Deliberative Democratic Evaluation and Expanding the Role of Evaluation in the Policy Process

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> *Citizen participation is the cornerstone of the democratic political process. The case for democracy derives its basic normative rationale from the principle that government decisions should reflect the consent of the governed. Citizens in a democracy have the right—even obligation—to participate meaningfully in public decision making and be informed about the bases of government policies* (Fischer, 2003, p.205).

As politicians become less and less engaged in policy making per se, policy formation has increasingly fallen to policy experts and to political staffers rather than to elected officials (Fischer, 2003; Florio, Behrmann, & Goltz, 1979). Policy, then, becomes more distanced from the citizen/stakeholders that it is supposed to serve. Policy theorists argue that only by getting more involved in the discourse and symbolism of politics can policy analysts assist decision makers and citizen/stakeholders in putting forward alternatives that address their own issues and interests instead of those defined and shaped for them by others (Fischer, 2003).

Evaluators can aid this process by including a deliberative democratic element in evaluation designs. This component can open a forum for democratic participation that has been lost in the shift to administrative decision making. As articulated by Ernest House and Kenneth Howe (2000), this method expands stakeholder participation to incorporate diverse voices and interests through inclusion, dialogue and deliberation. It also encourages the participation of those groups who have been historically and politically disenfranchised – women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disabled (Ryan, Greene, Lincoln, Mathison, & Mertens, 1998) – that enrich and expand the available knowledge base.

While the House and Howe model concentrates broadly on the three overarching components of a deliberative democratic evaluation, Thomas Beierle's (1999) framework of social goals expands and refocuses the concept of public participation. He claims that in volatile and complex areas such as environmental policy, there are essentially three reasons to include public participation in decision making. First, the changing nature of current problems makes them unsuitable for centralized, top-down decision making. Instead, these problems require the knowledge and commitment that diverse participants can bring to the table. Second, even the most technical aspects of decision making require attention to public values (NRC, 1996 & PCRARM, 1997 cited in Beierle, 1999) and there is increasing recognition that lay people and experts bring very different but valid perspectives to this work. Lastly, in our democratic society, the public represents a legitimate voice in the decision making process (Beierle,

1999). For this paper, I have synthesized the two models to include important aspects of public participation in a democratic process while maintaining the focus on inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation.

Evaluation and Public Policy

Evaluation serves a variety of purposes, one of which can be to influence policy change (Rossi & Berk, 1981; Weiss, 1999). Although evaluation can be seen as a linear process of issue development, agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation; evaluation can occur at any point in the policy cycle (Anderson, 2011). Therefore, as Rossi and Berk argue, evaluation can

> … answer questions that arise during the formulation of policy, in the design of programs, in the improvement of programs, and in testing the efficiency and effectiveness of programs that are in place or being considered. Specific policy questions may be concerned with how widespread a social problem may be, whether any program can be enacted that will ameliorate a problem, whether programs are effective, whether a program is producing enough benefits to justify its cost, and so on (1981, p. 287).

Even so, policy makers rarely develop entirely new policies as a result of evaluation findings. Instead, policy often develops incrementally, building on extensive information networks and policies that are already in place. In addition, policy emerges from and exists in a political environment, meaning that there are numerous pressures that affect when and how policy develops. Evaluation is only one form of knowledge that might influence policy and it must compete with other information that exists within that environment (Weiss, 1999).

How, then, can we increase the use of evaluation results in public policy? One possibility is what Carol Weiss calls "enlightenment." Enlightenment is the movement of new ideas, information, and perspectives into areas of policy development. In this process, evaluation data become a part of the wider store of knowledge contributing to policy formation and change. This information influences the way in which issues are framed and reframed as well as the scope of alternatives available (Weiss, 1999). Deliberative democratic evaluation provides a vehicle for this transfer of ideas and information that represents the plurality of the people, including those who are too often without voice (House & Howe, 2000).

The House and Howe Model

House and Howe (2000) argue that there are essentially three requirements for deliberative democratic evaluation. These consist of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation. Inclusion speaks to the most basic principle of democracy; those with legitimate, relevant interests should have a voice in decisions that affect those interests. Inclusion means working, not just with evaluation sponsors and more powerful stakeholders, but with those who are underrepresented or powerless. The second element, dialogue, is critical to identifying and understanding stakeholders' interests. The widespread use of dialogue increases

the probability that greater understanding will develop between evaluators and stakeholders as well as among stakeholders themselves. Deliberation, the third element, involves "the careful, reasoned discussion of issues, values, and findings" (House, 2005, p. 3) and provides a bridge to authentic evaluation outcomes (House & Howe, 2000; House, 2005). Deliberation, though, is not simply a discussion of issues. In deliberation, there is an emphasis on the product that emerges from dialogue as well as the process that brought about that product (Abelson et al., 2003).

House and Howe (2000) use ten questions to help conceptualize their deliberative democratic paradigm. They are –

1. *"Whose interests are represented?"*

This normally includes the views and interests of all significant stakeholders.

2. *"Are major stakeholders represented?"*

Because it is almost never feasible for each individual stakeholder to be involved in the evaluation, evaluators often must settle for representatives for each group. In addition, there are instances when not all stakeholders can be represented or when evaluators must represent absent stakeholders.

3. *"Are any stakeholders excluded?"*

There are times when important groups are not included. This happens most often to the poor, the powerless, and minorities; those who have no power or voice. In that case, the evaluator must represent these interests in the best way that they can.

4. *"Are there serious power imbalances?"*

There are often clients or powerful stakeholders who, by virtue of their resources or positions, influence the evaluation and its findings.

5. *"Are there procedures for controlling the imbalances?"*

The evaluator must be responsible for controlling power imbalances and establishing the conditions for conducting data collection and implementing and maintaining dialogue and deliberation.

6. *"How do people participate in the evaluation?"*

While the mode is critical, according to House and Howe, direct involvement is expensive and time consuming as well as having the potential for bias.

7. *"How authentic is their participation?"*

Respondents tend to disengage due to increasing demands for information, becoming increasingly careless about their answers.

8. *"How involved are they?"*

Although interaction is a critical part of the evaluation process, it can be excessive. Alternatively, involvement can also be too superficial, also with negative outcomes.

9. *"Is there reflective deliberation?"*

With due dates looming, there is often insufficient time for reflection. Also, there is the possibility that the involvement of stakeholders will be limited due to time constraints.

10. *"How considered and extended is the deliberation?"*

In general, more extensive deliberations yield better findings with the case in evaluation tending toward too little rather than too much deliberation.

The House and Howe (2000) model provides a broad framework linking evaluation to democratic principles. While it addresses three critical aspects of this method, a more specific model can aid evaluators as they develop and implement their evaluation plan. In order to focus more closely on outcomes, we can incorporate additional elements from another model, Beierle's social goals framework.

The Social Goals Framework

Environmental policy issues are especially difficult to address due to their technical complexity, their tendency to be value laden, and the simultaneous operation of multiple, often conflicting interests. Policy makers in this area struggle with the challenge of making high quality decisions while striving, at the same time, to serve a participatory democratic process. Public agencies, especially regulatory agencies, have spawned a legacy of distrust and acrimony with preemptory decision making processes. In addition, public participation has not been totally successful in addressing this problem (Beierle, 1999).

Thomas Beierle (1999) proposes a model for evaluating public participation that utilizes a set of what he refers to as "social" goals. While not specifically advocating a deliberative democratic evaluation methodology, Beierle's model fits within the framework proposed by House and Howe (2000) and provides a basis for an expanded view of mechanisms by which this type of evaluation might be achieved.

Beierle's model includes the following goals.

1. *Inform and Educate the Public*

This goal discerns between an actively involved public and a wider affected public. The goal is for the active public to be able to gain sufficient knowledge to deliberate issues and develop alternatives with experts and government representatives. The wider public will be knowledgeable enough about relevant issues to offer opinions and have an understanding of the consequences of their choices.

2. *Incorporate Public Values, Assumptions, and Preferences into the Decision Making Process*

There needs to be an ongoing dialogue to discuss differences over values, assumptions, and preferences and to encourage mutual education about various issues. In order to support an inclusive discussion, all affected stakeholders should be engaged in this process on a level playing field.

3. *Increase the Quality of Decisions*

The public, in addition to a wide variety of values, assumptions, and preferences, can provide important information and innovative alternatives. As Bierele points out, input from the public can provide for more technically rigorous decisions as well as meeting a wider range of interests.

4. *Promote Trust in Institutions*

Providing input into the decision making process may bring about greater legitimacy.

5. *Reduce Conflict*

In the environmental field especially, court battles and other modes of conflict have consumed resources and caused expensive delays. Public participation can work to lessen these negative impacts by identifying shared norms and values while generating a platform for cooperative as opposed to confrontational decision making. Even if issues remain unresolved, participants can develop a greater awareness and better understanding of the others' goals and perspectives (Susskind and Cruikshank (1987) cited in Beierle, 1999).

6. *Making Decisions Cost Effectively*

Beierle approaches public participation and cost effectiveness in light of the burdens of financial costs, time, risks, and opportunity costs involved in this method. House and Howe (2000) concede that direct involvement of the public in the evaluation process is expensive in both money and time. Given that there are other alternatives that might be expected achieve the similar results, is public participation the best choice? He argues that participatory methods must justify their added effort by producing the desired results (Beierle, 1999).

<div align="center">Model Synthesis</div>

How does Beierle's model relate to deliberative, democratic evaluation? First, by increasing knowledge, this process provides a basis for an informed public to participate in the evaluation process. Traditionally, the prevailing view has been that decisions, especially those centering on technical issues should be made by experts and scientists. The more recent trend toward an active citizenry has resulted in increased emphasis on more participatory methods (Beierle, 1999; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

The effort to incorporate public values, assumptions, and preferences into evaluation is perhaps the most salient intersection of these two models. As many stakeholders as reasonably possible should be included so that there is a representative sample of thoughts and opinions. It is important at this juncture to make sure that those who are often excluded from the political process (the poor, the powerless, women, and minorities) have a voice. Dialogue at this point allows for sharing ideas about values, assumptions, and preferences and exploring differences between groups and individuals. Deliberation can provide a means to decide how these differences will be resolved. This is also a place where serious power imbalances should be addressed since stakeholders bring different resources, positions, and influence to the evaluation (Beierle, 1999; House & Howe, 2000).

Public participation is a way to increase the quality of decision making (Beierle, 1999). Members of the public can provide information that may not be available to policy makers, program staff or evaluators through any other avenue. This can be technical expertise in some area related to the problem or it may be valuable insights available only to insiders (Beierle, 1999). Including a wide range of stakeholders and encouraging dialogue among them can generate a synergistic effect, resulting in a data source that is rich and varied. Deliberation can then narrow down these insights and information to address the needs of the evaluation as well as those of internal and external decision makers (House & Howe, 2000).

Declining trust in various institutions results in a similar decline in the ability of these institutions to solve complex problems (Beierle, 1999). However, to counter this effect, stakeholders' inclusion in the decision making, implementation or evaluation process can provide evidence of the democratic process at work. Providing an opportunity for stakeholders to have input in the decision making process can improve political and organizational legitimacy and ultimately outcomes by insuring that policy development and initiatives reflect those of society and not just political agents (Carmin, Darnall, & Mil-Homens, 2003; Fischer, 2003).

Policies and programs inevitably result some level of conflict, costing money, time, and goodwill. By providing an arena where issues, values, and shared norms can be openly discussed and deliberated by those with a stake in the outcome, evaluation can decrease conflict as well as provide feedback for policy and program improvement (Beierle, 1999).

In assessing the cost effectiveness of deliberative democratic evaluation, we must keep in mind the benefits and the burdens that result. On one hand, including a diverse plurality of stakeholders increases the probability that important viewpoints can be aired and considered, some of which would have remained hidden or ignored without this process. It is also possible that a variety of relevant alternatives will emerge from deliberative elements. As a result, this type of evaluation can generate a substantial amount of highly pertinent and useful information. On the other hand, there are substantial costs involved with citizen participation in money, time, and other resources and costs incurred using a deliberative democratic method may preclude the utilization of other methods. The evaluator must weigh the costs of the program against the benefits that may accrue (Beierle, 1999; House & Howe, 2000; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

Bringing Inclusion, Dialogue, and Deliberation to Evaluation

Deliberative democratic evaluation is not for everyone or every situation. Working with diverse groups and individuals with varying backgrounds and cultures requires a greater than ordinary amount of sensitivity and "people skills." Depending on the overall goals of the evaluation, this model may best be utilized as a single aspect of a comprehensive evaluation. Considering the likely complexity of this

method, implementation may be time consuming and expensive. Also, take into account that, given its dynamic nature, there should be other avenues for data collection and analysis if timely feedback is required.

Evaluation of community development initiatives is an area where a deliberative democratic process can be especially useful. Or…it can result in undeclared (or worse, a loudly declared) battle between competing factions in the program environment (with a few volleys now and then from outside).

Almost by definition, community development programs take place in areas where there are groups who have little or no voice. These include racial and ethnic minorities, low-income families and individuals, children, and those who are marginalized in our society. For a considerable time, these programs were developed and implemented using a top-down, "command and control" approach. However, with the emergence of issues where democratic action can make significant impact, there has been increased citizen participation (Beierle, 1999; Carmin et al., 2003; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Using as an example a blend of two case studies, we can examine some aspects of deliberative democratic evaluation in a community development program evaluation.

This evaluation methodology did not result from an intentional use of a deliberative democratic model but primarily from that of social justice (See House, 1990; also Howe, 1995; and Tyler & Blader, 2003). Although the social justice theoretical perspective is different from that of the deliberative democratic perspective, they are very much alike in their goals. By chance, the path to these goals was that of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation.

Looking at a Case Study

This evaluation was part of a community development initiative located in a federal agency that required a very strong public participation component in all three program areas; development, implementation, and evaluation. It was located in a low-income minority community with many of the problems that are commonly seen in these areas; crime, high dropout rates, unemployment and underemployment, and homelessness. The goal of the program was to aid community groups in exploring and implementing solutions to problems they had defined.

From the beginning, the evaluation was designed to include various stakeholders and their viewpoints. A primary task at the early stages of the evaluation was to identify different interest groups and who would represent them. Because there were official partnerships with many of the groups, this was not particularly difficult. Conversely, some interests were inadvertently overlooked because they were not connected to the program or to any of its partner groups. While not deliberate, it is almost always the case that, unless there are extremely close ties to the community, someone's interests will not make the agenda.

As House and Howe (2000) discuss in their article, not all stakeholders can be expected to participate. It is often beyond the capacity of the evaluation to incorporate extremely large numbers of groups and individuals. An additional issue concerns bias. The large majority of participants, with the exception of program staff and others who work in community development, are self-selected. This means that the group that actively works with and participates in the evaluation may be significantly different from other residents. Beierle's (1999) separation into an actively involved public and wider public may reflect this schism. These differences between active participants and the wider community can impact the program and the evaluation in any number of ways, some of which the evaluator will hopefully recognize and document.

Developing dialogue is not as easy as it may seem. It requires a certain sensitivity to the evaluator's "place" in the group structure. This "place" can be fluid; sometimes the evaluator is on the outside looking in and at other times, he/she is more solidly embedded in the group process. Cultural barriers are another issue. Asking participants what problems they would like to address will seldom result in voicing sensitive issues like discrimination and racism, especially if the evaluator is of a different race or a markedly different socioeconomic group, effectively tabling those concerns. Also there are myriad power issues as House and Howe indicate (2000). A number of these are obvious while others can only be discovered with the help of individuals more familiar with community dynamics. Some of these power issues can be addressed but others will remain intractable, having become deeply entrenched in the fabric of the community.

Although knowledge development is at the top of Beierle's list of social goals, in the evaluation process, it actually emerges and grows beginning with dialogue. When community members engage each other, program staff, local bureaucrats and politicians, and others outside the immediate area, ideas are exchanged (sometimes rather heatedly), theories are advanced (students stay out of school because they know they can), solutions proposed (work with the school district to track truancy and inform parents), and alternatives examined. Having a diverse group means that this process taps a wide-ranging knowledge base from high school dropouts to highly educated professionals and from small businessmen and women to regional employers.

Such a group means not only that a host of values, preferences, and assumptions are represented but there is a broad knowledge base to address problems identified by the community. High school dropouts, for example, can contribute a great deal about what it means to be one. Just as the high school dropout can talk about some of the reasons for not completing school and how the community might address such issues, small businesses and regional employers can provide solid expertise drawn on their experiences and values. The role of the evaluator is to document and report this knowledge as an outcome of both the program and the evaluation.

The process of deliberation moves beyond dialogue to the essence of decision making. Deliberation is based on reason, evidence, and the principles of valid argument (House & Howe, 2000). It can be distinguished from dialogue by its focus on considering different points of view and reaching a decision based on this information (Abelson et al., 2003). Deliberation does not always flow seamlessly from dialogue. Groups develop their own dynamics, starting and stopping, slowing down and speeding up. Although evaluators can encourage the movement from dialogue to deliberation, it appears to emerge only when group dynamics meet a certain state. Even when groups reach the deliberation stage, the focus may change back to dialogue as the group seeks more information or a new viewpoint.

Although inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation may appear to be part of a linear process in this narrative, in reality, they move back and forth as individuals become more or less involved, as problems are addressed or tabled. The group may become more proficient or may become tangled in a morass of conflict and contrasting values, goals, and views. In addition, interest in the group and or in current problems waxes and wanes, affecting how much can be accomplished. In working in this context, evaluators must be prepared to be "loosely bound" to their evaluation. Attempting to control this process can result in negative impacts on the quality of the deliberative democratic element of the evaluation.

The information gathered from working with these groups was used to inform program staff and facilitate program activities and growth. Attention to inclusiveness, dialogue, and deliberation improved the sensitivity of staff and the evaluator to various aspects of the program orientation and dynamics. While not a completely deliberative democratic evaluation, including this element helped to give more ownership to those that the program was designed to serve.

<center>Expanding the Role of Evaluation</center>

- *Make your data relevant*. Strive to have a representative group or groups. Be able to support the reliability and validity of your information. Were issues adequately discussed and deliberated? Why or why not? Be able to explain <u>why</u> the data is relevant.

- *Make, to the extent possible, your findings available*. Even though evaluation is only a part of the large body of knowledge available, share it with policy makers, the general public, and other evaluators.

- *Put your findings within a larger context*. Help "connect the dots" between evaluation findings and policy development or change.

<center>Conclusion</center>

This synthesis of models can provide a beginning framework for evaluators to develop and assess efforts to incorporate a pluralistic democratic element in their evaluation designs. As this type of process becomes more highly utilized, evaluators can adjust particular elements to reflect the emerging knowledge base on citizen participation as well as expanding the role of evaluation in the policy process.

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