high quality tertiary education. The critical role that controlled access to the practice can play in the jurisdictional contest among occupational groups is illustrated by the French '*grandes écoles*'. They rely on tough selection and admission policies ruled by nationwide written and oral competitions waged by highly motivated and rigorously selected applicants who have undergone dedicated and intensive preparatory classes. They produce engineers who, unlike their Anglo Saxon colleagues, enjoy an elevated social status that allows them to fill high-ranking civil service posts. This contrasts with the lowly status of graduates from an inclusive, democratic but ultimately unwieldy university system that is mandated to enroll any applicant armed with a high school degree.

Not all professional cadres can endure the rigorous regimes of meritocratic systems. The potential restrictions over access to a professional practice can be modulated over a wide range. *Designation* is earned by a person qualified to perform a job or task by a professional body acting to safeguard

the public interest. *Credentialing* confirms proof of completion of specified training and experience requirements. *Certification* testifies to the basic knowledge, skills and experience required to carry out professional work. *Licensing* implies legal control over the ability to practice including the power to remove the license if professional standards are not being adhered to.

The rationale for such controls lies in managing the risks faced by users when selecting professional experts through personal contacts, word-of-mouth testimonials or trial employment. To reduce these transaction costs and limit the prohibitive risks of professional malpractice, control over entry by professional associations and/or accredited academic establishments are intended to enhance service quality and facilitate consumers' choice of service providers.

### *The analytical framework*

In summary, based both on experience and on theory, the indicators listed below emerge as serviceable criteria for the assessment of the professionalism of a distinct occupational group. While they do not amount to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that guarantee success in the competitive occupational market place, they constitute a well-documented list of traits that can inform the strategy of any occupational association intent on exercising more influence in society through collective means:

- (i) *Prestige and status* (high and rising demand for services; substantial monetary rewards, respectability and a recognized place in the upper regions of the occupational ladder);
- (ii) *Ethical dispositions* (orientation towards the public interest, loyalty to the occupational group; commitment to a life-long career, collegial behavior, occupational solidarity; responsibility for the quality of one's work);
- (iii) *Expertise* (high quality education; exposure to practice, theoretical knowledge, specialized skills, sound judgment, mastery of techniques);
- (iv) *Professional autonomy* (controls on recruitment, training, professional guidelines, ethical standards, administrative rules, quality assurance; disciplinary processes);
- (v) *Credentials* (degree from accredited tertiary education establishment; professional designation; tested performance; membership in professional associations).

### **Is evaluation a profession?**

Armed with the above assessment framework it is now possible to tackle the first question raised at the outset of this article: is evaluation a profession? Without reference to an explicit set of criteria the answer was far from self evident: the lack of a common assessment framework explains the diverging assessments of the status of evaluation as a profession among evaluation luminaries.

To facilitate the advent of a consensus, based on the above supply side traits (even though they are not, to repeat, in and by themselves necessary or sufficient to lead to a privileged status in the organization of expert labor) a concise and admittedly somewhat impressionistic review of the extent to which evaluation can be viewed as a profession is presented below. While prestige and status are outcome indicators, they are relevant to the design and implementation of competitive occupational strategies since they help to measure success.

#### *Prestige and status*

From this perspective, in terms of its social and economic status, evaluation has not climbed very high on the totem pole of occupational groups. The public at large is often unclear about the nature

of the evaluation discipline. The jurisdictional boundaries between evaluation, auditing, inspection and social research are perceived to be fuzzy. According to Rossi and his colleagues 'the common labeling of persons as evaluators or evaluation researchers conceals the heterogeneity, diversity and amorphousness of the field (and) . . . few people in evaluation have achieved responsible posts and rewards by working their way up from lowly jobs in evaluation units' (2004).

Size does not always matter in assessing the success of an occupational group. But in a competitive labour market it is a critical variable when demand is outstripping the supply of services and neighbouring occupations offer themselves to fill the gap. This is where the evaluation industry stands today. The growth in demand is sustained by a widespread and chronic public dissatisfaction with large formal institutions. Furthermore, evaluators face competition with management consultants, auditing firms and social researchers who sport their own occupational designation and do not necessarily subscribe to the ethical tenets and quality guidelines of the evaluation discipline.

In 2000, each the big five accounting, auditing and consulting firms in the USA averaged 100,000 professionals. Together this professional group is at least ten times larger than the number of US evaluators working on a part-time or full-time basis (Rossi et al., 2004). No evaluation association outside the USA has yet to achieve a membership of 500 and the American Evaluation Association, the oldest and largest, had 5600 members in 2007. This compares to 240,000 members for the American Medical Association. Thus, the supply of qualified evaluators will need to be enhanced to achieve a critical mass in the competition with other occupational groups.

Another labor market indicator (monetary rewards) points in the same direction. Evaluators do not often command high fees. As a result, many teach and/or work as consultants in policy research establishments and they devote only a fraction of their time to bona fide evaluation assignments. Most do not have advanced degrees in evaluation. More often than not, they bear another professional designation (economist, sociologist, psychologist, teacher, adviser, consultant, etc.).

Finally, the prestige of evaluators is marred by widespread perceptions of uneven quality that are damaging the evaluation brand: accordingly and unsurprisingly, evaluation commissioners that responded to the European Evaluation Society survey were the keenest supporters of credentialing for evaluators (<http://www.europeanevaluation.org/about-ees/activity-streams/survey-competencies.htm>).

### *Ethical dispositions*

As noted at the outset, orientation towards the public interest is widespread among evaluators. This is the thrust of all evaluation guidelines endorsed by evaluation associations and it is a frequent leitmotif of evaluation textbooks. Based on admittedly personal and subjective observations that span social science professionals and evaluators, the latter rank relatively high in terms of such ethical dispositions as their loyalty to the occupational group; their commitment to a life-long career (if they can afford it); their collegial behavior; and their commitment to quality and self improvement. This precious asset has been nurtured by all evaluation associations.

### *Expertise*

Exposure to expert practice is improving and there is a vast and growing literature that can be readily tapped to enhance the theoretical knowledge and the mastery of techniques of evaluators. Professional training opportunities are expanding even though the number of graduate programmes in the evaluation domain is limited especially in elite universities. However, as an applied interdisciplinary endeavor, evaluation lacks stability and clout within academic establishments. This

is why evaluation training has moved towards the professional schools and unfortunately, to quote Rossi and his colleagues once again ‘both faculty and students in professional schools are viewed as second class citizens by those located in social science departments’ (2004).

### *Autonomy*

While in some public and international institutions evaluation is managed autonomously with adequate controls on recruitment, training, professional guidelines, ethical standards, administrative rules, quality assurance and disciplinary processes the situation is quite different for the evaluation occupation as a whole. Commissioners and evaluation managers are not always punctilious in protecting the integrity of evaluation processes. Evaluation guidelines are not mandatory. They rarely specify the vital need for independence and transparency in evaluation governance. Evaluation standards have not been harmonized across sectors or across national borders. Major suppliers of evaluation services are not specialized. Within the civil society most evaluators are freelance operators who are fee dependent and inadequately protected from intimidation and pressure.

### *Credentials*

Currently qualified evaluation practitioners are not always able to hold out against unqualified competitors from other disciplines. Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the evaluation jargon can pretend to be an evaluator. The competencies debate remains inconclusive. Even accreditation of evaluation training programmes has yet to be a common practice. Except for Canada, progress towards designation or certification of evaluators has proceeded at a snail’s pace. Evaluation associations are open to any individual or group willing to pay the fee.

### *A fledgling profession*

In sum, given the decidedly mixed ratings that emerge from this overview of evaluation’s standing relative to the traits commonly associated with the established professions, we can conclude that Rossi et al. (2004) are correct in their assertion that evaluation is not a profession. But this does not mean that evaluation should not (or will not) become a profession. This is presaged by Patton (1990) and House’s (1993) joint perception that evaluation enjoys many of the assets required of a profession. On balance, Lincoln (1985) may well be hitting the nail on the head when she detects a definite trend towards professionalization and characterizes evaluation as a fledgling profession.

## **The logic of professionalism**

Whether the trend towards professionalization should be encouraged remains a contentious policy issue: the general loss of public confidence in professionalization has not spared evaluation. Going beyond the traditional sociological study of the profession, some postmodern theorists have challenged the positivist, self-serving model of professionalism. They have heaped ridicule on the ‘noblesse oblige’ nostalgia of a professional culture redolent of the time when expert occupations were handled by the aristocratic class.

Specifically, they have argued that elite domination and hegemony rather than collegiality and trust are hallmarks of the professions. In particular, they have interpreted controls over entry and

knowledge as ways of enhancing the economic interests of professionals. Without doubt the association between knowledge and influence and the occupational control of work are core issues that need systematic and unbiased examination. The result is a balanced diagnostic that shows that the institutions of professionalism benefit a particular group of trained knowledge workers but also constitute a social venture aimed at learning, advancing and practicing a body of expert knowledge in the public interest.

In order to analyze the links between power and the professions, Eliot Freidson (2001) sketched three alternative models of knowledge production. Under the first model, specialized workers are controlled by fully informed, rational consumers highly motivated to seek quality knowledge services at minimum cost. In this ideal world, dear to neo-classical economists, the hidden hand of competitive market forces generates optimum social outcomes.

The second model inspired by Max Weber's (1978) ideal-type of the effective bureaucracy has spawned a vast public and business administration literature. Predicated on hierarchy, discipline and internal market incentives, it too is widely alleged to generate felicitous societal outcomes through an elaborate system of rules that governs who can be employed to do narrowly defined jobs; that standardizes the production and distribution process; and that delivers high quality knowledge goods in a planned and efficient manner, etc.

The third model is animated by the logic of professionalism. It features knowledge workers who are dedicated to the generation of high quality products that benefit others. Professionals are empowered by society to control all facets of their occupation, i.e. organize admission into their ranks, define the competencies required to do particular jobs, supervise knowledge production processes, maintain quality standards, etc. Here too, the ideal-typical model of knowledge production and distribution is deemed to produce economically and socially desirable outcomes.

Of course, all three models are abstractions. They are only meant to serve a heuristic purpose. In the real world, the first model of unregulated markets is prone to failure given information asymmetries, fraud, collusion and environmental externalities. Furthermore, principal-agent problems, dilemmas of collective action and transaction costs hinder the actual functioning of the public and private bureaucracy model.

Even so, the market model has been exceptionally influential in highlighting the potentially bracing effects of competition and the alleged costs of exclusionary devices and monopolistic practices associated with professionalism. Similarly, organization and management specialists have come up with persuasive theories of the firm that have reified the leadership role of chief operating officers, promoted the use of internal market incentives and downgraded the importance of professional autonomy and judgment.

By contrast, the compelling logic of the professionalism model has yet to make its mark and capture the attention of policy makers even though it is far better adapted to the reality of specialized expert work. Neither the market model nor the bureaucracy model are well adapted to professional activities grounded in advanced knowledge: motivated by the public interest rather than profit maximization; characterized by the exercise of professional discretion and judgment; and distinguished by a focus on service quality rather than narrow efficiency considerations.

Evaluation illustrates these propositions. It provides a useful test for Freidson's (1970, 1986, 1994, 2001) logic of professionalism since it is emblematic of an expert occupation that embodies civic values, ethical guidelines and a shared understanding of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that underlie quality work while promoting good practices through guidelines that have garnered substantial support among practitioners precisely because they have avoided methodological straitjackets or promoted compulsory adherence to rigid doctrines.

## Evaluation autonomy

The status of any expert occupation is best understood in terms of the sources of power and authority over the definition and control over specialized knowledge work. This equation is defined by the nature of the consumer, the characteristics of the producer-consumer relationship and the conditions of access to the practice. Unless it is self-managed, a knowledge occupation interacts with consumers either directly through market exchanges or through the mediation of an organization or firm. The organization and direction of evaluation work is no exception.

To appreciate the implications of alternative means of occupational control over the evaluation function it is important to clarify the nature of evaluation products. They are quintessential public goods. Accordingly, evaluation costs are normally classified as organizational or social overhead items since funding for evaluation cannot normally be secured through variable fees targeted to individual beneficiaries. This contrasts with the fee-based character of such established professions as medicine or the law that legitimately serve individual consumer needs as well as benefit the society at large so that cost recovery from individual beneficiaries is feasible. In such cases price elasticity is a standard feature of the demand for professional services even in cases where socialized service provision is the preferred option.

Thus, more than in other knowledge domains, evaluation 'consumers' form part of a large, heterogeneous and unorganized group encompassing diverse interests. In turn this means that except for consumer product evaluations (or for evaluation activities geared to the empowerment of an organized interest group) it is impractical to conceive of an effective market-based model of policy and programme evaluation that would cede primary control of the evaluation function to its ultimate beneficiaries – the citizenry.

Nor would independent evaluators be credible if they opted to abdicate control over their practices and processes to the very private firms and/or the state agencies which they are tasked to assess in the public interest. Indeed, for evaluation purists the fundamental mission of independent evaluation is to 'speak truth to power'. **From this perspective the benefits yielded by evaluation are largely negated if the institutional framework facilitates their capture by powerful individuals or narrow interest groups.** One may therefore infer, based on Freidson's compelling paradigm of the professions, that the logic of evaluation independence inevitably implies evaluation professionalism.

## Evaluation in the real world

Yet, in the real world of evaluation practice evaluators do not usually enjoy the autonomous status enjoyed by the well-established professions, including such occupations as auditing that increasingly deliver evaluation services under the label of 'value for money' or 'comprehensive' auditing. While evaluators in government are frequently called upon to fulfill statutory responsibilities on behalf of the executive and/or the legislative branches, they are not always protected from external influence in the performance of their functions.

Similarly, evaluators housed within private and voluntary organizations enjoy significant autonomy only if they operate under the aegis of strong and independent boards of directors or trustees. More often than not they are subservient to senior executives who conceive of evaluation as a tool of programme management and may even tend to equate evaluation with monitoring. Finally, in the civil society most evaluators act as fee dependent consultants.

The practice of evaluation consulting is circumscribed by the specifications that commissioners impose through bidding processes and contractual arrangements. These do not always ensure the

standards of transparency and independence that is taken for granted within the territory of recognized professions. Absent agreed standards of independence and without the authority to govern the behavior of its members, evaluators have yet to exert professional autonomy and control over their own expert occupation.

## Self evaluation

What distinguishes evaluation from neighboring disciplines is its unique role in bridging social science theory and policy practice. By focusing on whether a policy, a programme or project is working or not (and unearthing the reasons why by attributing outcomes) evaluation acts as a transmission belt between the academy and the policy-making world. In order to achieve results, utilization-oriented evaluators have frequently adjusted their practices to accommodate the powerful. The resulting adaptability has come at a price: frequent compromises with respect to the autonomy of evaluation practice.

Partial autonomy of the evaluation discipline is often justified by the practical necessity of cooperation between evaluation practitioners and evaluation patrons who wield superior authority within the organization and control vast resources. Since a chilling effect may result from the adversary stance typically associated with independent evaluation, constraints on evaluation processes are often accepted with a view to resolve the tension between the use of evaluation for accountability and its potential contribution to lesson-learning.

Hence, many evaluators acquiesce to managerial oversight over evaluation. They are either housed or contracted to perform evaluations within a patronage model of occupational control (Johnson, 1972). Submission to hierarchical influence is the distinguishing characteristic of self-evaluation. Frequently combined with monitoring, its main object is to improve the workings of the organization or to enhance the beneficial impact of a programme. Self-evaluation does not preclude virtuosity in the use of evaluation techniques. Conscientiously implemented it can yield wholesome benefits not only to the employing entity but also to the society at large. But certain explicit or tacit boundaries cannot be crossed, e.g. with respect to the dissemination of highly critical findings.

This is in line with the oligarchic and/or corporate management of expert occupations which arises when the main demand for services originates from a rich and powerful entity that is unchallenged by other centers of power and influence. Under patronage, recruitment of knowledge specialists is limited to individuals who evince a disposition to protect the basic interests of the employing entity and share the values of the patron. Within well-delineated parameters autonomy is provided so that consistently good quality work can be performed but self evaluation rarely challenges the status quo.

## Mediation

The three contrasting logics of occupational control described by Freidson (2001) are shaped by the interaction between the state, the market, and the civil society (within which the autonomous professions are embedded). The reality of the evaluation business today can best be appreciated by acknowledging that various admixtures of control over evaluation work co-exist. For example, independent evaluation can be may be a form of mediation between a firm committed to corporate social responsibility and its stakeholders.

Similarly, independent evaluation in such organizations as the World Bank may set norms for self evaluation of public policies, programmes and projects along with objective verification of

evaluation findings thus ensuring that evaluation independence is not isolation – a constructive relationship akin to the interface between accounting and auditing. Such hybrid institutional arrangements can help to nurture a learning environment through principled protocols of interaction between independent oversight and corporate management in the public and corporate sectors.

More generally, social learning implies a creative and constructive tension between the managers of social programmes and a self-regulated evaluation profession. This potential synergy is the main reason why professional autonomy would greatly facilitate organizational and social learning. Thus, self-management of independent evaluation emerges as a major contributor to excellence and independence in evaluation practice.

## Professionalization

Through comparative and historical study, Andrew Abbott, has examined the system of professions as a whole to build a general theory of how professionalization tends to occur, i.e. how occupational groups controlling expert knowledge achieved their power. While he discovered no single pattern of professional development, he demonstrated that professions in a modern society construct themselves by forging links between their distinctive occupation and the work they do – a relationship which he calls jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988).

Abbott's empirical investigations confirm that there is no 'immaculate conception' in the birth of a profession. His case studies show that professionalization is driven by the collective exertions of a cohesive occupational group competing in the public arena. The groups that prevail are able to solidify their hold on prestige and privilege. Thus, medicine triumphed over homeopathy. Psychiatry took over the terrain of personal relationships previously occupied by the clergy. Finally, accountants were able to expand their jurisdiction from bankruptcy to auditing, cost accounting and management services.

In turn, occupational groups that faltered became subservient to a dominant group or left the stage. For example, in private corporations, architects and engineers lost ground to the business school graduates who now manage them. Itinerant entertainers have been decimated by the centralization of entertainment through the mass-media specialists. Psychological mediums who professed a capacity to connect clients with their dead relatives flourished in the late 19th century by securing all the attributes of a professional group – training, learned societies, regulation, etc. – but they were eventually discredited.

This latter example confirms that just because successful cases of professionalization display certain attributes does not imply that acquiring them is sufficient to achieve professional status. Even a determined and cohesive group that complies with the standard traits of professionalism may fail to achieve prestigious professional status.

The dynamics of complex, interconnected and technologically driven labor markets can defeat even a determined and cohesive occupational group. On the other hand, when demand for the services of an occupational group is rising (as it is with respect to evaluation) the supply side characteristics of the professions come into their own and these characteristics can only be acquired through purposeful self-management by the occupational group.

Of course, shrewd competitive behavior is not always enough to achieve a prominent status in the labor force hierarchy. Validity of knowledge claims, ethical behavior and civic responsibility also matter. Successful professions invariably secure the enhancement of their group's economic and social status by delivering worthwhile services and by displaying commitment to the public interest. These imperatives are synergistic since the sustainability of an expert group's privileged status ultimately depends on the value that the society places on the services rendered by the group.

Without doubt evaluation professionalization would benefit evaluators as a group. This is the implicit conclusion of Jacob and Boisvert (2010) who visualized professionalization strengthening the field, enhancing evaluation training, increasing the prestige of evaluators, improving evaluation quality, protecting the public and discouraging problematic behavior while the generic risks (restricted methodological diversity, rigidly standardized training, blocked access to talented practitioners, putting the interests of evaluators ahead over those of its clients) seem readily manageable.

Excluded from their analysis and worth emphasizing once again is the wholesome impact that professional autonomy would also have on the quality of evaluations and the utilization of their findings through the mediation roles of independent evaluation sketched above.

## **Will evaluation become a profession?**

In the industrial world, the demands of international trade have encouraged the adoption of common quality standards. Similarly, the internationalization of evaluation is calling for a convergence of views regarding the prerequisites of good evaluation practice. The advent of national, regional and transnational associations interconnected on a global scale through the new information and communications technologies is contributing to this process. On both sides of the Atlantic and in the zones of turmoil and transition of the developing world aspiration towards a recognized professional culture is sweeping the evaluation community.

Within specific cultural and institutional contexts, progress has been made in defining ethical norms and principles. Indeed, at the national and regional level and within particular branches of the discipline (e.g. education, development cooperation, etc.) evaluation guidelines have garnered substantial support among practitioners precisely because they have not been too detailed and have avoided methodological straitjackets or adherence to narrow doctrines.

In the 'post-paradigm war' era, these promising developments suggest that the debate about competencies currently underway in many evaluation societies could also lead to improved and harmonized practices with respect to evaluation training, management and commissioning of evaluations in ways that are respectful of cultural differences and adaptable to diverse institutional contexts. In brief, evaluation is coming of age as a cohesive expert occupation (Russ-Eft et al., 2008).

The past is not necessarily prologue; further progress will not be rapid since the process needed to secure a principled consensus should be democratic and inclusive and current trends may not be sustained. Under the veil of cooperative endeavors connecting evaluation, the social science disciplines and the well established auditing and consultancy professions a muted jurisdictional competition is underway so that the future economic and social status of the evaluation occupation remains in doubt. Depending on its strategy and tactics the evaluation occupation may win or lose the covert jurisdictional contest currently unfolding.

How will evaluation fare over the long-run? Will evaluators become to the auditing profession what osteopaths have become to medical doctors? Not necessarily. Evaluation is better adapted to the assessment of public policies and social programmes and it enjoys many strengths and assets (including ethical guidelines and a well stocked tool kit). These advantages could yet propel evaluation to a high position in the professional ladder given the obvious need for enhanced accountability and learning in the design and implementation of public policies and social programmes.

But many obstacles will have to be overcome. Evaluation is only one of the occupations that regulate the affairs of society. The accounting and auditing professions, the legal profession and the vast armies of social scientists working in research and advisory firms exercise considerable market power. Being still in its formative stage, evaluation wields far less influence than these well entrenched disciplines and, given its mandate, evaluation is vulnerable to direct or cognitive

capture by powerful interests. One subtle way of controlling evaluators has been to equate evaluation with monitoring, inspection, auditing, policy-based evidence, etc. and to downplay the independence criterion that is critical to the integrity of summative evaluation and its accountability dimension.

A competitive advantage of evaluators consists in their well established capacity to assess professional performance, including their own. These assets might be used to evaluate other disciplines – just as auditors do when attesting to the quality of work carried out by accountants. But exercising this potential lever of influence may lead to discomfort among competing knowledge occupations, especially those (public administration, political science, economics, etc.) that help in the design and oversight of public policies, social programmes and regulatory initiatives. Of course, the state may well opt to use evaluation to regulate the professions. But lacking statutory protections for evaluators, such an alliance might facilitate state capture of the discipline.

Finally, both among the social research professions and in state bureaucracies the urge for self preservation will continue to induce overt as well as covert resistance to the rise of evaluation as an influential profession. Evaluators ‘the new kids on the block’ of the policy establishment will have to display ‘street smarts’ to improve their competitive posture in order to protect the public interest through independence and excellence in evaluation practice and principled collaboration with like minded partners in government, the social sciences and the consulting profession.

### **Should evaluation become a profession?**

From a public welfare perspective is this game worth the candle? Vigorous professions flourish in liberal democracies. The professions have been associated with the growth of modern economies and have facilitated effective internal governance of expert work. In judicious combinations and in appropriate balance the attributes of professionalism identified above have delivered substantial net benefits in such sectors as public health, education and commerce.

In the public sector, the professions contribute to the devolution of power to the lowest efficient level of governance (*subsidiarity*). Without strong professions there would be no useful counterweights to the expanding power of the state, the petty tyrannies of private vested interests and the encroaching bureaucracies of contemporary societies.

Evaluation could spread these benefits to the entire public policy apparatus. As a profession focused on transparency and accountability, it could play a far more influential role in leveling the playing field of politics on behalf of the most disadvantaged segments of society. Should evaluation aim to become a profession? The answer to this question hinges on the extent to which the evaluation community proves able to manage the risks associated with professionalization.

Pressing economic needs for advanced expertise have not eliminated public opposition to professionalization in general and evaluation professionalization in particular. Popular opposition to professionalism is partly due to distaste for elitism in democratic societies. It is also undeniable that the division of labor and the need for expertise that explain the continued grip of the professions over modern societies has undermined the self reliance ethos associated with traditional cultures. Indeed, a widespread nostalgia for the idyllic imagined communities of the past underlies the post modern backlash against professionalism.

Nor is the backlash against the professions that has materialized in recent years altogether irrational. Poorly administered professionalization has imposed inconvenience and costs to consumers. Critics of professionalization note the disabling and disempowering effect on non-specialists created by excessive dependence on professionals. They also stress that specialization has narrowed and limited the potential of professionals to fulfill their own human potential outside their own specialties. Finally, there is ample evidence that excessive professional power can corrupt.

Professional certification processes are neither cost free nor exempt from risk. Accurate assessments of professional competencies can be expensive and unreliable. In some instances, the ethical dispositions advertised by professional guilds are mere window dressing. Emphasis on formal education may lead to the 'trained incapacity' of professionals (Merton, 1957). Premature moves towards designation or certification could do more harm than good and this explains why two thirds of the evaluation practitioners surveyed by the European Evaluation Society consider that this is not a priority for the discipline at this time.

## Weighing the pros and cons

All of these downside risks need to be acknowledged and tackled so that professionalization can generate substantial net benefits not only to the professional class itself but also to the society at large. Specifically, for professionalism to contribute to society, professional authority must be restrained by responsibility. The prestige and status accorded a profession is a function of ethical dispositions, expert knowledge, self-governing characteristics and guarantees of quality service often sought through accreditation/certification arrangements. Transparency, oversight and participation are central to effective professional governance.

In sum, risks and rewards co-exist in all the attributes of professionalism identified above. They only produce adequate, high quality and effective professional services if a sound balance is struck between political autonomy, economic incentives and social safeguards. Hence, the institutionalization of an expert occupational group such as evaluation calls for tailor-made design within specific institutional contexts.

Evaluation is not a profession today but it could be in process of becoming one. Much remains to be done to trigger the latent energies of evaluators, promote their expertise, protect the integrity of their practice and forge effective alliances with well wishers in government, the private sector and the civil society. It will take strong and shrewd leadership within the evaluation associations to strike the right balance between autonomy and responsiveness, quality and inclusion, influence and accountability.

## Notes

1. As quipped by Tip O'Neill, the former and legendary US Speaker of the House.
2. Definitions are often framed to buttress particular theories – an extrapolation of Wittgenstein's proposition that '*the meaning of a word is its use in language*'.

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