

This article outlines a new generation of evaluations and thus marks a new entry in the history of evaluation literature. The author, who advocates that the field of evaluation faces a considerable development potential, presents her vision of Fifth-Generation Evaluation. The reader will learn how an epistemological shift in paradigm is creating a much needed opportunity for developing new practice-oriented evaluation approaches and methods. The article discusses the many unintended consequences of the widespread use of evaluation in organizations and institutions, which staff, managers and users later have to devote time and resources to correcting or trying to make sense of; often at the detriment of the work community and the organization as a whole. It is demonstrated how many of these unintended consequences can be avoided by anchoring the evaluation process in a social constructionist epistemology.

Fifth-Generation Evaluation

By Gro Emmertsen Lund, Master in Evaluation, Evaluation and organizational consultant at Haslebo & Partnere

With this article I hope to contribute to the continuing development of the discipline of evaluation, as in my work as an organizational consultant I see a great need for new evaluation approaches and methods. Fifth-Generation Evaluation does not yet exist, but my point is that we need it, and I will attempt to outline what Fifth-Generation Evaluation might look like. As I will demonstrate, an epistemological shift in paradigm will open new avenues for evaluation that may lead to better and less costly solutions in both the private and the public sector. My key assumption is that the underlying epistemology shapes and organizes evaluations.

A step in the direction of constructivism

Much has happened in the globalized knowledge society since Guba & Lincoln in 1989 published the book "Fourth Generation Evaluation". Fourth-Generation Evaluation constituted a big effort to put users, respondents and stakeholders center stage, and it introduced a constructivist perspective to the field of evaluation. In many ways, this was a challenge to the positivist evaluations and methods of investigation. Now, Fourth-Generation Evaluation introduced the possibility that what we take for granted *is* not given, but rather a result of social negotiation in specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, Fourth-Generation Evaluation pointed toward more responsive, democratic and participatory evaluation models, which enabled respondents, users, stakeholders and others to gain insight, influence and a share in decision-making processes on their own terms. This was a substantial and important step in the field of evaluation.

In his article "*Constructionism in the Rhetoric and Practice of Fourth Generation Evaluation*", James L. Heap (1995) offers a thorough analysis of the constructivism that is present in Guba & Lincoln's "Fourth Generation Evaluation". Both Guba & Lincoln and Heap made important steps toward

putting the epistemological basis of evaluation into words, and they unfold a variety of constructivist approaches. Heap points out that the methodology and the epistemology in Fourth-Generation Evaluation are not coherent, but nevertheless he acknowledges the democratic and participatory methodology, which in his opinion deserves continued attention and development. He also calls for methods to ensure that this development will support, illuminate and serve evaluation practices.

Thus, the constructivist approach to evaluation fueled a need for new methods in evaluation practice, but the methods that Guba & Lincoln present in “Fourth Generation Evaluation” are often so comprehensive and time-consuming that they are hardly appropriate for a workplace context in Denmark today. Examples describing how Fourth-Generation Evaluation *could be carried out* in practice continue to be in short supply. Consequently, so far, this evaluation approach has not seen very widespread use in general evaluation practice. We still need more applicable methods and models that are feasible in practice in terms of economic costs, methodology and man hours.

From my perspective, the primary challenge is no longer to develop the evaluation capacity and competences of the field. There are many evaluation guidelines, consultancy firms and competent internal and external evaluators in the field today. The key issue is rather that we need a shift in paradigm. And I believe that this shift is already underway.

Unintended negative consequences

Evaluation is an integral part of our everyday life and embedded in our understanding of the political management of the public sector as well as in our understanding of project management, budget management, human resources management, organizational development, management development and many other areas¹. Evaluation comes in countless forms, including 360-degree management appraisals, quality assurance, satisfaction surveys, workplace assessments, accreditations, guidelines for the development of an evaluation culture and many more.

Managers and employees are increasingly involved in evaluations, either formally having to deal with the planning, execution and implementation of evaluation or informally dealing with the constitutive effects of evaluations². Constitutive effects are the unintended impacts, consequences or effects of evaluations. They involve the unintended effects that evaluations have on us as well as the social reality. These effects come in as many different shapes as does evaluation, and they seep unnoticed into our relationships and understandings of roles, tasks and identities³.

In recent years there has been growing awareness that evaluations often have undesired effects and can even be counterproductive⁴. Thus, from a management perspective as well as a perspective of social psychology, it is crucial that we develop new evaluation methods and approaches that avoid these negative consequences.

In practice, many organizational members and professional evaluators are working hard to optimize their evaluation efforts. They attempt to make sense of accreditations and evaluations, to follow up on satisfaction surveys or to find promising paths to pursue after yet another workplace assessment that uncovered problematic conditions. Perhaps because conditions are indeed unsatisfactory – or perhaps because workplace assessments are uniquely suited for

uncovering and promoting the negative features. Many organizational members experience the annual 360-degree management appraisal as painful and damaging to relationships between managers and employees and thus harmful for the potential for achieving good results, innovation and development. This is worrying since evaluation has the inherent intention of making the world a better place.

Basically, evaluations aim at helping to build a better social world through improvements in programs, policies and social conditions, “to contribute meaningfully to the well-being of people” (Shaw, Green and Mark 2006). As the negative, unintended and counterproductive effects often overshadow the good intentions, it is high time for the field of evaluation overall to set a more productive direction for the evaluation practices that dominate institutions and organizations. But how can we accomplish this? Let us now look into that.

A step in the direction of social constructionism: Any question or evaluation will affect people somehow

It has been more than twenty years since the release of the book on Fourth-Generation Evaluation, and since then, there has been little movement on the epistemological level within the field of evaluation. In light of developments within organizational psychology⁵ and the criticism of today’s management technologies⁶ as well as the need for new approaches and methods in evaluation, I therefore suggest that we take the next big step and move from a constructivist to a social constructionist mindset.

Such a shift in paradigm allows for a whole range of new models and methods that together form the basis for a fifth generation of evaluation. Most evaluation systems that are in use in private and public sector organizations are based on the underlying positivist assumption that there is a truth out there that it is possible to gather data about. In a survey of employee well-being, for example, this implies that it is possible to determine staff members’ well-being in the workplace by means of a neutral and objective survey, and – importantly – that such a survey can be carried out without affecting the employees. A social constructionist epistemology rejects this assumption. It is not considered possible to study something in a neutral and objective manner without also affecting the phenomena of study. This means that “the reality” that one attempted to capture has already been altered. Technically, it is quite possible to carry out such a survey and obtain a figure that expresses the level of well-being “as found in the survey”, if one should want to bother one’s organization with this sort of data gathering. But despite a wide array of scientific methods and theories, carrying out valid and reliable research remains the main challenge of the field of evaluation. The understanding that any study and evaluation will affect people somehow is a key aspect of Fifth-Generation Evaluation.

Any evaluation effort based on a positivist approach, such as a staff well-being survey, in fact generates a myriad of intractable and unintended effects, many of them undesirable or even harmful for the organization as a whole. In many cases, dissatisfaction increases significantly after a satisfaction survey, sick leave goes up after a staff well-being survey, management performance drops after a 360-degree management appraisal, etc. These unintended and undesirable effects are difficult to explain under the assumption that it is possible to study something without affecting it. From a social constructionist perspective, however, things look very different. Here,

evaluators will carefully consider how a given question might affect staff members' thinking and behavior.

An example of a typical question in a traditional workplace assessment might be, "To what extent do you find that your supervisor provides the frames and ensures your well-being in the workplace?" This type of question positions the staff member in the role of passive recipient of well-being with no personal responsibility. In this point of view, staff members may rightly ask their supervisors, "When are we going to get some well-being?" It is easy to imagine the sort of unhelpful dialogues, relationships and expectations of the future that such a question invites.

Fifth-Generation Evaluation and carefully chosen words

Working with a Fifth-Generation Evaluation, we pay a lot more attention to how our language might position users, employees and managers, and we strive to achieve constructive positioning which in turn promotes useful organizational roles and relationships.

With Fifth-Generation Evaluation it is still possible to address issues such as well-being, user satisfaction, working environment and management appraisal and to question staff members, managers and users about various aspects related to these topics. But with a shift from a positivist to a social constructionist paradigm the questions that are asked in a survey take on a very different character. Through language and communication we create new realities which render certain actions possible while ruling others out. We know that we cannot ask questions without affecting people somehow. When we articulate questions in Fifth-Generation Evaluation we therefore make a great effort to position staff members as co-responsible, competent and obligated members of the organization, as this enables them to contribute appropriate and constructive knowledge about what works and about the organization as a whole. One example of this is the question, "*How do you especially contribute to the well-being of this work community?*"

Let me elaborate on the capacity of this type of question to help affect the present and build the future. A future with increasing levels of well-being, that is. The wording of the question assumes that the respondent contributes to the well-being of the work community in several ways. This has the advantage of recognizing the person as engaged and important. The emphasis here is not on the well-being of the individual but on that of the work community. The wording assumes that everybody has a shared responsibility for the well-being of the work community. This encourages staff members to see themselves as co-responsible actors. Next, the wording also assumes that some of the person's contributions are particularly successful, and that the person is competent to assess which contributions are most important. Finally, the question focuses on what works and what can make the best contributions to the future.

In a social constructionist perspective, we aim to create the best possible future, and we only want to include the best aspects of the past. We do not want to devote considerable resources on charting the past. We would rather learn more about what we can do to use our knowledge and our experiences to build a desirable future.

A social constructionist framework of evaluation

The challenge before us involves establishing a social constructionist framework that covers the full scope of evaluation, and which can help guide evaluation efforts in practice. So far, Fifth-Generation Evaluation is framed by nine key social constructionist assumptions:

1. Language and communication create realities. Evaluation is also communication.
2. Organizational roles and relationships are shaped by the language used in evaluation. Therefore, we carefully consider *how* the language used in the evaluation positions the participants.
3. As the language use of the evaluation positions the participants, it also establishes certain moral rights and obligations in favor of others.
4. A focus on the shared desirable future is a better guiding star for the evaluation than a focus on what went right or wrong in the past, and why. Knowing what went wrong rarely tells us what we need to do to build a better future.
5. We assume that little data about what works is better than a lot of data about what didn't work. Therefore the focus is on the core function; "need to know" rather than "nice to know". We carry out evaluations when they are necessary to help the work community develop its practices, cooperation and performance.
6. We assume the best about each other rather than thinking that someone else is cheating, is cutting corners or bears the blame, or that we need to discover the cause of our problems etc. We assume that everybody has good reasons to behave the way they do, seen from their own perspective. This shifts the focus from individuals to relationships and to our various and shared visions of a better future
7. We assume that we get more of what we study. Therefore we are curious about what works! And we are not interested in learning what went wrong, or why
8. We assume that in any situation organizational members will have different understandings of "reality". We are not looking for one truth, and we do not consider the belief in objectivity a sound basis for development and change.
9. We assume that appreciative and challenging inquiry that is contextual, relational and open minded will create better opportunities for change and development than critical testing, exposure, diagnoses, analyses and conclusions

Principles of Fifth-Generation Evaluation

Once these basic assumptions are allowed to organize evaluations, the following evaluation model⁷ takes on new perspectives, as the social constructionist approach allows us to use the model in a new way:

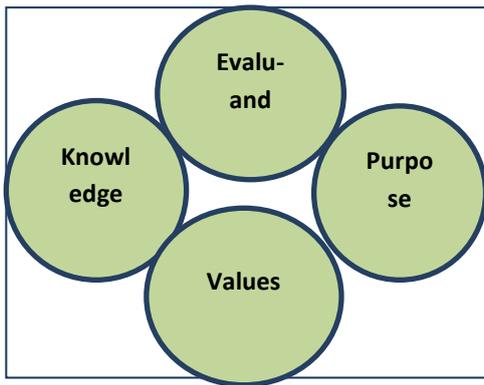


Figure 1. The four dimensions of any evaluation

In Fifth-Generation Evaluation we carefully consider what evaluands we can focus on, with what purpose, and based on what values and knowledge. That leads to the following key points:

- a. The evaluand may be a department, an effort, an education, a form of treatment, a service, a policy etc. The evaluand cannot be a person (an evaluatee), since no one can be understood in isolation from their interpersonal relationships. For example, we move from talking about “manager appraisal” to “management appraisal”.
- b. The purpose may be learning/insight, development, improved efficiency, improved productivity, improved well-being, improved job satisfaction, improved management, improved followership, improved relationships to users, etc.
- c. The value base rests on a worldview where human beings are viewed as competent and co-responsible members of the organization who have positive contributions to make. Everybody is obligated to contribute as much as possible to a shared desirable future, and this obligation also extends to the evaluation. In particular, we celebrate the moral rights and obligations that are associated with the organizational roles of contributors. In Fifth-Generation Evaluation we consider it a value to develop a work community with an emphasis on the professional space, which involves appropriate collegial relationships, not personal or private relationships.
- d. The knowledge dimension in Fifth-Generation Evaluation is about practice knowledge. We are interested in what works and in finding ways to create more of what works. That means that our knowledge about the best of our current practices can go into co-creating a better future. The knowledge dimension of evaluation is also about *how*, that is, about the data generation methods we use to develop knowledge. We generate data by means of dialogue or questionnaires. But it is an important feature of Fifth-Generation Evaluation that it does not rely on vast amounts of data. Knowledge gathering is replaced by the shared generation of practice-based knowledge. The focus is shifted from raw data and systematization to an interest in possibilities of action and coordination. Besides, we are only interested in data about the aspects that we want to boost.

Fifth-Generation Evaluation goes hand in hand with organizational development

Thus, in Fifth-Generation Evaluation we undertake a responsibility for not just gathering information but also carefully considering how our evaluation methods might affect social interactions within the organization. We include the constitutive power of language, and with a careful use of language we seek to contribute to a situation where members of the organization can increase and improve their possibilities of action in relation to goals and core functions.

In this way, a shift in paradigm from a positivist to a social constructionist epistemology creates a rewarding framework for new organizing principles of evaluation. It becomes possible to carry out evaluations that reach out to the future, and which focus on what works and on the things we want to boost. But most importantly, it becomes possible to carry out evaluations that position managers, employees, students, patients, users and citizens as competent, insightful, committed and dedicated organizational members. That increases the chances of:

- Improvements in job satisfaction, staff commitment and user satisfaction, since everybody involved is recognized for their contributions and their role in the organization, and because they can see the practical applicability of their contributions.
- Improvements in cost management, because Fifth-Generation Evaluation is relatively low-cost (less paper work, shorter duration and simpler procedures).
- Better opportunities for staff members to get involved in the evaluation efforts, as the focus shifts from control and documentation to cooperation and shared learning in the work community.
- Organizing evaluations that are more closely related to specific practices, as the emphasis is on practitioners' learning and the application of knowledge in practice in relation to specific goals; this facilitates implementation and follow-up and, not least, supports the core function.
- Positive developments in performance partly because man hours and resources are freed up and can be allocated to core tasks, and partly because the members of the organization are active, engaged and focused on common goals and results.

Let's keep the ball rolling

Evaluation practices during the past ten years have made it increasingly clear that the unintended negative effects (for the individual members of the organization and for the organization as a whole) of evaluation often outweigh the intended positive effects (for example data collected for purposes of inspection and control by external authorities). It is therefore urgently necessary to find new ways. However, refining methods within the framework of the same epistemology would simply lead to more of the same. Increasingly, organizations and institutions need to think outside the box. The same applies to professional evaluators and the managers and staff who are in charge of evaluations. A shift in epistemology toward social constructionism would be an initial and crucial step toward developing better, less costly and more useful evaluations, capable of generating new knowledge that is useful in practice and which promotes an appreciative and innovative learning culture. A shift in paradigm toward social constructionism makes a good starting point for developing the Fifth-Generation Evaluation that I have outlined in this article. I

hope that many other evaluation theorists and practitioners will join the debate and keep the ball rolling.

¹Hanne Foss Hansen (2007)

²Dahler-Larsen(2007)

³Grønbæk Pors (2010)

⁴Nørholm(2008),

⁵Gergen, K. (2007), Haslebo, G. (2004), Haslebo, G. & M.L. Haslebo (2007), Haslebo, M. et al.(2008), Dahler-Larsen(2007)

⁶Grønbæk Pors (2010), Nørholm(2008), Norman Andersen(2003)

⁷ See the KREVI memo "Evaluering og Læring" by Morten Eriksen for an excellent description of the four dimensions of the model.

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