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CONDUCTING QUALITY EVALUATIONS: FOUR GENERATIONS OF META-EVALUATION

Abstract
At the end of the 1960s, Michael Scriven coined the concept of meta-evaluation. In the strictest sense of the term, a meta-evaluation is the evaluation of an evaluation. From a theoretical point of view, it can be used to assess the value of one or more evaluations. In a practical sense, it helps the planning of evaluations. Thanks to its increasingly widespread use, meta-evaluation has emerged as a method of quality assurance for evaluations. To meet the requirement for quality, more and more summative and formative meta-evaluations have been conducted and published over the last twenty years by both evaluators and scholars. This article includes a theoretical overview of meta-evaluation and reviews its foundations, methods, practices, and objects.

Introduction

Evaluation, as an applied science, entails a perpetual quest for improvement, as evaluators seek the codes and instruments that will allow them to ensure the quality and validity of their conclusions and recommendations. Given the range of evaluation objectives, a number of quality issues are present. First, the evaluation must centre on a specific need for information. Second, it must lead to a judgment on public actions that is based on explicit criteria. Third, it must generate useful, evidence-based recommendations. And last, it must provide information as an input for the decision-making process. As a result, the literature on evaluation quality is rich and constantly evolving. It outlines four evaluation quality assurance approaches. The first is the structural approach developed by Schwartz and Mayne (2005), which involves the elaboration of standards and other directing principles to orient evaluative practice. The second is the systemic approach, which consists of ensuring the reliability of information collection mechanisms during the evaluative process (Bornmann *et al.* 2006). Third, unlike the systemic approach which focuses on the information collection system, the formative approach allows evaluators to ensure the quality of the information at the time of its collection and production. Fourth, the summative approach is similar to the formative approach in the sense that it also concentrates on information quality, but only once it has been produced (Daigneault 2008). These different approaches use precise instruments for their operationalization. One of the methods which allows evaluators to link together several quality assurance approaches is without doubt meta-evaluation.

Meta-evaluation, also referred to as "second-level evaluation", is an application of the formative and summative quality assurance approaches (Daigneault 2008) because it allows evaluators to ensure, both before and after an evaluation, the quality of their work. Also, meta-evaluation mobilizes instruments such as standards and directing principles for its implementation. In this way, it may appear to be a structural approach.

The origin of the term "meta-evaluation" is attributed to Michael Scriven and dates back to the 1960s (Cook 1978; Reineke and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007; Stufflebeam 2001a; 2011). Meta-evaluation is defined as being the evaluation of the evaluation and indirectly of the evaluator (Scriven 1991). In an editorial entitled *Meta-Evaluation Revisited*, Scriven explains, "I published my first article about 'meta-evaluation' (Scriven 1969), a term I had invented somewhat earlier in a report to the Urban Institute, who had asked me for help in dealing with the non-comparability of the evaluations they had commissioned for several housing projects" (Scriven 2009, p. iii). The main rationale for the existence of meta-evaluation is to respond to criticisms and concerns about the value of evaluations. Reineke and Welch (1986) find expectations on the subject of meta-evaluation in Stufflebeam's writings. On the one hand, evaluators are increasingly required to demonstrate the quality of their work; on the other hand, it is fitting that they should evaluate their own work. Meta-evaluation allows evaluators to meet this double expectation.

Despite the simplicity of the concept's definition, the operationalization of meta-evaluation has taken place in several stages, and has included the development of several tools for its implementation and several theoretical approaches for its analysis. Nevertheless, it seems essential to develop characteristics common to the profession to better determine the issues of meta-evaluation (Cooksy and Caracelli 2008) which is now presented by several authors as a professional obligation (Hanssen *et al.* 2008; Jacob and Boisvert 2010; Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007; Stufflebeam 2011). When we speak of meta-evaluation, three recurrent questions emerge:

- (i) exactly what it is,
- (ii) how it can be justified, and
- (iii) when and how it should be used (Scriven 2009 p. iii).

Based on a review of the literature, our research will attempt to answer these questions. The objective of this exploratory study is to describe meta-evaluative practice.

A systematic review was used to create an inventory of relevant publications. For the purposes of our research, we explored the Ariane 2.0 Article Search database (the research interface at the Université Laval library), the Web of Science (1990-2013), the Worldwide Political Science Abstracts (1975-2013), the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (1951-2013) and PAIS International (1972-2013). We identified publications which evaluated the quality of evaluations using meta-evaluation as their method. In all, 28 articles were selected for the research project. The second author of this study, under the supervision of the first, read the publications based on the keywords and the abstracts of the various documents identified in order to select those which were truly adapted to the research objective.

With respect to the data and its analysis, the selected articles were read by the second author to exhaustively identify and extract the elements listed in the reading grid. Two readings of each article helped the authors to fill the grid. Generally, the second author

systematically copied the passages of articles which allowed him to complete the various sections of the grid. When the grids were completed, they were validated by the first author to ensure that the results were checked for reliability.

In the following sections, we will present the epistemological foundations for meta-evaluation, and will then describe the aims and theoretical approaches of meta-evaluation, along with the types of meta-evaluation associated with the evaluation management cycle. Last, we will discuss the four generations of meta-evaluation.

1. *Epistemological foundation of meta-evaluation*

More than just the evaluation of evaluation (in the sense of a match between the objectives and results of the evaluation), meta-evaluation is perceived as an evaluation of the quality of an evaluation (concerning the objectives, the evaluation process, and the results and use of the evaluation, etc.)(Chapman 2012; Jacob and Desautels 2014; Patel 2002; Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam 2001a). In fact, evaluation quality is a professional requirement, in terms of the technical production aspects of the evaluation (methodological rigour, coherence between the different phases, justification of the conclusions, etc.). This requirement acquires extra meaning when the key concern of evaluation use is considered. The quality of the evaluation is also an ethical requirement for the evaluator, personally, and for all the participants in the evaluation (Desautels and Jacob 2012). Evaluators must ensure that they act in accordance with their responsibilities, and with the highest respect for all the involved stakeholders. It is finally a corporatist requirement because the evaluator accomplishes his mission in view of the rules and codes which regulate the profession. Extending the idea of evaluation quality, Stufflebeam (2001a) refines the concept of meta-evaluation and defines it "as a procedure for describing an evaluation activity and judging it against a set of ideas concerning what constitutes good evaluation" (p. 134). This definition refers to the characteristics of a good evaluation which we find in the Standards for Educational Evaluation of the Joint Committee (1981; 1988; 1994; 2003; 2011) and the directing principles of several professional associations (American Evaluation Association [AEA] 1995; 2003; Société suisse d'évaluation [SEVAL] 2000; Société canadienne d'Évaluation [SCE] 2012; etc.). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) provide the most explicit definition of the concept by reaffirming the necessity of a good evaluation as an ethical principle and a professional obligation. According to these authors, "meta-evaluation is defined […] as the process of delineating, obtaining, and applying descriptive information and judgmental information – about pertinent criteria – including the evaluand's utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy and its systematic nature, competent execution, integrity, respectfulness, and social responsibility – in order to guide the evaluation and report its strengths and weaknesses" (p. 651). From the perspective of this definition, it is possible to identify the characteristics of the concept of "meta-evaluation". These characteristics revolve around its aims, its theoretical approaches, its criteria of analysis, its practices and its object, making it possible to answer the three principal questions relative to meta-evaluation outlined above.

2. *Aims of meta-evaluation*

Meta-evaluation is found in the register of evaluation practices for reasons of accountability (normative aim) and decision-making (instrumental aim) (Coosky and Caracelli 2005; Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam 2001a; 2011). Accountability concerns the evaluator. Meta-evaluation is a method of self-evaluation for the evaluator. It helps to improve evaluators' practices because it allows them to look retrospectively on their own actions so as to improve their practices (Cook 1978; Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam 2011). In this way, "as professionals, evaluators need meta-evaluations to assure the quality of their evaluations, provide direction for improving individual studies as well as their developing evaluation approaches, and earn and maintain credibility for their services among both clients and other evaluators" (Stufflebeam 2001a, p. 184). In this retrospective process, evaluators learn to base the results of their work on reliable and valid norms so that their results are not contested. In a normative perspective, meta-evaluation can orient the norms for current evaluations and contribute to the elaboration of norms for future evaluations. The decisional perspective concerns the clients of evaluation. Meta-evaluation makes it possible to improve the robustness of data and consequently the use of evaluation results (Coosky and Caracelli 2005; Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam 2001a; 2011). In an instrumental perspective, it appears as a decision-making tool for evaluation users.

3. *Theoretical approaches of meta-evaluation*

In relation to these two aims, two theoretical approaches orient the meta-evaluators in how they conduct their examination of the evaluation and provide instructions on how to conduct it: these two theoretical approaches are the "Evaluator-Centred Meta-Evaluation" (Stufflebeam 2001a; 2011) and the "Client-Centred Meta-Evaluation" (Reneike and Welch 1986). In the evaluator-centered approach, methodological rigour is the principal characteristic considered. Rigour is the essence of the meta-evaluation put forward by Scriven and Stufflebeam in their work. The main question is "to what extent does the evaluation meet the standards of evaluation and the directing principles of the profession?". This approach finds its inspiration in evaluative approaches such as the Questions and Methods-Oriented approach, mainly in the form of Objectives-Based Studies, Outcome Evaluation as Value-Added Assessment, Experimental Studies, Cost-Benefit Analysis Approach, Case Study Evaluations, etc. (see Stufflebeam 2001b). On the other hand, the client-centered approach is derived from theoretical approaches to evaluation such as the Client-Centered Studies/Responsive Evaluation of Stake (1967; 1975; 1999); and the Utilization-Focused Evaluation of Patton (1980; 1982; 1994; 1997) (see Stufflebeam 2001b). This approach has been popularized by Reneike and Welch (1986). In this approach, meta-evaluation is conceived as a negotiation game between the client, the evaluator and the meta-evaluator. Client-centered meta-evaluation is more focused on communication, notably the credibility of the evaluator, the characteristics of the client, the report and its presentation, etc. than methodology (i.e. evaluation design,

choice of measurement instruments, observations, sampling, analysis, etc.) (Reneike and Welch 1986).

4. *Type of meta-evaluation*

We have identified three types of meta-evaluation in the literature. First, the type of meta-evaluation often conducted prior to an evaluation in a formative perspective (formative meta-evaluation). Secondly, the type often conducted at the end of an evaluation in a retroactive perspective (summative meta-evaluation). Finally, the type conducted simultaneously to an evaluation (concurrent meta-evaluation) for either a formative or summative purpose. Formative meta-evaluation helps evaluators plan their evaluation. It precedes the evaluation and helps to improve its quality (Hanssen *et al.* 2008; Stufflebeam 2001). It helps in the selection of the evaluation's objectives, from design to results and the desired impacts of the evaluation (Stufflebeam 2011). Summative meta-evaluation helps users to determine the quality of the evaluation by revealing its strengths and weaknesses (Coosky and Caracelli 2005; Stufflebeam 2001; 2011). Concurrent meta-evaluation was developed by Cook (1978) and then later by Hanssen *et al.* (2008), who affirm:

> "the concurrent meta-evaluation differs from both formative and summative meta-evaluations because concurrent meta-evaluation (a) is conducted simultaneously with the development and implementation of a new evaluation method; (b) has both formative and summative components; (c) is comprehensive in nature; and (d) includes multiple, original data collection methods" (p. 575).

The literature on meta-evaluation remains dominated by the writings of Stufflebeam. He certainly is the author who has spent the most time reflecting on the operational implementation of meta-evaluation. Based on his writings, the objectives of meta-evaluation relate (1) to the objectives of the evaluation, (2) to design, (3) to process and (4) to the results of the evaluation. While formative meta-evaluation demonstrates separate interest in these various objectives, summative meta-evaluation focuses on all of the objectives together (Stufflebeam 2011). Figure 1 presents a look at meta-evaluation as well as the principal authors involved in the development of this method of quality assurance.

Evaluation must meet a quality requirement (Baker 1983; Green and Attkisson 1984; Mark and Pines 1995). At the heart of the profession, meta-evaluation is the method able to outline quality issues in evaluation. If meta-evaluation ensures the quality of the evaluation before and after its implementation, evaluators aim to use the lessons it provides to answer the question: What are the principal challenges and problems to overcome in order to conduct a quality evaluation?

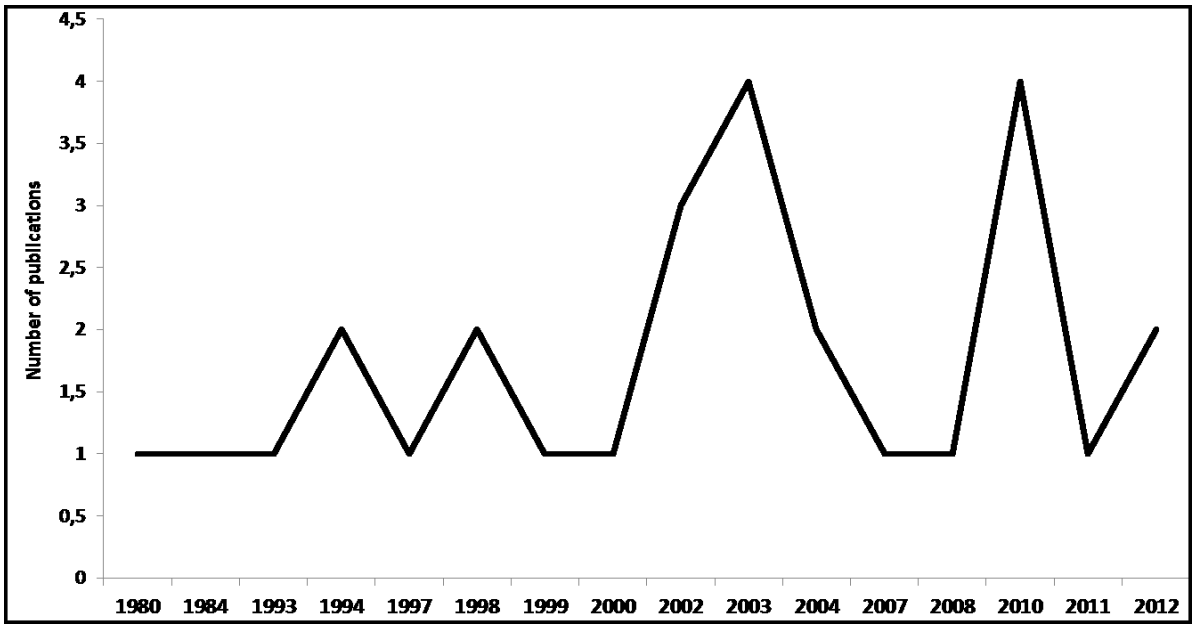
Figure 1: A Look at Meta-Evaluation

Definition	Objects	Instruments	Type of Meta-evaluation	Aims	Theoretical Approaches
"Meta-evaluation is defined [….] as the process of delineating, obtaining, and applying descriptive information and judgmental information – about pertinent criteria – including the evaluand's utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy and its systematic nature, competent execution, integrity, respectfulness, and social responsibility – in order to guide the evaluation and report its strengths and weaknesses" (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007, p. 651).	(i) Evaluation objectives (ii) Evaluation design (iii) Evaluation processes (iv) Evaluation results (Stufflebeam 2011).	Standards Standards for Educational Evaluation Joint Committee: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy (1981; 1988; 1994; 2003; 2011) Directing Principles Directing principles of professional associations: systematic nature, competent execution, integrity, respectfulness, and social responsibility (AEA 1995; 2003) and other directing principles from other professional associations (SEVAL 2000; SCE 2012; etc.).	Formative Meta-evaluation This helps evaluators plan their evaluation. It precedes the evaluation and helps to improve its quality. (Hanssen *et al.* 2008, Stufflebeam 2001).	Normative Aim (Accountability) Meta-evaluation allows evaluators to retrospectively examine their own actions so as to improve their practices. This is an instrument of self-evaluation for the evaluator (Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebam 2011).	Evaluator-Centred Approach Methodological rigour is the principal characteristic. To what extent does the evaluation address the evaluation standards and the directing principles of the profession? (Scriven 1966; 2009; Stufflebeam 2001; 2002; 2011; Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007)
			Summative Meta-evaluation This allows users judge the quality of the evaluation and highlights its strengths and weaknesses (Coosky and Caracelli 2005; Stufflebeam 2001 2007).	Instrumental Aim (Decisional) Meta-evaluation helps to increase the defense of the robustness of the data and consequently the use of results in evaluation (Coosky and Caracelli 2005; Reneike and Welch 1986; Stufflebeam 2001; 2011)	Client-Centred Approach In addition to methodology, this approach focuses on communication, specifically the credibility of the evaluator, the characteristics of the client, the report and its presentation, etc. (Reneike and Welch 1986)
			Concurrent Meta-evaluation This occurs simultaneously to the evaluation with the goal of evaluating a new evaluative approach (Cook 1978; Hanssen *et al.* 2008)	Normative Aim and Instrumental Aim	Evaluator-Centred Approach and Client-Centred Approach

5. *Four generations of meta-evaluation*

Figure 2 shows trends in the number of publications relative to meta-evaluation. A review of these texts highlights the emergence, beyond the first generation, of three more generations of meta-evaluation.

Figure 2: Curve of Evolution of the Number of Articles by Year 1980-2012 (N=28)



Development Period. Since its appearance, meta-evaluation has evolved over four decades. The 1970s saw the first generation of meta-evaluation. During this period, evaluation researchers attempted to clarify the concept. In this way, research laid the theoretical foundations for meta-evaluation (Scriven 1969; Stufflebeam 1974). The title *Can Meta-Evaluation Give a Direction for Research on Evaluation?* by Gowin and Millman (1978) clearly evokes the nature of the discussion during this period. The primary concern of researchers was to answer the following questions: (i) What is meta-evaluation? (ii) Why meta-evaluation? (iii) When should we conduct meta-evaluation? Few reports of meta-evaluation were conducted (Baker *et al.* 1980). During this time, related research was published in the form of communications at scholarly or professional association conferences to validate the concept so as to operationalize it. One example is Gray (1978), who made a presentation on meta-evaluation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Toronto (Canada). This is also the case for Gracia and Kapes (1982) who conducted a meta-evaluation to synthesize the studies conducted from 1968 to 1979 on the effect of participating in vocational education and of which the results were presented in 1982 at the annual meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association.

Propagation Period. The second generation of meta-evaluation corresponds to the first period of the curve which begins in the early 1980s and ends in the early 1990s. Only a few meta-evaluations were conducted during this period (3 in the sample of this study). Although the theoretical reflections continued (Martin 1982; Reineke and Welch 1986),

the practice of meta-evaluation had acquired a firmer framework. The main question raised in this era was "How do we conduct meta-evaluation?" The answer to this question is found in the Standards for Educational Evaluation of the Joint Committee (1981; 1988) which became available for use by both evaluators and meta-evaluators. However, the popularity of these instruments remained embryonic, leaving it to researchers to use their own knowledge of evaluation to enact the criteria serving to conduct meta-evaluations (Green *et al.* 1980; White *et al.* 1984; Boyd and Windsor 1993).

Enrolment Period. The third generation of meta-evaluation goes from the mid-1990s and ends in the 2000s. During this period the production of knowledge on meta-evaluation doubled (7 meta-evaluations in the sample of our study) compared to the Propagation Period. The practice of meta-evaluation also took off, with many different instruments delimiting the boundaries of the field, including the AEA guidelines (1995) which made meta-evaluation a professional obligation. A more refined and operational version of the Standards for Educational Evaluation of the Joint Committee (1994) appeared, strengthening practice. Specifically, the program evaluation models meta-evaluation checklist (based on the Program Evaluation Standards) of Daniel L. Stufflebeam (1999) offered a framework for responding to the recurrent concern of "How do we conduct a meta-evaluation?".

Maturity Period. Once meta-evalution had been codified, the fourth generation of meta-evaluation was reflected in the two peaks of the curve which showed a net progression of meta-evaluative practice (18 meta-evaluations in the sample of our study). Instruments became more operational (Joint Committee 2003; 2011; AEA 2003). Many other professional evaluation associations adopted or adapted the model of the AEA and the Joint Committee concerning standards or directing principles (SEVAL 2000; SCE 2012; Mbaïrewaye and Jacob 2012) to strengthen the practice of meta-evaluation. In 2010, Scriven published *Evaluating evaluations: A meta-evaluation checklist*, confirming the maturity of this period.

Conclusions

Our objective was to review the literature on meta-evaluation to create an overview of its epistemological foundations, its aims, the different types of meta-evaluation, and the main theoretical approaches. We also reviewed the evolution of meta-evaluation over the last four decades. This review shows that, from a conceptual point of view, meta-evaluation developed from being simply an evaluation of the results of an evaluation (in other words, of the match between the objectives and results) to an evaluation of the quality of the evaluation based on its design, implementation and impact, among other factors. In this way, meta-evaluation has developed through four generations that have shaped its form and defined its boundaries (or characteristics). The first decade of this development, the 1970s, corresponds to the development of the concept and its epistemological foundations. The 1980s saw the enrolment of researchers and theoretical discussion of ways to implement the concept. During the 1990s, meta-evaluation took on a professional dimension as the practice became popularized within several professional networks. Last, the 2000s cemented the support of researchers, professional

associations and government bodies, who increasingly turned to meta-evaluation to assess the quality of an evaluator's work.

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