

Tessie Catsambas

The value of applying appreciative and positive approaches to evaluation

Many scientists believe that the “scientific way” must be “unbiased” worrying that Albert Hirschman’s bias for hope is unscientific. In the last 20 years, however, evaluators and scientists have been developing and incorporating approaches that aim to empower evaluation participants shifting the locus of power from “expert evaluators and scientists” to “program participants” and uncovering the shortcomings of the scientific paradigm, and demystifying evaluation for all those involved. These newer approaches have had strong elements of “human-centered design” focusing on the process and experience of evaluation participants, recognizing that evaluation design and implementation needs to invite participants to share openly, and that evaluation needs to include both structure and flexibility to engage participants and adjust to iterative learning. The application of Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology approaches to evaluation invite participants to have honest and constructive conversations about their work and experience; focusing on what matters to them, and with the support of evaluation experts, participants write the story of their past in ways that uncover exciting possibilities for the future.

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Further evidence of the attention to the evaluation that engages and serves people is the effort of several development agencies to continuously improve the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the evaluations they fund, and to ensure that their evaluations promote the values of their organizations. In 2014 blog, Caroline Heider, Director General of the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), made the argument that we need to be ensuring value-for-money evaluations. Following a critical review of the World Bank’s independent evaluation function, in 2016, the IEG embarked in an effort to improve its engagement of program managers and implementers in a collaborative review of findings and recommendations. This was an important shift in the IEG’s policy; it had been a point of pride and independence to conduct its analysis and building of recommendations behind closed doors without involvement of any participants.

Thus, in spite of resistance from some quarters, there is evidence that this positive, human-centered design to evaluation is becoming the new dominant paradigm, even though the literature has not yet caught up. A review of new and emerging evaluation standards and competencies around the world demonstrates a convergence; the expectations of a good evaluation are getting closer to Hirschman’s hope that “intellectual imagination may unlock sweeping possibilities.” Hirschman believed that “by finding seems in even the most impregnable structures, one might create openings and prospective alternatives.” Appreciative and positive approaches to evaluation have found those seems in the previously thought impregnable assumptions of scientific superiority that centralized control and remained unconcerned about the human experience and the needs of evaluation clients and participants. And in breaching those seems, appreciative and positive approaches are making significant contributions to the future of the evaluation profession.