

Personalizing Evaluation

A Humanist Approach to Valuing

3rd Edition

Saville Kushner



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By

Saville Kushner



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Saville Kushner is a theorist and practitioner of programme evaluation with a number of books and numerous journal articles dealing with evaluation methods. He has been a long-standing advocate of Democratic Evaluation and Evaluation Case Study. He worked in the UK at the Universities of East Anglia and the West of England (where he is Emeritus Professor) and at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is also Visiting Professor at the University of Granada, Spain. Between 2005 and 2007 he served as UNICEF Regional Officer for Monitoring and Evaluation (Latin America/Caribbean). He was President of the UK Evaluation Society and is a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences.

Other Books:

Evaluative Research Methods: Managing the Complexity of Judgement in the Field. Information Age Pubs, 2017;

School: an Exposé. Available at <https://amzn.to/3wf2Wzc> 2023;

With B. Kushner, *Who Needs the Cuts: Myths of Economic Crisis.* London: Hesperus (short-listed for the Bread and Roses national literary award) 2013, 2025;

with N. Norris (Eds.). *Dilemmas of Engagement: Evaluation and the New Public Management.* UK & NY: Elsevier, 2007;

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CHAPTER 1

HUMANISM, INSTITUTION AND PROGRAMME EVALUATION

We are promiscuous. Programme evaluation is a field crowded with models and approaches. Perhaps even unique among the social sciences, our enthusiasm has generated ever-more variants on what are, in reality, a small range of archetypal approaches. We assign groups to quasi-experimental treatments; we talk to people, ask them to tick boxes and observe what they do; we adapt and apply social theories to explain coherence. Mostly - we just talk to people. We trust respondents, some more, some less as sources of insight; and we may be more or less willing to include peripheral vision in our reporting. You might struggle to identify a stranger sitting at the back of a classroom with a notebook and a purpose as a Phenomenological Evaluator, a Democratic Evaluator, a Dialogic or Participatory or Responsive Evaluator or, indeed, an autocratic inspector of services. Talk about chameleons!

Often, what the author of a 'new' approach is doing is, in fact, advocating for paying special attention to practical options that reflect their preference. Less so, to advance the field with new epistemologies, paradigm shifts or novel theory. '*I prefer my respondents to engage more positively with what I am doing,*' or '*I see what I do as more conversational than interrogative*' or '*since we live in a democracy, surely we should do what we do democratically*'. Rare are the true methodological breakthroughs that expand the perimeters of what we do, or change our destination, rather than modify our behaviour or recalibrate our interactions. *Responsive Evaluation* (Stake, 2010) was one such shape-

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shifting proposal: rather than emit a stimulus to a programme (an interrogation, a test) to see how the programme responds, but to see the programme – its experience, its interactions, its beliefs – as a stimulus to the evaluative observer who then *responds* by writing a portrayal. That was a breakthrough.

Do we need yet more methodological variants? Is that what this book is offering?

Well, no it is not. In a recent article, Kushner and Stake (2025, in press) we argue that the disposition to create new ‘models’ has been a diversion from the forgotten legacy dilemma that is *validity*. That the early discourses and arguments that originally gave shape to our field came to focus on validation – much driven by the discovery of new-wave methods such as Responsive Evaluation and other narrative-based approaches; and that these discourses have largely been discarded as obstacles to the rapid industrialisation of programme evaluation. When House (1980, 2010) wrote his book *Evaluating With Validity* this was a response to the gap left by the hurried emergence of qualitative methods. This is what this book is about, though concerns with validity are expressed in terms of how we use method – while aspiring to...well, Humanism.

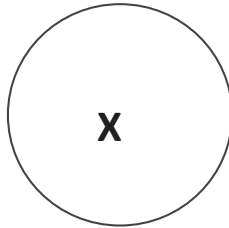
The premise of the book can be stated simply. Habitually, we evaluators present a programme as a context, and within that context we portray people and events. Those people and events are given identity and meaning by the programme. In a school programme, for example, this person is a teacher, that person a school leader or a student; this event is pedagogical or institutional. I question the validity of this – especially so in a society which too easily depersonalises people in favour of policies or programs set up in their names. And especially so in a society we hope to be Humanistic.

Rather, then, I propose a switch – a Humanist switch. Rather than document how people fit in programs, as it were, I suggest we more validly document how programs fit into people’s lives and work. This involves the simple switch of portraying a person, a group, an organisation or an event as a context, and placing the programme inside that context. Here (Figure 1.1) is an equally simple diagram to illustrate the point – we will return to this diagram later.

Where the circle represents the programme-as-context, affording identity to the person, X, we invert this relationship so that the circle is given by the life, work and values of the person, and the X becomes the programme. This is a shift more significant, merely, than an ethical or a moral principle – though this, too, is an important element of validity. It allows us to estimate the true proportions of the programme as it features in the universe of meaning of the ‘evaluand’ (a term coined by Stake, 2010, to signify the subjects of evaluation). If, for example, people speak little of the programme in interviews *about* the programme, this is telling us something important.

Figure 1.1.

Inverting Programme and Person



Of course, this implies a specific range of methods. We can easily see how the evaluative interview (of which more in later chapters) would feature, for example. But the intertwining of method with validity is a familiar theme, and it is best that we understand both the distinction and the overlap. When I argue in this book for more attention to be paid to the interview and to the negotiation of data, I do so from a standpoint of giving our evaluation greater claim to validity. We have even given a name to this in the evaluation literature – *respondent validity* (see Torrance, 2012, for example). MacDonald (1976) in his paper ‘*The portrayal of persons as evaluation data*’, famously argued to ‘shift the locus of intellectual control’ to the respondent. That he felt the need to argue for personal data to be part of the evaluation repertoire speaks of the emergence of such methodological sensibilities at the time.

MacDonald was my mentor, and this book flows from his advocacy of democratic procedures in evaluation (MacDonald, 1987) with an emphasis on personal experience and judgement. I use the term *Personalising* to signify nothing more or less than the need to locate evaluation judgement in the experience of those we are evaluating. I am cautious about the loftier title, *Humanistic Evaluation*. The book is replete with data examples drawn from evaluation reporting, mostly (by chance) in the field of the performing arts – though I might just as easily have drawn from evaluations of international development, school curriculum, police training.

The Humanistic Turn

In that recent paper, Stake and I also introduce an ideological strand to the dilemmas around validity. Looking back at the modern history of programme evaluation – from the 1960s forward – we characterise major shifts and breakthroughs in terms of the introduction of qualitative

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(anthropological) methods, the politicisation of programs and their evaluations, the shift of emphasis from *internal* tests of validity to *external* tests, as the *uses* and ethics of evaluation came to the fore. We mention the positioning of evaluation in public debate – democratic argument. All of these placing pressure on conventional means of validation.

But we also see the underlying change as one of a growing sensibility to principles of Humanism, which we will visit in a moment. This was made explicit a number of times, not least by Cronbach and Associates (1985) who open with an evaluation manifesto entitled *95 Theses* The first of which is: ‘evaluation is the means by which society learns about itself’. By this Cronbach was repeating an insight already offered by Barry MacDonald and others: that each programme is a microcosm of society, in that it exemplified (writ small, as it were) the politics and sociology, the competition between values and interests of society at large – including structures of power and authority. In documenting the lives and values of people in programs we are, as it were, documenting a substantial element of the human condition. House (1974) compares the schools in which he evaluated to the weatherbeaten lakeshores of Chicago: ‘it is more evident to me now than before that the schools are as pounded as a windward shore, and that they take their shape from the social winds and waters’. Study school, study the social winds. Study the human condition.

Not just this. Richard Rorty (1998), in his incomparably optimistic working of Philosophical Pragmatism observed that the contemporary (postmodern) age is characterised by a shift of Humanist preoccupation with *who are we?* to one of *who could we become?* If you are able to go along with this (and I do recommend reading Rorty) then you will be ready to frame our historical moment as one of reflective analysis, a yearning to understand transition and change, a taste for futures thinking. Is this not what we do when we evaluate a programme - explore that question: who could we become? Now you are close to defining the perfect context for the emergence of programme evaluation.

So, let us think of the years 1960–1980 as midwife to a Humanistic Turn, not to be too grandiose about our sometimes-plodding steps towards ethical realisation. But this, too, is one of the underpinnings of this book, as will be outlined below, as the substantive argument unfolds. We might well place evaluation among what we sometimes think of as ‘the caring services’ (Bob Stake and Merel Visse are spearheading this particular leap of imagination). We evaluators are often seen – often see ourselves – as social technicians, writing the blueprints for the ‘engineering’ of society, programs being the prototypes of social ‘engines’ generating societal energies and setting directions. And we often function that way. But where society’s future is being redrawn, new policies being tested, our obligations go way beyond that into the politics and

ethics of ‘who has a say’. After all – who else is there? Who else, that is, with a putatively impartial position.

So the journey of this book starts here – with validity closely linked to Humanism expressed as ‘personalisation’, and with our own blueprint – that diagram with a circle and an X. People before programs.

Humanism Limp Forward

As I carry this book into a new edition a mediaeval war is being played out in Eastern Europe, with Vladimir Putin, the drab pastiche of a Charlemagne or a Robert of Normandy. The general reaction to this senseless endeavour shows us how far we have moved in almost 100 years away from militarism and a yearning for inhumane conquest. The Ukraine war is seen as an absurdity, as an irrelevance to the ambitions and methods of modern nation building. From the arch-global capitalist to the most committed environmentalist; from the populist ‘nation-first’ politician to the radical left-wing internationalist, murderous destruction like this is simply bad for business. This far, at least, we have come in the onward march of Humanism.

Progress is uneven, however. Though the West largely enjoys democracy-by-degrees we can hardly be said to yet live in a Humanistic society. Inequities and inequalities still prejudice the life-chances and self-determination of too many, based on gender, ability, age, ethnic and economic discrimination. The sense of absurdity we happily visit upon military dictators stops short at the doors of our institutions, for there, it turns out, Humanism is ‘*not* always good for business’. Our brief, postwar excursions into historic levels of wealth redistribution by ensuring access to education, employment opportunities, healthcare, domestic security and social support seem to be grinding to a halt as economic austerity strips protective institutions bare. We have legal austerity, social work austerity, educational austerity, policing austerity and all the rest – possibly including austerity of the imagination. We seem resigned to our fate. Moral and Humanistic gains in terms of individual and collective rights drain away with frightening speed, no matter the hundreds of years it took to accomplish them. Excessive wealth, so arduously prised from the rich, is being returned to them through fiscal policies based on the legal harms of monetarism. Welfare States, once constructed to ensure armies of the fighting-fit, are being dismantled as we reduce both the incidence and the labour-intensity of war. Even our reliance on the working woman and man is being fast eroded by robotics and the autocracy of the algorithm. We just don’t need a healthy, loyal working class anymore.

The ruthlessness of economic advance is neatly seen in the otherwise widely admired society of New Zealand, where I lived and worked for some

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years until recently. At my university and at government gatherings I attended regularly, no meeting started without a Māori oration. Sometimes in the face of white (*Pakeha*) working class opposition, Māori language and values were and are asserted with ever-greater confidence. If you pronounce Whangarei *ūangarei* and not *phangarāi* you will be corrected. Institutional promotion opportunities increasingly depend on learning *Tē Reo Māori* – Māori language. Not for nothing, New Zealand can rightly be fêted for its respect for its indigenous populations and for their cultural status.

And yet, Māori socio-economic status tends strongly towards disadvantage; whereas non-Māori (*Pakeha*) socio-economic status tends strongly towards advantage. And so it is that male suicides among the Māori run at more than twice the rate of the *Pakeha*; around one-third of New Zealand's under-14s live in poverty with almost half of those being Māori children, though Māori make up just 15% of the population. Meanwhile, the city of Auckland is the most unaffordable in the OECD. There is an implicit social contract in New Zealand, written by the *Pakeha*, which says, effectively, 'you can have culture, we'll take the economy'.

This is not to single out New Zealand, by any means. The UK and the USA provide similarly worrying examples of economic destitution through discriminatory policies based on gender, ethnicity, disability or whatever. I offer it as an example of what, to the Humanist, is as absurd and out of time as Putin's criminally lumbering war. Humanism is alive and well in Western nations, but it is more buoyant in the world of culture than in the world of economics and government. If European Humanism is the benevolent intelligence born of Dante, Giotto and Erasmus, it strides on its one good leg, but limps on its twisted other.

Evaluation and Humanism

What does all of this have to do with evaluation, besides providing a context to what we do? What difference does it make to the evaluator who struggles to make a methodological decision on a Monday morning as she observes a group of nurses in a training meeting, or a teacher in front of a class? What does it add to our repertoire of action made up of interviewing, observation, survey, random allocation and so on?

Evaluators and social researchers are the contemporary historians and analysts of society's institutions. Our contracts ask us to look at minor aspects of institutional action – a programme, this year's innovation, yet another restructuring. We are generally looking at momentary, situated attempts at change – sometimes at what Donald Schön (1971) called *dynamic conservatism* ('if we want things to stay the same we'd better start changing') – i.e. an attempt to resist change. But over time, we carry with

us developing insight into the role and functioning of social institutions – and these are the primary vehicles for Humanistic movement. It is to our public institutions – which includes the professions – that we look for the foundations of a Humanistic society. We look to them to give and guarantee our rights and legitimate needs, to mediate power, to care for us, to deal out fairness and reasonableness, and to act on our behalf. This is why we can be so intuitively resistant to the privatisation of public services. If we enjoy degrees of self-determination and both material and intellectual autonomy this is because of the conditions created by our institutions. Schools, for example, nurture or deny individuals the capacity for self-determination; the British principle of *policing by consent* guarantees a community the security to pursue its aspirations; geriatric care is essential to safeguard the ebbing forces of individualism; unemployment benefits are supposed to guarantee our personal, economic agency (though, admittedly, rarely do).

When we evaluate a programme of nurse training, urban development, dental education, international development or (as we will see in these pages) performing arts, this is what we are looking at. It is, as the anthropologists say, the ‘elephant’. We may be close up and focussing on its tail, or a trunk, or an ear – but if we stand back we will see the whole thing – the Humanist endeavour, a milestone which measures our progress towards a Humanistic society. This is the fundamental promise of case study which lays bare the very mechanisms of Humanistic and caring practice. In fact, it has been said by a number of evaluation theorists from Barry MacDonald and Ernest House to Robert Stake and Lee Cronbach that each and every evaluation is a case study of society. It captures something of the roles, resources, relationships, authority structures, inequities and contestations that characterise all our social institutions. If only we *see things that way* – if only we *generalise*. Programme evaluators should be theorists of innovation and change as we accumulate knowledge across and between our commissioned projects. In that sense, we (should) feel our fingers on the pulse of social change. And in modern societies that means blood flowing through the veins of institutional networks.

I will expand just a little on this, for it offers a broad insight into the role of evaluation as a practice and discipline. As rigorously explained by Hertog (2023) scientific understanding – and now I am drawing a parallel with programme evaluation – rests upon two factors: *evolution* and *boundary*. In fact, Hertog describes this as a dualism and a ‘*fundamental separation*’. When we look at ‘evolution’ we are looking at where things came from, what they have become and what they might become. It is movement and change through time. When we look at ‘boundary’ we are looking at the momentarily fixed conditions through which, and because of which, things do evolve – ‘a concise description of the state of a system at a given moment in time’ (Hertog,

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2023, p. 79). This is, of course, profoundly Darwinian – Darwin, too, thought of species development in terms of individual histories and environmental conditions – that same dualism. So – action, if you like, within context. Of course, boundary conditions, which both enable and constrain evolution, can and will change, too. And so, the conditions which help determine evolution will also change – sometimes in response to evolution.

With this analogy, clearly, I am arguing for a Darwinian/historiographical approach to programme evaluation. The programs and professional practices we observe are the immediate face of social evolution – by observing and analysing programs we are empirically observing social change. Institutions and political contexts set the boundary conditions – the ‘state of the system’ within which evolution happens. If we do not see both, and how they interact dynamically (evolution can change boundary conditions – this is the claim, for example, of anthropomorphic climate change advocates), then we deny ourselves robust vision. Natural (and quantum) scientists defend no claim where they cannot provide a plausible account of interactions between evolution and boundary. For the purposes of this book, the broader evolutionary sweep I am concerned with is that of Humanism, and how it responds to its boundary conditions.

I am not saying that we should include in our evaluations a ‘report card’ on the fulfilment of Humanist principles. But that the principles of Humanism, just as the principles of democracy, its political methodology, should nurture – even give shape to – our judgements. Our methodological judgements. What, then, are the Humanist principles that guide our methodological choices? Here, we are in uncertain territory. Humanism has a wide range of definitions – secular, religious, spiritual, political. These, however, form a common core of Humanist *approximations* – but research and devise your own:

- *Self-determination and responsibility for one’s own spirituality*
- *The right to insist that authority is justified*
- *The obligation to measure one’s actions against the welfare of others*
- *An intolerance for social inequity*
- *A substantive reality of collective ethics*

To reiterate, it is *not* for the evaluator to insist that programs embrace these as their values, *nor* that we hold programs accountable for realizing these values, but that these principles serve as our guide to methodological action – how we interact with those we evaluate, which methods we choose and how we apply them. When we argue, for example, that ‘people own the data over their own lives’ we are asserting the first of the above principles; when we offer the opportunity to challenge our interpretations and conclusions we assert the second; and if we are able to give the same weight to a