

# So what do you do? Exploring Evaluator descriptions of their work

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# So what do you do?



So there are these  
birds and bees and...



Is your husband  
giving the talk?



No, the kids  
just asked him  
what he does  
as an evaluator



# It's not only cartoonists & students who struggle

“Evaluation is not yet rendering the service it should; a chief reason is that those who commission, conduct and use evaluations do not have a coherent, comprehensive concept of evaluation”

(Cronbach & Snow, 1977, p. 44)

# It's not only cartoonists & students who struggle

"It is awkward to be a program evaluator. On a personal level, people in social settings rarely seem to grasp the one-sentence summary of what you do."

(King, 2003, p.57).

# This matters for the field



## **GROWTH**

of the **field** and  
**growth** of our  
evaluation firms

## **REQUIRES**

Clients & a general  
public who  
**understand** and  
**values** evaluation

# One common definition

Evaluation is the process of determining the merit, worth and value of things, and evaluations are the products of that process.

Michael Scriven  
Evaluation Thesaurus, Page 1



# Focus

1

How do evaluators describe evaluation to non-evaluators?

2

Are there contextual factors that shape how evaluators describe their work?

3

What are evaluators' experiences when discussing their work with non-evaluators?

# Method



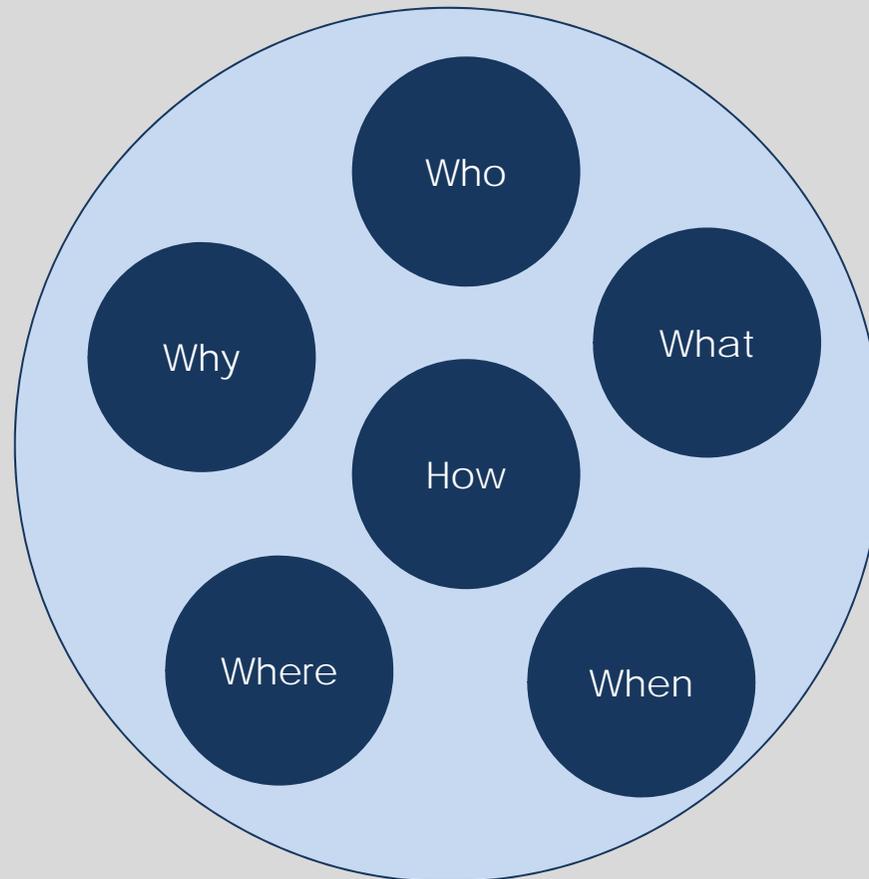
**43** US-based  
evaluators

Both **experts**  
and **novices**

From a wide  
range of  
**content** areas &  
backgrounds

# Analytic framework

The essential parts of circumstance: those pieces of information that make up a complete story.



# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

"My job is to tell a **funding agency** if they are getting their money's worth"

# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

"I help them **identify and measure the impact** of the intervention on healthcare costs, quality and outcomes"

# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

"We stress that evaluation is simply a tool to help track progress **from the beginning** so that if interventions are needed we can do this **early**."

# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

“For example, changing the culture of a **university STEM department** such that the faculty members...are more motivated to improve instruction.”

# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

"I'm here to work with you and provide feedback **so they can make their program better.**"

# What might these look like?

Who

What

When

Where

Why

How

"In order to do that we'll need to get feedback from students, and we'll do that by **giving surveys** to each of them, and then we also want to **talk to some different school staff** to see what they think about the program, and you know, how it's been serving them."

# Findings

1

Evaluators tell **incomplete stories** about their work, with most mentioning only 2 of the 6 parts of circumstance.

2

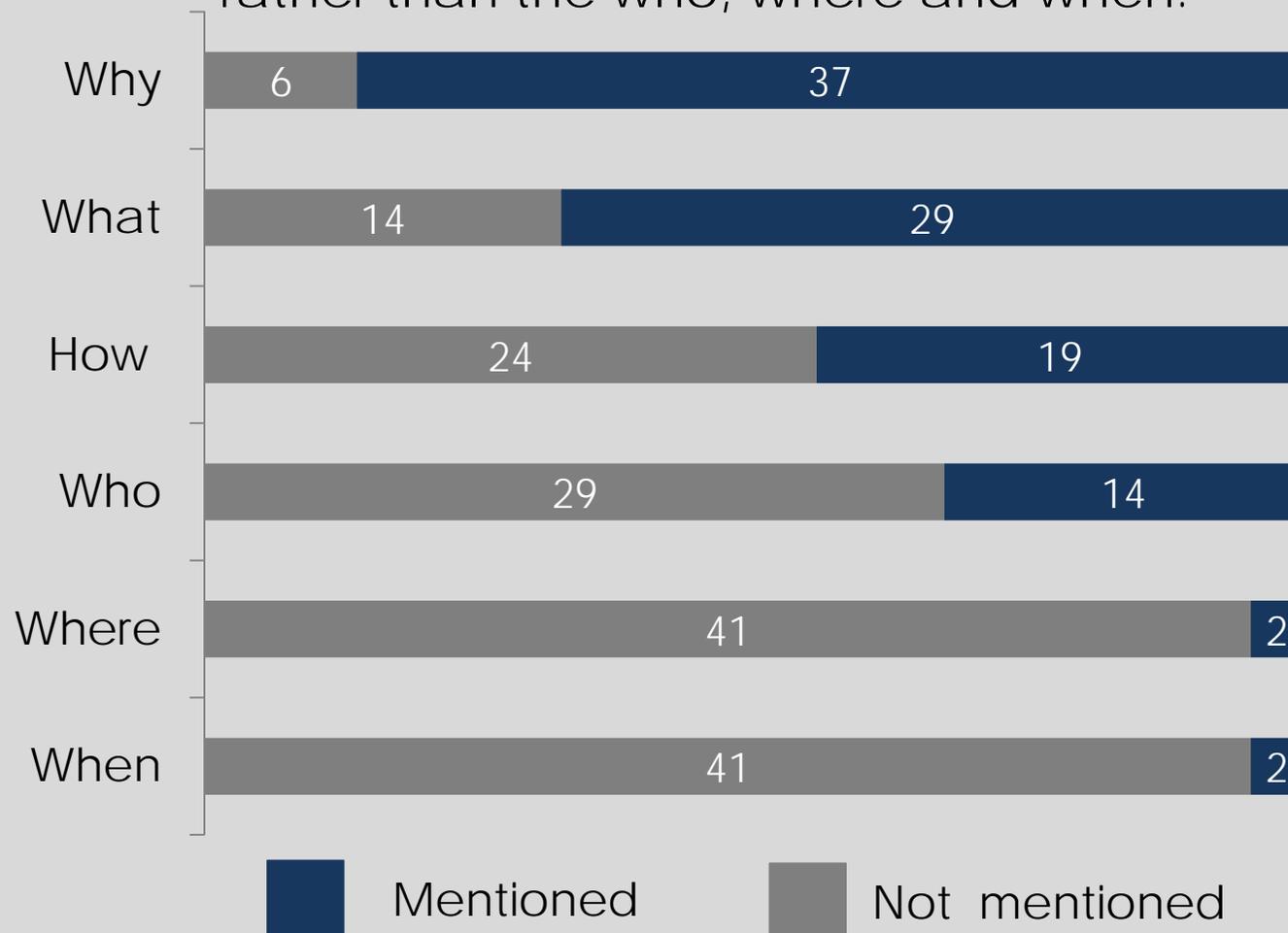
Many evaluators find it challenging to describe their work to others: **people get bored, confused or afraid when we talk.**

3

Evaluators adopt a range of strategies to try and overcome these less than positive reactions.

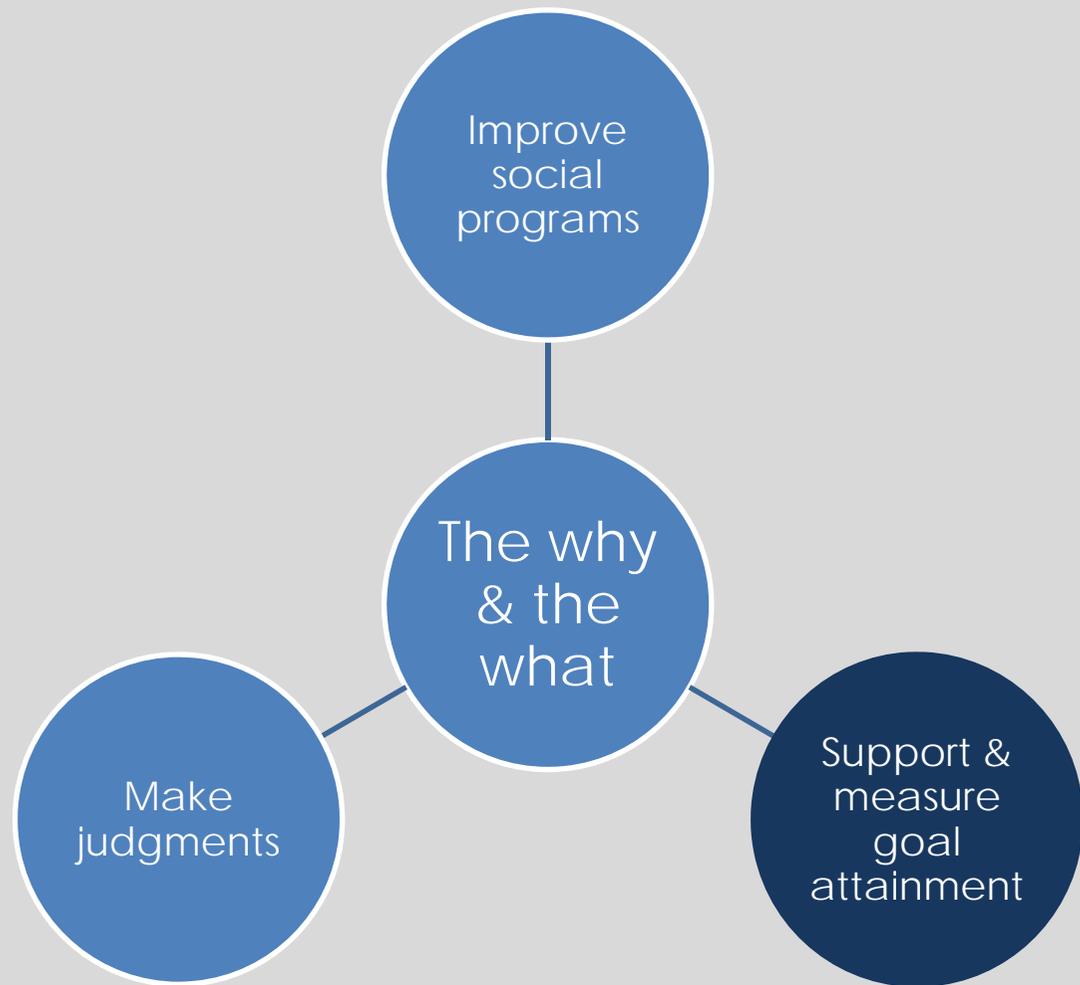
# Finding #1: Incomplete stories

Evaluators focused on the why and the what behind evaluation, rather than the who, where and when.



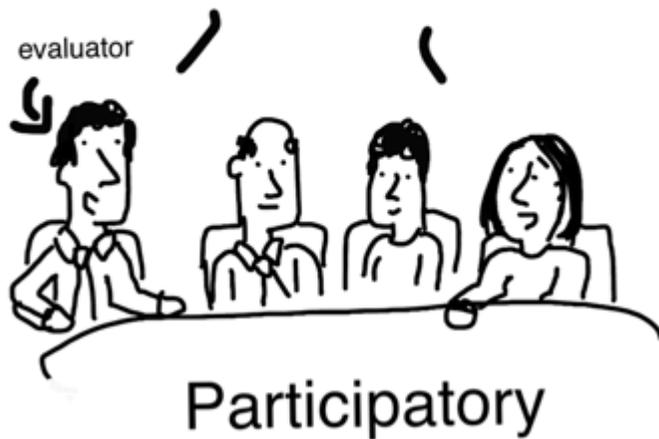
# The Why & the What

“Yeah, I usually describe it as some sort of **feedback mechanism** that helps people get the information they need to **accomplish their objective**”



# The How

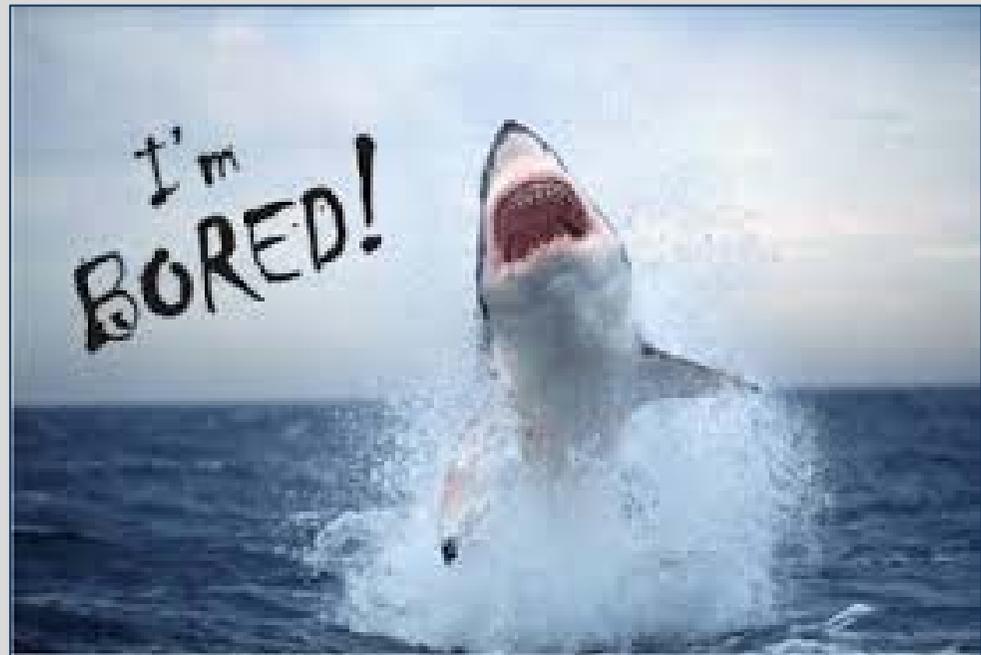
Working together, we will  
make this evaluation a success.



“I make them understand that we're not evaluating them but **we're working together** for their program.”

# Finding # 2: Boredom, confusion & fear

“Usually when I start saying research methods people start glazing over.”



# Finding # 2: Boredom, confusion & fear



"So, my aunt asked me, 'what is it exactly that you do?' I tried to explain a sub-component of being an evaluator and in that situation I was a methodologist and she just sort of looked at me, stunned and said, 'Does that mean that you're not Jewish anymore?'"

# Finding # 2: Boredom, confusion & fear

"I walked into each of these places and, um, they were afraid of me in Tennessee and Texas. And it was like Darth Vader just arrived to tell you what your results are"

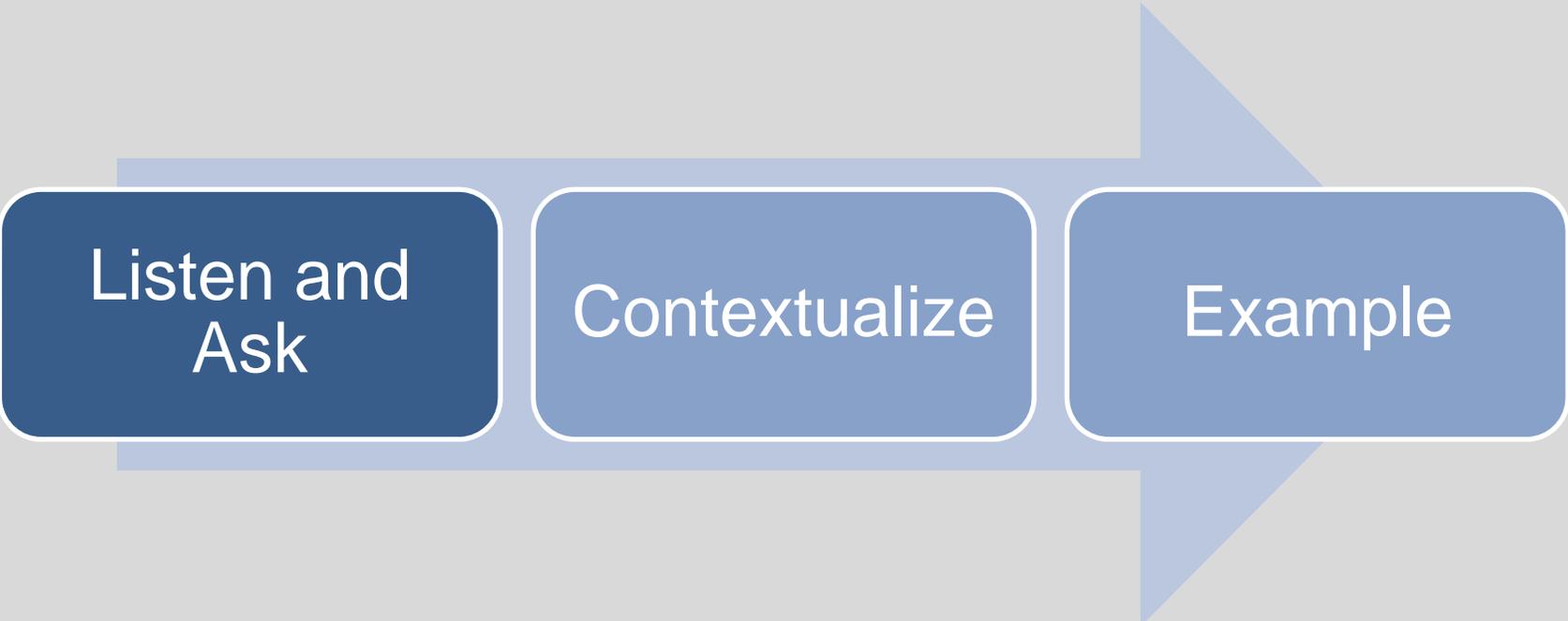


# It's not all bad

"I'm so happy there are people who are in your profession because I always wonder where the money is going and if people are really doing what they say they're going to do."

**Gratitude & appreciation,  $n = 7$**

# Finding #3: Evaluators adopt mitigating strategies



Listen and Ask

Contextualize

Example

“As in evaluation itself, there is no answer to a single question without context details. And the same is true when you’re trying to explain evaluation to somebody else.”

# A follow-up study

1

**Understanding:** What is the level of understanding about evaluation among members of the US public?

2

**Descriptions:** What descriptions of evaluation might enhance understanding of evaluation among members of the general public?



**Intent:** Provide practitioners with empirical data that can help inform conversations with potential clients or the public

# Thank you & any questions?

**A question for you:** how do you describe evaluation & how do people react?

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