

Educational Evaluation with a Social Focus

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Abstract In the Colombian context some sociologists take on the role of evaluators. Back in the 70's several sociology programs didn't establish clear connections between the different study subjects, and interests were more instrumental than theoretical. In this context being a sociologist, in a very strict sense, did not offer specific alternatives for getting a job as "a sociologist". In the search for employment opportunities the field of educational evaluation appeared, by accident, as a solution. It was necessary to learn about this new area. But little by little the relations between evaluation and sociology emerged. Topics like research methodology, ethnographic approaches, the social role of evaluation and evaluation models got together to construct new meanings to support the comprehension of educational facts. Likewise when teaching about evaluation, the social view always stands out. In this sense the advances in the evaluative field and the broadness gained in its treatment could not have been possible without the contribution of sociology. Evaluation and sociology are framed in the so-called "social sciences," which means that they share, in a great proportion, essential epistemological traits.

Keywords Educational evaluation · Sociology · Multidisciplinary · Professional retraining

Introduction

After several years of professional practice as evaluator, I was invited to a Symposium in sociology. At first I disliked the idea, but I got a presentation based on the need to broaden the scope of sociologist education. Along my presentation I mentioned my role as an educational evaluator, and at the end an old classmate asked me why I was being unfaithful to our sociological principles.

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It is very interesting to find out that, at least in the Colombian context, there are many sociologists that for various reasons take on the role of evaluators. That is the reason why it is beneficial to look back and think about how the relationships between my early education as a sociologist, and a later education and practice as evaluator have been built. Below some reflections are presented as a very brief “professional history” about these interactions.

Education as a Sociologist

The world went through difficult times in the troubled 70’s, and Latin-America and Colombia were certainly no exception. During those years, both dictatorships and insurgent movements emerged. Many of these movements turned into guerrillas and a few of them into legally recognized political parties. This social context required new visions, new answers, and the undergraduate studies in sociology and anthropology were a professional possibility for achieving the desired change because they were expected to shed light on the routes the society was taking. But at the same time, sociology was going through a transition and stressful period, between the functionalist approach that had identified it from its very beginning¹ and at that time somehow rejected, and a new force that came strongly from Marxism.² An important tendency began, at least in Latin-America, oriented towards the development of a politically engaged sociology. At certain instances, sociology was viewed—specifically this “new kind of sociology”—as something subversive and as a result several programs at private universities were closed.

A retrospective look allows us to establish the fact that this situation did not have a clear solution. The official orientation of the sociology programs was going in one direction and the experiences of students and teachers were moving in a different one. These actors were part of a society that could not be understood just based on the programs’ guidelines. Many of them offered a curriculum that today could be considered as erratic: there were no clear connections between the different study subjects, and interests were more instrumental than theoretical. Research methodology was a priority, but oftentimes, it was treated from a decontextualized and instrumentalist angle which gave more emphasis to “do” than to “understand” why something had to be done. Statistics was also important, and writing out questionnaires as well as applying them became a priority. Due to the limited interest in theoretical matters, understanding the sociological fact in itself was not relevant at all. Hence, many sociologists were educated as such but lacked some of the fundamentals to perform properly. However, later on, the professional exercise showed the need for contextualizing and overcoming some views that, at times, were rather narrow.

This academic situation brought dissatisfaction, and we as students looked for other alternatives that would allow us to understand our social reality and be more in agreement with it. These possibilities were raised by students as a sort of “parallel

¹ Several sociology programs had been founded or supported by sociologists coming from European and North-American universities with a seal, in most cases, functionalist.

² Exponents of this tendency were Camilo Torres, catholic priest (who later on joined the guerrilla force) and Orlando Fals Borda (renowned sociologist all over the world) who together with Torres founded the first sociology school of the country at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

education” in which they were able to acquire a better understanding of sociological facts and also how to confront them from a different conceptual and methodological view. In my case, opportunities came up especially working with indigenous communities located in different provinces of Colombia. This contributed greatly to enrich my view of what could be considered sociological. So starting off from the knowledge officially acquired during my university studies, and what I had gained during my work with such communities, I developed broader categories about the social facts that later would illustrate the comprehension of evaluative acts.³

Job Opportunities for Sociologists

Once my formal sociological studies were completed, I had to face the labor market. And a very important question emerged. What kind of professional job can I do? The answer was rather discouraging: the professional working field for a sociologist appeared something blurred not only for a new graduate, but also for those who could possibly offer some kind of job. The fact of being a sociologist, in a very strict sense, did not offer specific alternatives for getting a job as “a sociologist”, i. e., as a professional dedicated to the study and analysis of the social facts (in its different expressions). This proved to be rather contradictory in a country which was going through a very difficult social situation. It was thus necessary to look for job opportunities in fields that, in spite of being socially oriented, neither fitted with applying what I studied nor with the expectations that could be derived, maybe vaguely, from what I learned.

In this search the area of education came on more as an accident rather than as something intentionally sought. I joined an institution dealing with educational topics in rural Colombian regions combining two fronts: educational activities and the evaluation of the processes and products related with these activities. They were two new fronts that, at least in the beginning, had no clear relationship with the sociology I did study.⁴ I had to start all over again, to learn empirically. Today it is called “professional reconversion”.

Little by little the introduction to the new working fields turned into a very strong attraction pole both personal and professional. All along the way I learned about the possibility of mastering my skills in education and evaluation. It was then that I got a scholarship to do a Master’s in evaluation and measurement at Florida State University in Tallahassee with the hope of reorienting my professional development.

My Education as an Evaluator: a New Beginning

Going into the field of evaluation was quite different. It was the beginning of a world with new meanings and parameters, different topics, a new theoretical discourse, and a

³ I had access to authors such as Wright Mills, Cardozo and Faletto, Furtado, Freire who were not “mandatory ones” at the universities.

⁴ In my undergraduate studies, I had never foreseen anything related to evaluation or educational evaluation, and what I studied about sociology of education was quite confusing.

lot better grounded principles than the sort I found in sociology. Likewise, it was a systematic introduction to the educational field. In time, I began to come across some links between sociology and evaluation: statistics and research methodology with common traits in the field of positivism and functionalism.

With the new conceptual frameworks achieved in the field of “evaluation in education” everything related to sociology became a bit unimportant. Now the reading matters and the choice of reference objects were mostly geared towards the area of evaluation. Additionally, this was a very promising field for my professional development. It was the time when evaluation was being introduced as a real novelty in Colombia. Not many people as me were ready to think over and conduct evaluations properly, from a technical point of view.

Interactions Between Sociology and Evaluation

This situation led to some deep development in the area of evaluation. In spite of all this passionate process, it required greater experience and understanding as time passed, specially fed from the practical exercise as a possibility to cope with this new construction. Dialectically, I should say that every day I had to learn and unlearn about evaluation. This fact generated the need for judging, broadening, re-elaborating, and creating reference frameworks. In this process I began to regain my sociological vision from a renewed view point. I learned that education and its evaluation are social events. They do not happen in a vacuum and they are charged with meanings which are given by their occurrence in specific social contexts. Little by little, social perception contributes to build the full comprehension of evaluation. From my experience I try to establish some relations between sociology and evaluation:

- *Initial reference frameworks.* As previously mentioned, the focus of sociology as well as evaluation was mainly positivist. The learning of evaluation history allowed me to establish how the paradigms in these two social sciences have been getting closer or farther apart according to the appearance of various schools of thought. The eventual complementation of the two frameworks must be noted. This fact nourished the possibilities for the evaluative comprehension. But even more: starting off from this enrichment and from the experiences I was gaining in my professional practice, I understood the positivist focus was not the only one to study evaluative objects. For instance, naturalistic focuses and the like, that I learned from evaluation, were very interesting alternatives. And in some cases the only valid ones. This fact could not have been done without the initial approach based on positivism.
- *Inquiry methodology.* My solid preparation in research methodology was very useful when approaching evaluation. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies, the construction of research instruments, data systematization, and some statistical tools, contributed significantly in order to understand and undertake, to this day, new performances in the field of evaluation. From my initial education as a sociologist I took advantage in relation with a rigorous approach to evaluation objects.

- *The opening to qualitative views: searching for comprehension.* Participation in qualitative and ethnographic studies with indigenous communities set the basis for an “introduction” to qualitative views of social facts. This has been of great relevance for my evaluative performance. In fact, at the present time, my work as evaluator is done based upon qualitative appraisals interested in understanding the objects under study. For this effect, the use of sociological categories and tools is always recurrent. Without this previous experience, I would have had a very hard time to carry out evaluative acts in the search of comprehension.
- *The treatment of the objects under a broad perspective.* Sociology gave me the possibility of acquiring a broader view. The social meaning of evaluation must be especially noted. I did introduce the term “appraisal acts” (Torres et al. 2000) employed in several evaluations as a conceptual and methodological resource. This deals with jutting out the social context in which evaluation takes place. Such aspects may turn into factors, as it has already been shown in certain evaluations, which contribute to define, both the design of the evaluative task and the meaning of the objects being evaluated. I have also defined the concept of “hidden evaluation discourse” (Isaza Merchán et al. 2000) similar to “hidden curriculum”. It deals with the need of going beyond the characteristics shown in a first moment in relation with the object being evaluated; for instance, social circumstances in which it occurs and its meaning. I have tried to explore fully social and cultural aspects of evaluation. Without any doubt, sociological topics necessarily may be found in these conceptualizations.

Within this framework I have been working on social and cultural meaning of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the OECD as an evaluative expression in the Colombian educational context. Important elements of sociological nature are present in this reflection. An evaluation such as PISA takes place in social contexts which give it specific meaning and directionality. Certainly evaluation is driven by social factors and affects in various ways the occurrence of social and educational events. This means, for example, that the interpretation of the scores obtained by students should be carried out in the light of some social variables in order to get a better understanding. In terms of significance we may find differences, for example, between the same scores from Colombian and Canadian students because their social contexts are diverse. In this manner, a specific fact (the scores) may be overcome to give way to a greater comprehension of the evaluated matters. No doubt that the relevance of this interdisciplinary view stands out: educational measure in the light of social factors.

It is also important to outline my work at the universities. When teaching about evaluation, the social view always stands out. However, this may appear a bit paradoxical since students do not always possess the elements to overcome the instrumental vision of evaluation and to place it in a broad setting: the one pertaining to social occurrence. This fact may be due to the way the evaluative process is approached from present norms or from social contexts that surround students.

Some other examples could be presented. But the most important issue is that this sort of evaluative developments could not possibly have occurred without the background support of sociology and the rigorous way of thinking I learned with this study.

More Sociology? More Evaluation?

At the moment of assessing this stage of my professional life, I truly believe that there is more evaluation than sociology. But the advances in the evaluative field and the broadness gained in its treatment could not have been possible without the contribution of sociology. Even more: a new vision of evaluation, a more social vision of evaluation, is required. This is not a new issue. But it is necessary, especially, to overcome the purely instrumentalist focus and to generate, in this manner, broad comprehensible evaluative concepts. In such a case sociology and social psychology have priceless contributions in hand as I have perceived in my professional activity. Sociology and evaluation are framed in the so-called “social sciences,” or “human sciences” which means that they share, in a great proportion, essential epistemological traits. It would be meaningless, for example, to look for some contraposition or some radical dissimilarity between the two fields. It is more important to try to find out how from the epistemological basis it is possible to generate feedback that can go on broadening mutual enrichment.

Of course, in my personal case, there are many elements of my education as sociologist that have been disappearing as time passes by. But the essential, in a renewed way, has remained.⁵ And I am sure that it is necessary for evaluation to incorporate elements of the social type allowing to overcome the isolated vision still found in many settings. In my own way of thinking it is necessary, for the Colombian situation, to carry on an evaluation that take into account its concrete historical and social traits, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the educational system: a more socially oriented evaluation.

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⁵ Undoubtedly with elements of the “new sociology” that I sought for in my undergraduate studies.