



May 1978

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Richard A. Ball
West Virginia University

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Recommended Citation

Ball, Richard A. (1978) "Systemic Perspectivism: A New Basis for Evaluative Research," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss3/7>

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SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVISM: A NEW BASIS FOR EVALUATIVE RESEARCH

Richard A. Ball

West Virginia University

ABSTRACT--Evaluative research has not kept pace with developments in the theory of social planning and the philosophy of science. If evaluation is to contribute to social planning, evaluators must recognize that planning is a political process. The method of systemic perspectivism may be able to provide a means of combining the virtues of general systems theory with a perspectivistic view of objectivity, allowing for a transactive planning which involves the public.

My purpose here is to describe what I consider to be the major problem facing evaluative research and to indicate one direction by which we might develop a methodology capable of providing a reasonable solution. The problem has to do with the place of evaluation in the planning process. Social planning as we have known it has tended toward one of two extremes; either the process has been characterized by a rather chaotic eclecticism influenced by all sorts of questionable motives, or it has followed a highly centralized, "social engineering" approach. The former is clearly inappropriate, but the latter is itself a matter of increasing social debate. What we need now is a new vision of social planning and a methodology of evaluation which augments it.

Social engineering was developed in a time of rapidly centralizing institutions which maintained a reality hegemony. These institutions dominated planning because they had stepped into a near vacuum with clear goals, a confidence born of faith in the application of technology, and a sense of their own power. Today it is different. Our goals are now matters of political negotiation. We have begun to realize that purely technological solutions may sometimes pose serious moral dilemmas. And some of the old arrogance of power is gone. Still, as long as the evaluator remains a technician who does the bidding of the politician and the professional planner, we are not likely to see genuinely sophisticated evaluative research or to witness the day when it becomes a truly integral part of planning. It is therefore necessary that the evaluator look beyond his traditionally narrow province and concern himself with the larger issues of planning and even with the philosophy of

science. He must understand that the planning process is political rather than technical, and instead of complaining about this fact of life he must learn to see it as appropriate to any society which presumes to become a democracy. If he accepts this view, he must seek to shift his own role so as to broaden and deepen the functions of evaluation. Recent developments in the philosophy of science suggest that this shift might be accomplished through a method of systemic perspectivism. To understand what is entailed here, we must first consider developments in the theory of social planning and then turn to questions of the philosophy of science. Social planning is the key to the evaluation question, for evaluation must be an integral part of the planning process. The philosophy of science may provide us with some new answers.

Developments in the Theory of Social Planning

Since our conceptions of evaluative research are embedded in our general views of planning, it is well to begin with the latter. What we discover is that some very significant changes are taking place in the theory of social planning. These changes are reflected in a repudiation of the social engineering model and in an increasing emphasis upon distributive equity (Webber, 1965) and societal learning models (Dunn, 1971). What these newer approaches have in common is an appreciation of the difference between functional rationality and substantive rationality in planning. Functional rationality attends to the efficient relation of means to given ends. It is the province of the "expert," and its guiding principle is efficiency. It rests upon the complicated assumption that there is always one best way of dealing with a situation, that this is synonymous with technical efficiency, and that technical efficiency rests upon the ability to control all relevant factors. The consequence is allocative planning, based on the distribution of limited resources among a number of competing users (Friedmann, 1973:52). Examples of the results of such a narrow orientation may be found in the increasing number of carefully documented studies of the actual consequences of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and planning, programming, budgeting systems (PPBS) (McKean and Anshen, 1965; Rivlin, 1969; Schick, 1971). These apparently precise techniques are usually nothing but a means of legitimating and fine-tuning decisions which have already been made.

The definition of evaluation as measurement of the outcome of a "social experiment" is an unrealistic remnant of social engineering." It can be traced to the older view which required only technicians capable of testing the efficacy of means and to a reluctance to face several harsh facts of life. To begin with, the evaluator rarely has much control over the "experiment" (Ball, 1977). There are particularly trea-

cherous pitfalls associated with evaluative research, which, unlike the sheltered laboratory work so characteristic of the older sciences, often finds itself in non-cooperative, actively resistant and sometimes deliberately misleading environment (Gouldner, 1965).

The issue of causality represents another serious set of questions which must eventually be faced, simply because the notion of unilinear cause-effect has little relevance in a complicated, interdependent and rapidly shifting social milieu (Ball, 1977; Weiss and Rein, 1969). The singling out of "independent" and "dependent" variables in such cases is largely a matter of which segment of a chain of events is selected for study. That is why Katz (1971:56), citing the increasing importance of social research in Supreme Court decisions, has entered a plea for a "model by means of which scholars may direct themselves explicitly toward the investigation of the empirical and logical foundations alleged to justify the causal inferences that underlie the official policy under investigation." He argues that much official policy may rest upon "dishonest pretensions" and that one function of policy research is to "unmask" the causal fallacies upon which these pretensions rest. We encounter the same problems when we turn from a discussion of "causes" to an examination of "effects." The focus upon effects defined as "primary", along with an insensitivity to the secondary and tertiary effects of a given policy, represents one of the most serious violations of the principle of distributive equity central to recent theories of democratic social planning (Webber, 1965). Which effects are to be considered primary?

Finally, there is the unpleasant fact that the evaluation criteria themselves are often selected by someone else in terms of his own definition of "success" and "failure". Suchman (1967:61), classifies the criteria according to which the success or failure of a program can be evaluated in terms of effort (input assessment), effectiveness (output assessment), impact (output relative to need), cost effectiveness (input to impact ratio) and process (descriptive and diagnostic analysis of the process by which results are produced), but maintains that the study of process is really not an inherent part of evaluative research (Suchman, 1967:21). Those who do express some interest have tended to equate process evaluation with rudimentary administrative monitoring (see, for example, Rossi and Williams, 1972:110). One reason for the skeptical attitude of many experienced politicians and administrators toward current evaluation research is their realization that the technical approach captures only a caricature of the political and social realities with which they must deal (Rock, 1965). There is certainly limited practical value to the findings derived through the orthodox designs. If we are very fortunate, we may learn what has happened, but

the question of how it happened goes unanswered except for our often simplistic assumptions about the variables which are "independent" and those which are "dependent." If the policy is a "failure" it may not be clear just why, and even if judged a "success", we have no reasonable certainty that we can repeat the process.

In contrast to the technical narrowness of functional rationality, substantive rationality rests upon intelligent insight into the behavior of complex system as a whole, including a grasp of its ambiguities. It is concerned with the ends of action as much as with the means. It is in the broadest sense political rather than technical. Substantive rationality makes possible innovative planning which is concerned with larger questions of change and is characterized by an accent upon the merging of planning and action activities. It leads us to a process of "transactive planning" based upon involvement of all concerned (Friedmann, 1973). A proper social planning process is really an information processing system. The better the information and the more effective the processing, the better the planning decisions.

We need better ways of getting information. Social planning has long been characterized by institutionalized selective perception. The process has been organized so as to give planners certain information. Some means must be found to make transactive planning a reality, so that all communication lines are open and attention is paid to the diversity of goals which is to be found in a complex, modern society. I believe that evaluative research has a major part to play here.

We also need to improve our information-processing, our sequence of decision-making. At the present time we find that decision-makers are relatively isolated from immediate environmental feedback. They are sheltered from the consequences of their decisions. We must open up this process at every stage of development. Evaluative research may also be our most important asset in this struggle for more effective means of collective learning.

Evaluative Research and the Philosophy of Science

Our preoccupation with social engineering in the traditional sense springs partly from our suspicion of "subjectivity." Evaluators are much concerned with the problem of subjectivity, and a great deal has been written over the issue of value-neutrality. Indeed, social engineering makes much of the possibility that it can be handled through a purely positive science which will eliminate the subjective element. Social planning, however, involves value judgements, and there is no way around this. Moreover, these questions of values cannot be separ-

ated from the so-called "objective" facts of a situation. Vickers (1965: 40) has put it very effectively:

An appreciation involves making judgements of fact about the "state of the system," both internally and in its external relations. I will call these reality judgements. These include judgements about what the state will be or might be on various hypotheses as well as judgements of what is and has been. They may thus be actual or hypothetical, past, present, or future. It also involves making judgements about the significance of these facts to the appreciator or to the body for whom the appreciation is made. These judgements I shall call value judgements. Reality judgements and value judgements are inseparable constituents of appreciation...The relation between judgements of fact and of value is close and mutual; for facts are relevant only in relation to some judgement of value and judgements of value are operative only in relation to some configuration of fact.

As Kuhn (1973) has reminded us, the history of science discloses a tendency to elaborate and sanctify the dominant paradigm until it constitutes the very definition of science, setting the legitimate range of inquiry, identifying research targets within that range, and dictating appropriate methodology. The social engineering approach to planning rests upon a positivist framework which assumes the existence of an objective reality external to us and of an "objective" expert who can describe it (Kolakowski, 1969), and this is the same epistemological framework which undergirds our contemporary notion of evaluation. It is assumed that experts have access to the sphere of absolute reality by way of strategies of quantification and experimentation (Kolakowski, 1969). Unfortunately, the tendency to attribute to this realm of "truth" a unitary nature (Holzner, 1968) and to conceive of it as absolute and eternal, static and changeless (Kolakowski, 1969) tends to produce a reification of one point of view as the scientific truth of the matter. This bias has interfered with the development of methods of equitable evaluation, which may be defined as evaluative research which includes the best possible representation of the diverse viewpoints to be found in a highly differentiated, "open" society (Ball, 1977). The "truth" turns out to be the version preferred by a certain segment of society.

Recently, however, we have begun to appreciate the extent to which social life is an actually constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Holzner, 1968). Friedmann (1973) makes this notion central to his

theory of transactive planning, emphasizing the viewpoint as developed by Mannheim (1936). At the same time, some research methodologists have begun to stress the same orientation (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968). Although one can hardly expect a new paradigm to emerge full-blown, it may be worthwhile to consider general directions. At this point, it appears that evaluative research might benefit greatly by explicit recognition of the extent to which reality is socially constructed through the "intentionality" of actors whose meanings are formed in a matrix of "inter-subjectivity" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The merits of such an approach are that it is politically sensitive to the changing nature of social reality and that it emphasizes the political process which facilitate or impede planned change.

The approach with which we are dealing has been called perspectivism (Mannheim, 1936). It must not be confused with epistemological idealism. This misunderstanding would appear to be the result of Husserl's emphasis upon attention to phenomena as they "appear" to us, bracketing the question of whether or not they are "real." There has been a great deal of confusion here. Strasser (1963:296-302) shows that this "phenomenological impressionism" is essentially a "degeneration" supported by tendencies toward a merely "suggestive" or "literary" approach and criticizes the way in which phenomenology "came to be considered as an uncritical intuitionism." Referring to this trend as a "strange attitude of mind," he points out that "no attention was paid to the fact that the naiveness of seeing, which received so much praise, could not even be genuine, for authentic naiveness is not aware of itself" (Strasser, 1963:297). Far from denying the existence of the world, perspectivism insists that all thought must be treated as "situated" in the world. Unlike the vulgarized versions of phenomenology which have become so popular, perspectivism insists with Heidegger that some method is needed precisely because the phenomena are not immediately given.

Although Mannheim gave us a new basis for social planning, he did not succeed in providing a satisfactory methodology beyond an emphasis upon the importance of substantive rationality and faith in the possibilities of a "detached intelligentia" which could learn to think in perspectivistic terms. The problem, then, is to find a method which will allow us to take account of social diversity. This would appear to require that we accept some sort of "processual model" of social systems. Following Buckley (1967:17), we may regard the processual model as an underdeveloped paradigm with a long history extending from the work of Whitehead, Einstein, Dewey and Bentley in physical science and philosophy to that of Marx, Simmel, Cooley and Thomas in social science. As Buckley himself has stressed, this model is most clearly exemplified by general systems theory (GST).

The "perspectivism" of Mannheim and the "Biperspectivism" of GST (Laslo, 1972:119) stress a holistic approach and the epistemological importance of perspective rather than the isolation of analytical variables assumed to be independent of perception. Instead of arguing over the importance of subject vs. object, both attempt to concentrate on relationships in the form of interplay between the two, and both emphasize feedback loops rather than "causes." Sutherland (1974:55) quotes with approval the following statement:

Analysis has to proceed at two levels: that of phenomenology, that is of direct experience, encompassing perception of outside things, feeling, thinking, willing, etc., and of conceptual constructs, the reconstruction of direct experience in systems of symbols, culminating in science, it being well understood that there is no absolute gap between precept and concept, but that the two levels intergrade and interact (von Bertalanffy, 1967:94).

The "reconstruction of direct experience in systems of symbols" is another definition of GST. A combination of perspectivism and GST provides a method which may be designated as systematic perspectivism. Since I have dealt with this method elsewhere (Ball, 1977) there is no need to go into much detail as to the actual practice of systemic perspectivism. What I am concerned about here is its applicability to the newer vision of social planning. It is especially applicable to the notion of societal learning, because one would expect information exchange to open a variety of feedback loops, leading to more efficient mapping of perceived reality and an emerging consensus as to its nature. Information is in fact sometimes defined as that input which increases order. Only when the public is deeply involved in mutual learning through some sort of transactive planning is it possible to open up information flow. Social engineering actually tends to close off information, giving a surface appearance of order which only serves to hide the disorder beneath.

My own experience, including evaluations of Community Action Agencies developed during the War on Poverty, assessments of curriculum impact, and evaluation of criminal justice programs, suggests that systemic perspectivism might be a powerful tool for policy studies. During the evaluation of one Community Action Agency, policy was seen not as an "experiment" (which implies tight control, clear resolution of the causality problem, and the power of the experimenter to select the experimental criteria) but rather as a new component introduced within an on-going system. It became clear that the program of the Agency was signi-

ificantly affected by such external variables as the pattern of power in the local community and that these forces had to be identified and their effect somehow assessed. The approach which was worked out has been described in detail elsewhere (Ball, 1970). It led to the construction of a model of coalitions of power which represented a system operating in accordance with specific rules but shifting its internal structure with variations in issues, with disagreements endemic to the system itself, and with the inputs of suprasystems external to the local community. Different definitions of events were held by different factions, but the foundations of these perspectives could be determined. The planners were occasionally among the least objective participants in the "experiment."

Such an approach means that we move to make the neglected question of process our central area of inquiry, using the merely technical questions of effort, effectiveness, impact, and cost effectiveness as subsidiary aspects of the process itself. Such an approach would allow us to direct the unrealized potential for evaluation to every stage of social policy. Evaluative research has so far tended to be of little help here, being generally limited to the implementation stage and the measurement of input-output differences. This conception of evaluation is not based upon an analysis of the data requirements underlying sound public policy, but is simply the logical outcome of adherence to the social engineering tradition. What is urgently needed is research and development with an emphasis upon the development of more effective means of problem definition and policy formulation. We must deal with the entire process.

Evaluative research must itself be evaluated primarily in terms of its applicability to contemporary planning problems and not as another interesting academic exercise. Opportunities appear to be most promising if the evaluator can see research neither as the simple testing of a priori hypotheses nor as an unguided "exploration," but as a continuous self-corrective process of successive approximations leading toward "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Among other things, this means that theoretical sampling, a technique by which the process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, must be employed as a complement to the usual statistical sampling based on pre-selected criteria. As I have tried to explain in greater detail elsewhere (Ball, 1977), the evaluator who studies process must use a flexible methodology which combines the traditionally respected virtues of the detached, rigorous data manipulating technicians with the practical abilities and concerns of the skilled craftsman (Mills, 1959), the data gathering opportunities of the strategically placed and highly trained participant (Bruyn, 1966), the probing orientation of the clinician (Gouldner, 1965), the skepticism of the investigative journalist (Sjoberg and Miller, 1973) and even the opportunistic hypothesis formulation of the detective

(Sanders, 1974). This will make him of greater value to the planner.

Conclusion

The new emphasis in social planning takes us away from the older social engineering tradition and toward a transactive planning which involves the public more closely. Planning is increasingly understood as a political and not a technical process, as a question of societal learning rather than imposed solutions based upon the selective perception of a technical elite. This change makes even more important the transition from positivism to a view of society as a socially constructed reality, a transition which is at the core of the contemporary philosophy of science. It means that the perspectivism of Mannheim can be taken not only as a basis for social planning, but also as a basis for its evaluation. Evaluative research can also draw upon general systems theory. The combination of these two traditions provides us with a systemic perspectivism which can greatly broaden the functions of evaluative research, so as to assist at every stage of social planning

It is important to emphasize the distinction between systemic perspectivism and the technical "systems analysis" approach to social planning. The latter represents social engineering. It is a "new utopianism" in the sense that it carries the social engineering tradition to extremes, tending to emphasize efficiency over the humanitarian values of traditional utopian thought (Boguslaw, 1965). GST has now developed beyond the extremely mechanistic positivism of systems analysis. Integrated with perspectivism, GST may actually provide a means of transcending the epistemological and sociopolitical pitfalls of systems analysis without sacrifice of rigor.

Systemic perspectivism may allow us to take account of our lack of experimental controls, avoid spurious causal attributions, and assume a more politically sophisticated stance with respect to criteria selection. Even if we could attain it, do we really want to make the public into "subjects" for experimentation? We can continue to maintain the fiction here, or we may candidly acknowledge the lack of experimental controls and accept the components of social policy as open systems rather than closed experiments. A systemic perspectivism is capable of this, especially if the entire process is subjected to study. It will also allow the planners to involve the public fully without fear that this will "bias the experiment." There is no doubt that such a stance would subject many evaluators to pressures which technicians are not usually called upon to face. But unless the truth is acknowledged and means are found to operate in the light of reality, evaluative research will lose its leverage as a means of affecting public policy.

As to the problem of causality, systemic perspectivism stresses the extent to which "cause" and "effect" are matters of perspective. GST tells us that reality is reciprocally related through feedback processes, and these feedback processes involve a combination of value judgements and reality judgements. What social planning must do is put the two together. Technical social engineering will not help us with this sort of problem, but evaluative research which deals with the entire planning process can tell us a great deal.

It should be clear that different goals and assessments of means need not be viewed relativistically. Given that different groups observe social reality from different perspectives, it is still possible that some have a better vantage point than do others. If evaluation can be extended to the study of secondary and tertiary effects, it will be possible to provide those concerned with valuable information which may serve to clarify or even alter their perspectives. In this sense, information increases freedom of rational choice and may actually be thought of as a basis for a more objective value judgment by all concerned. This then is societal learning at its best. Although the subjective element cannot be eliminated completely, it can be rendered more objective to the extent that assumptions can be brought nearer alignment with reality as perceived by a system willing to expose itself to environmental input. Systemic perspectivism can facilitate this. It is as a whole a method of evaluative research almost ideally suited to the new problems of social planning and the new theories which offer political rather than technical solutions.

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