Childhood Influences on My Work

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Draft: 10/11/12

In the first grade, our teacher put a chart on the wall with our names on it. She said, in her best grade school teacher voice, “Children, if you do this, you will get a blue star, if you do that, you get a silver star, and if you do this, you get a gold star!” I thought: she doesn’t think we’re going to fall for that, does she? To my astonishment, the other kids began falling all over themselves to win these stars. I felt like yelling, you idiots, they’re just little paper stars! (Perhaps a portent of evaluations yet to come.)

By that time I was living with my mother, who was working three shifts in a munitions factory, while my grandmother took care of my sister and me. My father had been killed in a car wreck two years earlier. My mother had no other means of support and no resources. After a few years she married a man from the factory she didn’t know very well, and we moved along a lonely rural highway miles out of town. Unfortunately, the guy turned out to be psycho.

At night they would get into violent arguments, and sometimes he would bring out a loaded gun and hold it to my head, hammer cocked. It was a way of threatening her. I don’t know if you’ve had the opportunity to have an experience like this, but it’s totally mind focusing. During these episodes my mind was absolutely lucid. I could see that he was deranged, and I sat perfectly still in complete control of my emotions. No crying, pleading, or moving. I didn’t know what might set him off. I did think that if I survived, I would never allow myself to get into such a helpless situation again. From these and other experiences, I developed a strong resolve and motivation not to be controlled by others.

Another conclusion I had reached by the age of eight was that adults made bad decisions that could prove disastrous for them and for my sister and me. My mother was the best person I ever knew, good through and through, actually too good for the world in which she lived. She was in extremely difficult circumstances doing the best she could. My father and his four brothers were the toughest people I knew, but hardly models of prudence, as police records show. When they were little, they had been sent to a St. Louis orphanage and farmed out as child laborers after their own father died of silicosis working in the mines in Southern Illinois. I reasoned that if I could see through adult motivations and anticipate what adults might do, I could protect my sister and myself. At an early age I began looking beneath the surface of people and events, and I looked suspiciously. This attitude evolved into an intellectual style.

Years later, these traits became useful in evaluation. Often I can see what others do not see, and I will say what others will not say. All people practice willful ignorance to a greater or lesser degree. They choose not to see things—a luxury I felt I could not afford. I pushed willful ignorance back further than most people can tolerate. In books, articles, and high profile evaluations, I employed these skills.

I was pressured in various ways, as you often are. After all, careers, reputations, and livelihoods are at risk. One of the strangest episodes was a review of environmental education in Austria for OECD. The Austrians were so upset with my report that they sent a formal diplomatic protest to OECD. Not every evaluator can say that. Of course, I was highly resistant to such pressures. What could they do? Hold a gun to my head?

This style had carry-over to other parts of my life, as in financial investing. To my great surprise, when I began managing my retirement funds, I found investing fascinating. In a way it was a pure form of evaluation that culminated in concrete gains and losses, unlike contemplating the inadequacy of Hume’s theory of causation. And I was good at it. Investing requires skills—skills of skepticism--similar to those I had developed in evaluation.

In retrospect, I didn’t make the same mistakes as the adults of my childhood. No. I made other mistakes instead. Really, you can’t see through everything all the time. You can’t live without some illusions. You need illusions to motivate and protect you. Decades ago I said that people are able to withstand far less evaluation than they think they can. That includes me.

How did these childhood experiences affect my work? When conducting evaluations, I don’t necessarily believe what people tell me. I validate what they say with other data and with what others say. I have a keen sense of looking beyond appearances towards what lies beneath. My motive is to develop a deeper understanding with the idea of preventing serious mistakes.

I also empathize with the poor and powerless. Evaluators typically come from the same backgrounds as those in charge, while those receiving benefits come from the lower social classes, or else are children, patients, or victims helpless to protect themselves. Empathy with the poor and powerless has prompted me to hold strong positions about social justice, which I have tried to incorporate into evaluation.

Used inappropriately, evaluations can be instruments of repression. I’ve tried to advance standards that evaluators should live by and have conducted meta-evaluations to show what evaluators should do. I’ve been partial to qualitative methods that focus on what people actually experience. Often those in charge do not know what’s happening, and sometimes they do not want to know. Willful ignorance is widespread.

Of course, no perspective encompasses the entire truth, and the evaluator’s task is to make sense of many perspectives using multiple methods. This skepticism applies to people and methods. No method delivers unequivocal truth. I’m skeptical of foundational positions based on methods or ideology. Evaluators need to look at evidence cautiously and holistically.

I have been bold in challenging authorities. If I arrive at a position not favored by those in power, I expect them to pressure me to change my views and to retaliate if I don’t. I am willing to change findings if I have missed something or the issue is unimportant. However, if the issue is critical, that’s another matter. How seldom those in power encounter principled opposition is indicated by how uncomfortable they are with it. They realize that professionals are vulnerable in their concern about their own careers, and since those in power can help or hinder, they expect professionals to play along.

In summary, characteristics that influence how I approach evaluation include skepticism, resolve, an autonomous viewpoint, questioning of authority, looking beneath the surface, resistance to pressure, control of emotion, and empathy with the poor and powerless. No doubt, other evaluators share some of these traits, which they’ve developed from different backgrounds. And, although these traits are well suited to evaluating, being too critical, too suspicious, too cynical, or too provocative can be quite counter-productive. I have been guilty of such missteps on many occasions.

Excerpted from Ernest R. House *How Personality Influences Evaluations*