

Validity

Robert E. Stake

Validity is a characteristic of a Representation. In evaluation, several things might be represented to interested audiences, e.g., the operations of the evaluand, its productivity, its efficiency, the criteria by which it is to be judged, the needs of those served, but the essential representation in evaluation is the representation of merit. Each representation has a validity.

An evaluand is evaluated. The evaluation may include, though it need not, a representation of the evaluand itself, or many things about it. Along traditional lines of thinking, that evaluand exists in some real sense, even if as intangible as the pride of its maker.



Suppose the figure above is an evaluand. A visual representation of it might look a lot like it or a lot unlike it. If we know the original, it is easy to decide the quality of representation, its validity.

When we don't know the appearance of the true value, it is hard to get a feel for the validity of the representation. What we rely on is some composite of what knowledgeable people perceive the value to be. This can be a holistic perception or an aggregate of criteria. People may not agree on the definition of value or the criteria. Still it is sometimes reasonable to think of the value of the evaluand as what most people would agree on if they had all possible information about value.

Suppose the rectangle at the left is the true representation of the value of a program. In evaluation studies, the value we report may be any of the others (except the first one, our representations are never that valid). Representation gets even more distorted when we take usefulness or consequences of using the representation into the definition of validity. But can we avoid that if we take the representation as a communication, and consider it valid only if the message is understood?

It might be best to think of the value we are trying to represent as in the composite in the first diagram below, a montage of three different views of program activities and accomplishments.



We may not know how to combine the three views but have had some success at presenting three views separately as shown to the right, none of them veridical but catching something of each view. We ask ourselves what is the true value, is it the composite that is well beyond our comprehension or is some combination of the three views we somewhat understand? It seems not sensible to have the three of them fight it out, as Sriven implied, but to try to present all three.

Validity is lost when we evaluators have a weak impression of value. Suppose the best idea of the value of the program is extremely nebulous, as with the shape at the left below. In brutal fashion, we might use our techniques to clarify the value so that it comes out as more vividly shown below. Wouldn't we feel that we had lost validity by making the value representation clearer?

