SECTION

H

What Is the Organizational, Community, and Political Context of the Program?

Another part of "understanding the program" is understanding its context. This means understanding as much as you can about the program to be evaluated and all its influences. You might be thinking, "Well, Marv, that's very broad," and you're right. There is a broad milieu—a broad context—that makes up programs and what surrounds them. Programs do not exist in a vacuum and they are not containerized. So how do we know what is part of the program context and how do we go about this process of discovery and learning about the program?

Let's consider this: Programs have an identity. Programs are part of larger organizations. Organizations are part of communities. All of these are made up of people who have unique values—unique cultures. Some people share similar values while others do not, and when values, people, organizations, and communities interact—which they inevitably do—politics and political processes are in play. Thus, understanding the program's total cultural context means learning about the program as an organization, the people in the program, and what is important to them. It also means learning about the community that surrounds the program, the people in the community, and what they value. This sounds straightforward enough and maybe even a bit trite, but context is to evaluation what location is to real estate. It is *that* important. Successfully navigating these various layers of context

is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks that an evaluator must be able to do for the evaluation to be useful (and hopefully, used—more on this in Section V). So let's think about what we call "context" a bit more and what you can do to make your way through this terrain.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Programs exist within an *organizational* context. Part of this structure is the organizational location. What is the governing agency or larger organization of which it is a part? Is the governing agency also the program's sole funding source? In such cases, the governing agency and the program are nearly synonymous. Other times, the governing agency may have a portfolio of programs that are designed to contribute to its social mission. Such programs may be offered by different levels of an agency. They may be implemented in many different geographic locations and may even be funded by different outside entities. All of this influences the program's and the organization's culture—the beliefs, customs, and rules that shape the way the organization operates.

Furthermore, programs, as organizations, have a *history*. This history reflects many previous decisions and involves those currently or previously within the program. It also involves individuals within the larger organization encompassing the program and the encouragement or constraints that they have provided and continue to provide. Consider, for example, an after-school tutoring program that is situated in a school and that school is part of a school district. The program did not simply come into existence at the school. Rather, someone or some group of people designed it to address a specific set of concerns. These individual(s) then had to convince a broad audience—teachers, school leaders, district leaders, and families—that the program was worth considering and supporting. Once the resources had been identified and allocated for the program, it had to be implemented. There is a story behind the development and existence of every program. A part of understanding the program's organizational context is uncovering this story and learning its history.

➢ *What You Can Do*

1. Do your homework. Learn when the program was established, by whom, where, and why. How large is the program? Who is on staff? Who does the program aim to serve? What are its goals? Much of this information should be available on the program's website or through social media. If the

program is government funded, then you might locate the call for program proposals in the government registries. This document will provide a good sense of the program's focus.

2. Talk with program staff. As you meet with stakeholders to learn about their evaluation needs, take the opportunity to learn about the program as well. Engage staff in an informational interview. You might ask, "Who was instrumental in starting the program? Whose idea was it? What were the motivations for establishing the program? What needs or issues was it expected to address? Has the program been implemented continuously?" If there was a hiatus in the program's availability, why and for how long? Likewise, if the program is to be *newly established,* many of the same questions may also be asked. "Who advocated for the creation of the new program? Who preferred the old program and maintained that a new program need not be established?"

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Now let's consider the community context. Just as every program has a history, so does every community. Understanding a community's history provides a unique perspective as to how it took shape and, more importantly, why it exists in the form that you will come to encounter and know through your evaluative work. Thus, you will want to understand those aspects of a community that give it a distinct identity and "feel." What do I mean by this?

Let's consider the after-school tutoring program mentioned earlier. How do we come to understand a program that is situated in a rural environment, where gas stations and markets are over 40 miles apart, where children are bused to school, and where bartering might be a common practice? Such a program would be very different from one that is located in a suburban town where the majority of homes look similar, where all lawns appear uniformly green and freshly manicured, where town centers are typical places for neighbors to run into each other while out on errands, and where children can walk or ride their bicycles to and from school. Life in metropolitan and more urban areas provide yet another perspective. What do we make of a tutoring program that is offered in communities where children are strongly discouraged from playing outside after dark; where gunshots, sirens, and helicopter blades beating overhead are reliably heard several times per week; where lockdowns are part of a typical day at school; and where there are more liquor stores than grocery stores per square mile?

It wouldn't be unusual for the same program to be offered in these highly different settings. However, we would have to anticipate that

the manner in which it is implemented and those who are truly able to take advantage of the program would change from one environment to the next. As you can see, every community has a story, and geography is only one element of it. Getting to know the community context requires much more.

➢ *What You Can Do*

1. Do your homework and find out what the story is. Continuing with the after-school tutoring program as an example, you might consider questions such as: What is the economic health of the community? What occupations are primarily reflected in the community? What kind of housing exists? What is the education level of community members? How many languages are spoken and what are they? What is the crime rate over the past few years? Much of this information can be acquired from area demographic statistics, but that is only a start.

Remember, you must obtain a "feel" for the community. One easy way to start gaining a sense of what a certain community is like is by using Google Maps. The "street view" feature of this Web-based resource allows you to walk down a street in most neighborhoods. Thus, without leaving your office, you can see where parks, libraries, or liquor stores are located within different communities. This is only the tip of the iceberg and does not preclude your physically going into the community.

2. Talk with community members. Every neighborhood and every community has people within it. My message for evaluators: Go into the community and get a feel for who these people are. What does a typical day in their life look like? What are their social moods? Do they know about the program? Do they have strong feelings about it? Do they have any knowledge about it?

Also, get a feel for the social context. Have there been changes in the economic structure of the community, such as major companies moving in or out? Has there been civil unrest or increases in the crime rate? What kind of relationship exists between the community and its leaders? Are there some issues that are "electric," or too hot to touch? Why?

POLITICAL CONTEXT

We have talked about the program and its larger organization as well as the community that encompasses it. Now we look at both from a political perspective. Esteemed evaluation writers have said that all evaluations are political. Within evaluation, there exists politics. First, let me

make this clear: Politics, as such, is *not all negative*. Programs themselves are created through a political process. There are political mechanisms that helped create the program and which continue to foster it. At the start, some people had a view about a way to achieve particular goals. Others needed to be convinced of the propriety of the proposed set of actions. Some might have disagreed. There was a give and take and finally, a political consensus was attained. Programs reflect a political consensus—a compromise—and an accommodation of multiple views.

Evaluation has continuing political impact because its purpose and the process are political. Consider, for a moment, what evaluations do. In a formative evaluation, we might question whether the logic behind program activities is sound—whether these particular program activities are capable of attaining the desired goals. In a summative evaluation, the viability of a program's goals is examined. Generally speaking, evaluations are relied upon to drive decision making—whether aspects of the program should stay the same, be altered, or discontinued (more on this in Section V).

A further indication of the political impact of the evaluation process is found in what we evaluators do in an evaluation. We assist in the determination of which stakeholders will participate and in what way, and we jointly come to a decision about who are the primary stakeholders. We obtain input from the larger stakeholder audience. At the same time, we are constrained by how attentive we can be to each stakeholder. Decisions about who gets selected and participates are sometimes logistical, but they are also often political—such decisions are measures of power. Furthermore, since programs were conceived politically, the results of evaluations might potentially disrupt this politically derived agreement about a program. Evaluations could disrupt the power balance that created the program. There are many aspects to this politically accommodated balance—the program being evaluated could have been created within the organization sponsoring the evaluation. However, there may have also been strong community views expressed during the program's creation. Evaluators cannot respond to all stakeholder points of view and represent them equally. Thus, evaluators risk politically antagonizing some groups.

One source of this continuing tension is the different value systems. Value systems influence ways of operating and views on acceptable behavior. They are made up of views and opinions rooted in previous experiences, beliefs, and cultural practices, and are influenced by the social norms of the organizations and other entities in which individuals take part. Every stakeholder group involved in an evaluation—directly and otherwise—has a value system embraced by their own family, friends, and social group. Many evaluators tend to refer to these

value systems as "cultures." There is a community culture, an organizational culture, a program culture, and many individual cultures. These various cultures impact the way that everyone experiences the program and its evaluation along with what is considered acceptable. These disparate cultures are often the root of conflict and misunderstanding because they do not always align. In particular, they may not align with your values—your culture. (Yes, the evaluator has a value system as well.)

Thus, evaluators must be mindful of existing cultures, how they are represented, and how they are experienced. This sheds light on the dynamics that exist between individuals and groups within the evaluation context. Note that the views and opinions that you encounter may belong to either a dominant or a minority subgroup. What do I mean by this? Communities are made up of smaller groups of constituents. Each group has their own views about and experiences with the program. Thus, some views are inherently overrepresented while others are inadequately represented. How will you—the evaluator—represent these competing perspectives? Likewise, while there are commonly accepted value systems, there are also sets of beliefs among segments of a community that are less widespread. This is particularly true for traditionally underrepresented groups whose voices may not get heard because they are intentionally not invited to contribute to the process, or because access, language, or cultural barriers prevent them from fully participating. Again, what role will you play in ensuring that the needs and voices of these groups are accurately represented?

It is absolutely important for evaluators to understand the political context because embedded within it are value systems, power structures, and implicit and explicit expectations (more on this in a bit). This aspect of context warrants mention because it sets the tone for the program, the community, the people in these settings, and how the evaluator comes to understand it all. So, what can you do? The theme of this section is "There's a story. Find out what it is."

➢ What You Can Do

1. Do your homework. Consider the community influentials who might have thoughts about the program, its evaluation, or its outcomes. In the case of the tutoring program mentioned earlier, it could be the parents, the school principal, the district superintendent, a city council member, or even the mayor. How would you know who the possible influentials are? To start, pay attention to the social issues that are making local, regional, and national headlines. Do they affect the program in any way? If so, how? Can this be verified with program stakeholders? Find out who is weighing in about the

program, the community, and what do they have to say. In the same vein, explore relevant archived materials. Examples of such resources include proceedings or recordings of town hall or city council meetings. Similar documents exist for school board meetings. They are often publicly accessible on city or school district websites. You might even ask program administrators if they would allow you to peruse prior meeting minutes for your own education.

2. Talk to people. Many in the community may not be aware of the program and so are apathetic about it. But there are voices (both proponents and opponents) who might have views about the evaluation being conducted and these should be considered a political factor. Program opponents, while possibly wanting an evaluation, will certainly have views about what they would consider to be desired results. Strong community advocates of the program might be hesitant about an evaluation because they don't want to see the program changed. Alternatively, they might want an evaluation in order to validate their position.

Various individuals might be impacted by the program in one way or another. For some, the *continuance* of the program might be viewed as beneficial. For others, the *dis*continuance of the program might be applauded. Particular aspects of the program might be viewed as intrusive or controversial. People in the community might think (or say), "Do I want these people [program participants] in my neighborhood? How will this impact the traffic on the streets that I drive? Do I want my son, daughter, partner, or friend participating in such a program? Does this program offend my ethical sensitivities? Are vulnerable constituencies having their voice heard? Are there ethnic or religious issues that I object to? Are social justice considerations being appropriately addressed?" Clearly, not all community views can be taken into consideration. You, as the evaluator, should at least attempt to gain some understanding of these sentiments.

Ask as broadly as possible about those in the community with whom you ought to talk in order to get a better understanding of the diversity of views about the program. And thus, be armed to perceive the sensitivity of what you do and what you report.

IMPACT ON THE EVALUATION

We have discussed the program, community, and political contexts because they are all important aspects of the evaluation context—that is, the setting and climate in which the evaluation occurs. Another important element in this organizational context are the various stakeholders. Some of these may be included in this discussion (a fuller discussion of stakeholder groups is presented in Section E). It is critical to

understand the web of relationships that people have with one another and with the program. The intermingling of unpredictable views and variable opinions within such webs make the evaluation context highly complex. Your ability to conduct a successful evaluation—one in which learning takes place and results are used—is contingent on your grasp of what is happening in this broader environment.

Consider, for instance, how you would go about conducting an evaluation where staff are excited to understand whether participants are benefiting in the manner that is hoped, where staff are open to feedback about the program's strengths and weaknesses, where the program itself is valued and supported by the community, and where there is unilateral commitment to see it thrive. Compare that with an evaluation of a program that is openly disdained by the community, but vehemently supported by program developers and funders, and where evaluation is not an instrument for learning and improvement, but is instead a mechanism for improving public relations and marketing. Likewise, what if you find yourself in a situation where staff are ambivalent about the program and are comfortable with the way things are, where participants' feedback are taken with a grain of salt, and where administrators are more interested in doing evaluation for the sake of being able to say—to a funder or an accrediting agency, for example—that they did it. Some of these examples are admittedly extreme, some are perhaps rare, but they have occurred and every so often, an evaluator will have the opportunity to work in such contexts. The spirit of evaluation differs greatly in all of these cases, and upon deciding that you will pursue an evaluation, it is important that you familiarize yourself with circumstances that may affect your work and trajectory.

What You Can Do

1. Again, do your homework. Understand whether evaluation has been conducted in the past, what was its purpose, and who were the intended audiences. Knowing what role evaluation played (if any) with respect to the program's development and evolution will give you a sense of how to go about the evaluation that you must conduct. Sources that might prove to be helpful in ascertaining this kind of information include existing evaluation reports, newspapers, other types of media, government registries, governing board records, and archived materials. Note that evaluation results are often reported in the media, but they are not always referred to as such, so be keen when searching for and consuming information from these sources.

2. Talk to people—program administrators, program staff, program participants, and community members—who you think will be able to shed

light on what can be expected in the present or upcoming evaluation. Specifically, try to understand their previous experience with evaluation, how they have used those results, their motivation for engaging in or commissioning an evaluation, and how they intend to use the findings. Know that there may be program stakeholders in the organization who desire an evaluation and others who would be threatened by one. You need to consider what *motivated* the evaluation. Who asked for it? Who wants it? Does the request come from the larger organization? Do they have an agenda? Are they open to real evaluation? Is there political pressure within the organization to satisfy the demands of a funding agency?

Talking to primary stakeholders to personally gain understanding of context is important but it has value beyond that. Involving these stakeholders as you seek to gain this knowledge of the context deepens their own understanding and helps to attain a more shared perspective.

➢ *My Advice:* It is important to know that tension will resurface throughout the evaluation because every evaluation activity has political consequences. Your role, however, is not to force alignment. Rather, it is to display sensitivity toward these dynamics, acknowledge where there may be discordance, critically reflect on whether they affect your ability to conduct a balanced evaluation, and attend to them throughout the evaluation.

Finally, recognize the political reality of evaluation. It exists and encompasses various partisan views, but do not be deterred. Do the best that you can to personally conduct the evaluation in an unbiased fashion. Always be sensitive to the political context surrounding your endeavor.

➢ *Thinking Ahead:* In Sections O, P, and Q, I discuss development of the evaluation plan. I urge you to be aware of potential political and organizational issues that might need to be addressed in the plan. By this I mean, begin to consider the manner in which sensitive issues might be dealt with. Consider whether the views of stakeholders in the community or the organization might interfere with the conduct of the evaluation. For example, will access be limited, or hindered, by those antagonistic to the program's continuance?

Being "in the know" about community, political, and organizational issues and points of view adds to your ability as an evaluator to relate to the various individuals who are connected to the program—including stakeholders, program staff, and those whom the program services. This helps you to make sense of what you perceive and of the information you gather. Contextual knowledge will assist in understanding the nuanced occurrences unique to this particular individual program.

RECAP—SECTION H

Organizational, Social, and Political Context

- Organizational Context
  - Research the program's history
  - Talk to program staff and program participants
- Community Context
  - Learn about groups and subgroups in the community
  - Go into the community and get a "feel" for what life is like there
- Political Context
  - Politics is not all negative
  - Every aspect of evaluation is political—purpose and process alike
  - Evaluation reinforces but also disrupts power structures
  - Tension between evaluation, politics, power, and values is recurring
- Impact on the Evaluation
  - Understand evaluation's historical role in the program
  - Understand the relationships people and groups have with each other and with the program
  - Gain clarity about stakeholders' previous experience with evaluation

GAINING ADDITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Evaluation of RUPAS

In thinking about the organizational, social, and political context for the RUPAS program, consider the aspects of the Family Matters (FM) organization that might impact the evaluation. What factors immediately stand out? What do you know about the community and how might it impact the program and the evaluation? What is the relationship of the RUPAS program to FM? What are the stakeholders' underlying motivations for commissioning or engaging an evaluation? If an evaluation was previously conducted, were the results used? If so, in what ways? What other organizational, social, or political aspects of the context might be relevant?

🖥 *Resource*

Google Maps
www.maps.google.com

As I mentioned, the "street view" feature here is quite useful and can be activated by going to the website above, entering the address of interest in the search bar, double-clicking the flag that marks the point of interest, and clicking the "street view" link.

📚 *Further Reading*

Fitzpatrick, J. L. (2012). An introduction to context and its role in evaluation practice. *New Directions for Evaluation, 135,* 7–24.

The breadth of evaluation literature on context is reviewed in this article. Explicit analysis of stakeholder and program culture and how they influence evaluation are provided.

Vo, A. T., & Christie, C. A. (2015). Advancing research on evaluation through the study of context. *New Directions for Evaluation, 148,* 43–55.

A framework for understanding the various dimensions of context and how it can be used to systematically study context is outlined in this paper.

Weiss, C. H. (1993). Politics and evaluation: A reprise with mellower overtones. *American Journal of Evaluation, 14*(1), 107–109.

Carol Weiss offers a critical analysis of how and where politics enters and affects the conduct of evaluation. Much of what Carol notes in this paper still rings true. The article is a classic.

✐ *Quick Reads*

1. Mary Crave on What's in Your Wallet? Or Back Pocket? Some Handy Questions for Encouraging Culturally Sensitive Evaluation
   http://tinyurl.com/zmtxc3j

2. Jennifer Greene on Context of Evaluation, and the Evaluator as Part of the Context
   http://tinyurl.com/jo5f5kf

3. Katherine Haugh, Smriti Bajracharya, and Kat Athanasiades on Putting Data in Context: Timelining for Evaluators
   http://tinyurl.com/gtflbqv

4. Mary Kane on Valuing Voice in Planning and Evaluation: Isn't It Obvious?
   http://tinyurl.com/j2h2be6