Honey, I shrunk the evaluator:

Reflections on the 1990 National Evaluation Conference

Max Liddell and Margaret Liddell

The 1990 National Evaluation Conference, a conference devoted to current developments in evaluation, left the authors with many concerns. This paper, after describing a few of the contributions which were of relevance to human services, explores some of the dilemmas. Is program evaluation a research activity or not? What are the implications of the commercialisation of the public sector? Is evaluation a tool to induce employee conformity? These questions are raised, and their implications for human services discussed.

The 1990 National Evaluation Conference, held in Sydney in July, left some vivid impressions. These include memories of the best run conference we had ever attended – everything even ran on time! There were the splendid facilities of the Manly Pacific Parkroyal; the excellent French pastries for morning tea on the Conference's first day; and the great lunches. In spite of all this, we were left feeling disturbed about where the evaluation industry in Australia is heading.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

More than 350 people participated in the Conference. They came from academia, private consulting firms, the sciences, the arts, industry and commerce. And they came from the Public Service. Public Servants were there in force. Not from our home state, Victoria – from the registration list we can identify only 5 registrants from the Victorian Public Service.

Most other States had very substantial representation from their Public Service. Naturally, New South Wales was heavily represented. A better contrast with Victoria is provided by South Australia. Although smaller and further away, it provided thirty-three Public Servants. The enthusiasm of many Public Servants, especially those from New South Wales and South Australia, for evaluation will be highlighted and discussed later in this paper.

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SOME RECENT EVALUATIONS IN HUMAN SERVICES

Although our aim is not to present a Conference Report as such, readers of this journal will be interested in the evaluations of human services reported at the Conference. We will discuss a few of those evaluations briefly, and then present the concerns which the Conference raised.

Disabilities

Two interesting studies were reported from the disabilities field.

Center and Hilder (1990) conducted a two-year study on the results of the integration of primary and secondary school students with disabilities into NSW Government Schools. Intensive observations of the students were supplemented with data on academic progress and on social interactions within the school. Interviews with teachers, classmates, parents, and the students themselves were conducted in addition to the observations.

Center and Hilder concluded (1990: p. 64) that:

> ...Children with learning difficulties and with sensory disabilities (in both high and primary classes) are the most successfully integrated students, as a group, followed in descending order by children with physical disabilities, multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities and behavioural disorders.

However, the analysis of results showed that the success of integration was not necessarily a consequence of the kind of disability, though difficulties increased as students – especially those with intellectual or multiple disabilities – moved into senior classes.

> The factor which appears to be most directly related to children's success in integrated placements is the amount of structure observed in teachers' instructional style, closely followed by the appro priateness of resource support provided to the class teacher. A third contributing factor is general school ethos or total school commitment to integration....when these three factors are all operating within the school system, students with the range of disabilities sampled can be effectively mainstreamed into regular classes irrespective of the degree or type of disability. (Center and Hilder 1990: pp. 69–70).

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Another development in evaluation from the disabilities field was reported by Pitfield-Smith and Davey (1990) from the Barkuma Centre in South Australia. The Barkuma Centre serves intellectually disabled persons. As part of the design of a comprehensive evaluation process, Barkuma has developed a Client Satisfaction Questionnaire for administration to residents of its residential services. The questionnaire has been tested on twenty clients who range in age from their teens to retirement age. The time taken to administer the questionnaire ranged from 1 to 3 1/2 hours, so it was administered in more than one sitting where necessary. Whilst over half the interviewees completed the

questionnaire in two sittings, as many as four were required for some. The questionnaire utilised a yes/no style of question in conjunction with open questions, since multiple choice questions were found not to be useful. Considerable effort has gone into checking the internal reliability of responses as well as comparing them with external sources of information, and the results of this look promising.

Child Protection

Two papers were of relevance to this subject.

Max presented a paper on some of the results of a Melbourne community placement program for adolescents who need care and protection (Liddell 1990). His paper examined case outcomes in the light of the backgrounds of the young people. Whilst approximately half did well on the program, the other half had great difficulty in coping for very long with community placements.

The amount of disruption suffered by the young people in their previous contacts with the welfare system seems to have been associated with the difficulties they experienced in community placements. Length of time in care, large numbers of placement changes in a short period of time, and large numbers of changes in the young people's lives after entering the program seemed particularly likely to put case success at risk. Many young people not initially taken into the welfare system after a court appearance had a history of disruption and rapid changes of residence outside the system; by the time they came to the attention of the system again they were highly unsettled. Even if they were then quickly accepted by the community placement program, thus avoiding institutional experiences, they nearly all broke down in community placements.

Max was also critical of some of the program's underlying premises. For example, the program is based and funded on the implicit assumption that case assessments have been done on statutory cases (which make up 80% of the sample) by Community Services Victoria and that it is the job of the program to implement these. However, a file study showed that such case plans were either completely absent from files or, when available, were usually quite devoid of the required assessment detail. In many cases therefore, placement staff were carrying out plans which were unavailable or inadequate.

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Max argued, given the numbers of current and former State Wards who are amongst the population of homeless youth (*Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* 1989: ch. 10), that these issues urgently required further research. The problems identified suggest welfare system failure; failure which clearly has serious effects on many of the young people and is likely to result in major costs to society later in their lives.

The issue of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect has been hotly debated recently (see for example Carter et al 1988; de Vaus and Powell 1988; and Carment 1990). A key focus of debate has been whether mandatory reporting is or is not associated with increases in the reporting of unsubstantiated cases. Carter et al (1988: pp. 26–27) argued that it is associated with such an increase; and this argument was recycled by Carment (1990: p. 18). However, de Vaus and Powell (1988: p. 162), using the same statistics as Carter et al., reached exactly the opposite conclusion.

In the light of this, a paper presented by Lamond (1990) was of interest. Lamond reported on a study of the response of New South Wales school teachers to the introduction in July 1987 of legislation requiring them to report cases of sexual abuse of children. Lamond concluded that there was a significant increase in the numbers of cases of sexual abuse reported by teachers following the introduction of mandatory reporting; but that the level of substantiation remained virtually the same. In his discussion Lamond (1990: p. 127) highlighted the importance of training courses in preventing a reduction in substantiation rates.

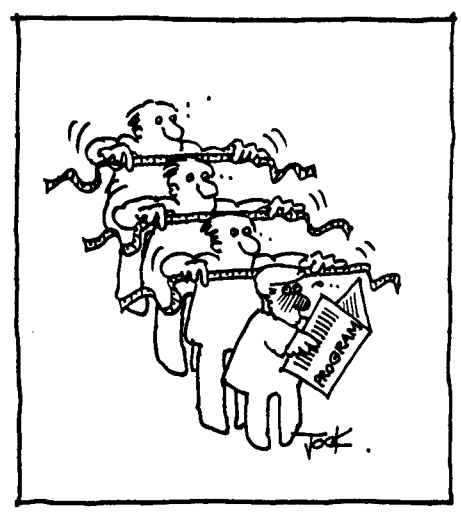
PROGRAM EVALUATION – WHAT'S THE REAL AGENDA?

There were major issues which ran through the Conference which surfaced only occasionally, if at all. We want now to raise some which we believe are of major significance.

1. Program Evaluation – Research, or Not Research?

This question is an old chestnut in the evaluation field, and it shows no signs of going away.

In some of the literature on evaluation the term "evaluation research" is used – the term is an indicator of the writer's orientation. In other words, one school of thought sees evaluation as a part of the field of research. Evaluation, from this perspective, should be carried out with scientific rigour and reflect classical research models and procedures.



The position of Cronbach (1982) provides a contrast. Whilst Cronbach was not anti-research his view was that evaluations are frequently one-off, individual efforts whose purpose is to provide useful information to the program's stakeholders. It is the stakeholders whose interests need to be satisfied. The more scientific, research-oriented tradition is concerned, by contrast, with meeting the research standards of one's

designs at the conference, with interesting results. In a fit of irritation at how tidy everyone's methodology appeared to be (and not believing it) he changed his paper to reflect on methodological problems. He posed the question he'd had to face himself: what do you do when, half-way through the evaluation, you find out that your methodology has been "stuffed" by factors beyond your control?

Some of the audience laughed - whether in sympathy or because they'd had the same problem we know not. However, no one asked questions about this, excepting one person who wondered how the findings had been validated?

This is a reasonable question, especially if you come from the scientific perspective. However, it also misses the point about what had happened and why.

All of us who have conducted research or evaluation in organizational settings know that creativity and "flexibility" are required to get the job done. The ability to adapt one's methods to deal with the practicalities of working in an organizational setting is absolutely essential. The technical purity of the evaluation methodology will rarely be uppermost in the organization's mind. One wonders, though, whether discussion of this subject has become taboo - methodological purity seems to have become a modern sacred cow, no matter how dubious its value or uncertain its achievement.

The point bears repeating: research and evaluation in the real-world context of organizational life in human services makes scientific rigour, even if it is appropriate and desirable, a goal which is not always attainable. We need to get real about this if we are to carry out evaluations in a way which makes sense.

We were left, therefore, feeling concerned about two related issues. One was that the debate about whether or not the scientific tradition was valid in program evaluation - or the degree to which it was valid - was hardly engaged. At the same time, those who supported the scientific tradition were clearly critical of evaluations which strayed from the scientific straight and narrow. The other concern was that the opportunities and constraints of conducting evaluations in the real world - a world of organizations and politics - went virtually unrecognized.

2. Public Service Reform - Free Enterprise, or Free for All?

As we noted earlier, the public services of New South Wales and South Australia were heavily represented at the Conference, and this was reflected in the large number of issues papers on major conference themes written by them. Two major and controversial points emerged to us from the discussion of these issues papers.

The first concerns the extent to which private sector values are permeating the public service. Bill Cossey, the Director of the South Australian Office of the Government Board, told us about that private hire car firm that will, under certain conditions, give you a pocket calculator if you haven't got your car within 2 1/2 minutes. He added, with justifiable pride (Cossey 1990), that the South Australian Government Car Pool could get you away from the desk with your car in just 30 seconds! Well, that's probably comparing apples with oranges, but it's still not bad going. Other discussions and anecdotes confirm the growing trend for Government Departments to charge each other for their services, to compete in the market-place for contracts, and generally to regard the recipients of their services as "clients" or "customers" to whom marketing and other commercial concepts and responses apply.

The commercialisation of the public service can usually be associated with the development of managerialism. Managerialism can be understood as "a rational, output-oriented, plan-based and management-led view of organisational reform" (Sinclair 1989: p. 383). As the definition implies, it focuses around an allegedly value-free approach to organizational change through management processes which use planning in particular ways.

Some of the mechanisms frequently used by managerialists to promote reform are leadership change; associating organizational outcomes with program budgets and with performance indicators which emphasise efficiency and frequently cost-cutting; the develop-ment of staff remuneration systems which reflect those used in the commercial world; and the adoption of the commercial world's principles of excellence. "The solution to public sector effectiveness is seen to be `keeping close to the customer' with careful monitoring of the market interface" (Sinclair 1989: pp. 383-384). As Considine points out (1988b) these developments are affecting human services, and increasingly they are affecting non-government organizations.

This raises questions which were not debated at the 1990 National Evaluation Conference. The "good news" stories presented at the Conference

emphasized the positive aspects of the growing commercialisation of the public sector. We are sure that there are advantages; we are not questioning that. Not that speakers were implying that the public service has completely changed or that the strategies referred to produce change easily; public service jokes have not entirely disappeared. One speaker, whose name we unfortunately did not record, produced two we liked:

> "Cultural change in the public sector is like doing wheelies in a steamroller!"
> "Public sector change is like a car with the engine of a lawn-mower and the brakes of a Rolls Royce!"

However, regarding the development of private sector practices in the public service, we have learned as observers and practitioners in policy fields that there are always consequences of what one does. The consequences are frequently unintended; but in any case they are there. So what, we ask, are the consequences of the commercialisation of the public sector? Are there sacrifices as our public sector becomes more commercially oriented; as it "sells" its products to its "clients"? What will happen to public sector commitment to meet community obligations - obligations of all kinds, but especially to the disadvantaged? Can the meeting of these obligations be maintained by a commercialised public sector; and if so what measures will be required to ensure they are? We saw plenty of evaluations lauding the results of the commercialisation of the public service at the conference, but nothing which questioned it or questioned the consequences.

There has been more debate on these issues in the literature. The Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration and the Australian Journal of Public Administration have featured a number of articles on the subject over the last 4 years. One recent example is the article by Sinclair cited earlier. Of particular interest to human services are the lively debates on some aspects of modern public sector management between Considine (1988 a & b; 1990) and Paterson (1988). However, if your judgment was being formed by the 1990 National Evaluation Conference you would have concluded that the subject was not controversial.

Perhaps it is too early; the early stages of evangelical fervour are usually the last stages at which one can get answers to critical questions. But there must be consequences - we would like some answers before the public sector goes even further down the same track!

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3. Evaluation - A Tool for Empowerment or Conformity?

A further concern surfaced at one of the plenary sessions. In response to one issues paper, some contributors of papers and members of the audience presented anecdotes about the use of evaluations as an "aid to the management process". Such anecdotes described the use of evaluation - especially the use of outcome indicators - in "managing" the behaviour of independent-minded groups who had a tendency to want to do their own thing. The indicators, naturally, kept these staff very task-focused. Professionals such as scientists and artists are two examples of independent-mindedness which were cited. The presentation of such examples was accompanied by much nudge-nudge, wink-wink body language and laughter as the audience recognized and enjoyed this naughty but nice usage of evaluation.

As the examples went on we became increasingly aggravated. Max got to his feet and suggested that what was being presented was a model of evaluation which was not a tool for greater effectiveness but a tool to induce conformity.

While Margaret muttered that the Conference didn't want to hear that, two people joined the debate. The first was from a non-government organization - he agreed wholeheartedly with the point being made! The second was from Government - she disagreed, pointing out that the specialists in her Department had a small area of the budget over which they had the control to do what they liked!

The absence of further input underlined Margaret's point that the argument was unpopular; from our viewpoint its validity remained. We were also reminded of Sinclair's observation that

> "...critics of managerialism maintain that today's bureaucracies are worse than undemocratic, that they peddle an elitist set of interests that are not even up for debate" (1990: p. 388).

In short, we were left with the impression that the field of evaluation had been captured by the managers. We have no quarrel with the interest of managers in evaluation, nor with the role of evaluation in improving management. In our naivety, however, we thought that evaluation had a broader role. We thought that it focused on the improvement of knowledge; a focus which could empower many stakeholders in the relevant service - managers certainly, but service providers as well. And, dare we suggest it, the clients? Clients in human services are in a weaker position than those "clients" in the new public service models who can purchase what they need from more than one supplier. In human services we could - and occasionally do - use evaluations to feed back to clients what they thought, how we responded, and why. That is, a line of accountability to clients can be developed through evaluations.

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The new, born-again managers, however, seem only to be able to apply these concepts within the commercial atmosphere they are

developing in the public service. We saw no evidence that the implications of these trends for the clients of human services were being considered. In retrospect, we were glad that so few Victorian public servants were at the Conference to hear the evangelical fervour of their public sector peers from other States. We've got enough problems in Victoria at the moment without that!

POSTSCRIPT

The Manly Pacific Parkroyal, during the Conference, had "Honey I Shrunk the Kids" showing on its in-house video channel. Over those few days the idea of shrinking the kids converged with our concern over the shrinking role of the evaluator. The political agendas implied in Cronbach's 95 theses seemed to have fallen under the control of the managers.

So, we asked ourselves – is the expectation that evaluation can empower us all unrealistic? On the other hand, if the expectation is realistic, what will it take to restore the role of the evaluator to full size?♦

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