

# **Tolstoy, Buber and the Continuum: The link Between Evaluation and decision making**

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The aim of this paper is to show that the relationship between the provision of information and the making of a decision is a complex one and most often defies description in terms of any purely rational process.

## **Cultural Processes**

Individuals and cultures have characteristics, says Martin Buber (1966; see also Coyle, 1988; D’Cruz , 1979; Hazidi, 1998), which can be described as more concrete or more abstract. The mind of the more concrete person, says Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, 1991) ‘works by the opposite of the Cartesian method; it refuses to break the difficulty into parts, never accepts a partial answer, and seeks explanations that encompass the totality of phenomena.’ In contrast, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (in Lindfors, Bernth (ed.) 1997) explains: ‘Our people have always taken a more holistic approach [to life]. So when people ask me “Is it this or that?” [I say] It’s both, it’s both.’ An ideal of social relations in such contexts is the copresence of subjects (Derrida, 1976). However, the more concrete experiences are capable of being homologously generalized, and both the concrete and their concomitant abstracted forms are transmitted from generation to generation through shared cultural processes.

Towards the abstract end of the continuum, the more abstract individual (or culture) will emphasize and value individuality, and privilege the individual’s free choice in democratic practices even if as individuals it means to stand against state and one’s own community. Also valued are autonomy, disengaged rationality, all-encompassing love, professionalism, direct communication styles yet mediated relationships (often without face-to-face contact), money (often in particularly intangible forms such as equities) and so on. Nigel Rapport (1997) offers a glimpse of

his preferred notion of individuality as ‘the individual who makes himself or herself *ex nihilo* and in an originary fashion—who comes to be, who achieves a consciousness, outwith and beyond the socio-cultural environment in which he or she was born and has been socialized/enculturated.’ The favoured political style is then ‘a relationship between strangers, who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance’ (Young, 1990). These ‘strangers’ might voluntarily come together in such social networks as government and non-government civic organizations, cultural, environmental, literary and religious groups.

The methodological characteristics of the two poles on the continuum are as follows. Towards the more abstract end of the continuum, one’s orientation would be—more objective, value free, given to universal generalizations, a-contextual, dualist in epistemology and positivist. Towards the more concrete end of the continuum, one would be—more subjective, value-laden, particular, context specific, with a monist epistemology, and non-positivist. However, there are no societies that are purely concrete or purely abstract; they all lie on a cultural continuum (D’Cruz and Tham, 1993; D’Cruz and Steele, 2001:Chapter 4; and D’Cruz forthcoming). From time to time one oscillates between the concrete and the abstract. ‘We seem to have trouble with the balancing act,’ writes Paul Rainbow (1996), ‘preferring to reify local identities or construct universal ones’, despite the fact that ‘We live in between.’

The end-points of the continuum are merely conceptual terminals. Each point on the continuum is a *mix* of the concrete and the abstract. One does not dichotomize pure and simple. In a similar way there is no evaluation approach that is a pure type.

### **Evaluational paradigms**

Paradigms are not of a kind. In one paradigm, Stufflebeam et al (1971:53) offer a methodology, with the constituent elements of awareness, design, choice, and action, which they believe are inherent in any decision making process, and which strives inexorably towards a predetermined rationality working its way systematically in the world. In goose-stepping fashion, Stufflebeam’s evaluators march to preordained and fixed criteria. In another paradigm, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (quoted in Schon 1971:197-199) offers us a world of shifting events and processes in which reasonable decisions have to be made in a process of reflection-in-action. The comparison between the artificiality of the stable, static, predictable, rational decision making process as depicted by Stufflebeam et al, and the more fluid process depicted by Tolstoy, stand in stark contrast.

One can speak of an evaluation approach as being more of one orientation or more of the other orientation on the continuum. And each evaluation approach can be put somewhere along the continuum between the poles. And just as both the concrete and the abstract are important, so too are both the qualitative and the quantitative. However, we believe that descriptive statistics is more informative than inferential statistics.

Stufflebeam et al's decision making approach to evaluation is close to the abstract end of the continuum. Ralph Tyler's (1983) objectives approach to evaluation would also be more abstract since it is positivist, objective, claims to be value-free, and dualist. In contrast Guba and Lincoln's (1989) fourth generation evaluation is transactional, subjective, value-laden, context specific, and rejects universal generalizations, and thus tends towards the more concrete than abstract. Those approaches using measurement would add the abstract to their concrete-abstract mix. A system-management approach, whose key elements are system, effectiveness, efficiency and performance indicators, would claim to be objective, value-free and science based, and thus would be more abstract. Elliot Eisner (1983) (connoisseurship and criticism approach), Robert Stake (1983) (responsive evaluation), Malcolm Parlett and David Hamilton (1972) (illuminative evaluation), and Michael Patton (1997) (utilization-focused evaluation) would have more concrete than abstract in their approaches since they are subjective, value laden, reject universal context free generalizations, have a transactional epistemology and are non-positivist. Evaluation by committees of inquiry and review panels would be toward the concrete end of the continuum. Fifth generation evaluation (Caulley, 1993), which involves self evaluation and reflection by collaborative groups (participatory action research) and by individuals, is more concrete and context specific.

Where a person's evaluation views lie on the abstract-concrete continuum might be judged differently by the person compared to other persons. For example, we judge Michael Scriven's views on evaluation to be more abstract than concrete. He might see it differently. Furthermore, our judgments about the various approaches in the previous paragraph might not be agreed to by everyone.

Our category of the more concrete necessarily includes the abstract and does not presuppose a fabricated non-contextual and non-fluid subject-self, but rather a person who is a member of a bustling community and also capable of some personal choice and action; and our category of the more abstract necessarily includes the concrete and conceives of a person as one who is particularly attuned and responsive to matters of personal autonomy and who also partakes of the benefits and responsibilities of a shared culture. Nor should one assume that one's position on the continuum is permanently fixed at birth; for one can well shift along the continuum depending on time, place and circumstance; yet, even with sudden conversions as on the road to Damascus with significant changes in thought, feelings and life-directions, one does tend to recognize semblances of a signature amidst the shifts.

One person who has shifted his position along the continuum is Robert Stake who started out his career as an outstanding statistician, a person with an abstract orientation. However, he shifted his views with the development of responsive evaluation and the qualitative case study approach to evaluation which was a dramatic shift towards the concrete end of the continuum. Another person who has shifted his position along the continuum is Egon Guba. He is one of seven co-authors of the book for which Stufflebeam was first author, which was published in 1971. The methodology in the book is positivist and represents the modernist Enlightenment rationality. As indicated previously this approach is more abstract than concrete. In 1989 Egon Guba, with coauthor Yvonna Lincoln, published the book *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. As indicated previously this approach to evaluation lies at the concrete end of the continuum. Thus Guba shows a considerable shift from being more abstract in 1971 to being more concrete in 1989.

Another person who shows a shift is Donald Campbell (now deceased) who was coauthor with Julian Stanley of the classic 1963 work *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*. Experimental designs have been used extensively in evaluation in the United States, much less so in England, Europe and Australia. This evaluation approach is positivist and modernist, lying toward the abstract end of the continuum. The designs were discussed in a way that saw them free of context. However, true experimental designs can be difficult to set up, depending on the context. Consequently, in 1979 Campbell, with coauthor Cook, published the book *Quasi-Experimentation: Design and Analysis Issues for Field Settings*. This book tried to take into account the context (field setting). This made the approach less abstract but overall it can still be regarded as towards the abstract end of the continuum.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that decision making is more like that portrayed by Tolstoy than by Stufflebeam et al. We are not denying that simple, even important decisions, can follow rational, complex decision making. However, especially those made on the run as for Tolstoy's commander-in-chief, can be irrational. Buber's notion of the concrete and the abstract and D'Cruz's notion of the continuum were used to examine various evaluation approaches. Stufflebeam et al's decision maker was found to be objective, value-free, involves universal steps, disregards context, involves a dualist epistemology and is positivist and modernist. In contrast, Tolstoy's decision maker is subjective, value-laden, concerned with particulars, relates to the context, has a monist epistemology, and is non-positivist and postmodern. Some evaluation approaches are more abstract while some are more concrete. Stake, Guba and Campbell have changed their positions on the continuum over time.

When a person does an evaluation the methodology is a *mixture* of the concrete and abstract. The methodological approach is *not* described in terms of a *dichotomy*, but the approach lies *along a continuum*, either being more concrete or more abstract. This conceives of evaluation in a new way; an evaluation which is more concrete or more abstract involves different methodologies and hence different evaluation results. To understand the nature of an evaluation it is important to know where it approximately lies on the abstract-concrete continuum.

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