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# Remembering Carol Weiss: My Advisor; My Teacher

Sharon F. Rallis



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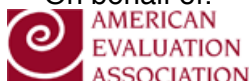
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## Remembering Carol Weiss: My Advisor; My Teacher

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Carol Weiss was my doctoral dissertation advisor, and if I have ever produced useful evaluations, I have Carol to thank. She turned a naive teacher who distrusted evaluators and evaluations into what I hope is an ethical evaluator. She revealed a new side of evaluation for me: that evaluation is meant to provide useful information to improve programs. From Carol, I learned that theory and practice work together; that context and criteria count; and that knowledge comes in many forms and can be used in varying ways. A veritable annotated bibliography herself, she directed me to read and read more and thus opened my eyes to multiple perspectives. Carol was far more than a mere doctoral advisor—she enlightened my world.

I began my doctoral program with both feet planted firmly in practice. I was frustrated with the *great disembodied researcher* defining what best practices I should be using. Research studies hardly seemed relevant for my classroom, my programs, my school, and my community; their findings did not address our problems or issues, and their solutions were not likely to work for students in my classes or youth in my programs. Researchers' pronouncements seemed based on perceived realities from mere moments of observation or gross generalizations. Research knowledge was simply not useful. So why did I seek a research degree? Because I hoped to legitimize my voice as a practitioner. And because I wanted to discover *useful* knowledge.

Near the end of my first year, a professor suggested I explore an applied research such as program evaluation. Studying applied research sounded promising; would this more practical form of research offer insight into production of useful knowledge? Still, I was skeptical about evaluation since those conducted on programs I had worked in seldom produced any findings we could directly use. In fact, I considered evaluators to be evil executioners who decided the fate of programs, usually with little input from those of us doing the work. Could any evaluation generate useful knowledge?

Then I met Carol Weiss. She had arrived at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that year (1978) as a senior researcher, coming from the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. There, with colleagues and students, she had promoted research utilization as a field of study. Other Harvard faculty who had heard me rant about knowledge use sent me her way, and our first conversation confirmed that she was a perfect match for me. Because she was not yet a faculty member, I sought special permission to add her as advisor, and over the next years, she showed me that knowledge and use are one, that evaluations could produce evidence with power to influence change and make a difference in people's lives. Evaluation could be useful.

Carol suggested that my questions were limiting my thinking; she said, ask not *what is useful knowledge?* *Can research produce useful knowledge?* Instead, she tweaked my questions to consider *What is knowledge? How is it produced? Who uses it—and how?* Carol believed that knowledge *is* the use of information or evidence; to know is to use. Thus, what people do with the information

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from evaluation is what matters. She pointed out that information comes from the data we gather in evaluations. To become evidence that policy makers or practitioners can use, data are filtered through the beliefs, values, and interests of these decision makers. I remember Carol telling me something like “Decision makers are human, so they bring their own agendas and ideologies. How—and whether—they use the information depends on how you communicate it—can you make it relevant? And you probably won’t even see that they use it—their use may just be a shift in the way they think about the problem or program.”

Carol taught me so much, but three specific ideas changed my views and led me to believe in evaluation. First, evaluation is far more than passing judgment on how a program is working; it is an ethical endeavor. Next, to understand evaluation you need to do it and reflect on what you have done. Third, I could do evaluation my way as long as I established sound criteria and uncovered the program theory.

To the first point, evaluation has an ethical purpose. Evaluators are not judges; rather, their evaluations should aim to bring insight so that “organizations and societies will be better able to improve policy and programming for the **well-being of all**” (Weiss, 1998, p. ix). Carol influenced me to keep in mind some greater good for all my evaluations; how can my process and findings serve to improve the lives of those affected by this program? The effects may be small but can accumulate over time, so the ethical grounding of my evaluation is critical: What moral principles guide my decisions, my interactions with stakeholders? I learned to consider always the principles that have become the foundation of human subjects reviews today: respect, beneficence, and justice.

Next, understanding evaluation means integrating theory with practice. You need to do it and reflect on what you have done. While Carol obviously was a theorist, she also was an evaluator who really did evaluations. In fact, most of her writing reflects her descriptions of or thoughts emerging from her experiences doing evaluation. Her linking of theory and practice is best illustrated in her writing about *theories of change*. In her classic *Nothing as Practical as Good Theory*, she wrote, “grounding evaluation in theories of change takes for granted that social programs are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why the program will work. The evaluation should surface those theories and lay them out in as fine detail as possible, identifying all the assumptions and sub-assumptions built into the program” (Weiss, 1995, pp. 66–67). Her argument still shapes how I design and conduct evaluations; I work together with the program people to express and agree upon the connection between program goals and program activities. For example, the theory of change on a recent evaluation went roughly like this: *If we want English language learning students to achieve, we need to teach them specific language skills; to do so, teachers need to know both the skills and how to teach them; our program activities offer those skills to teachers*. My conversations with Carol established this logic as a natural way to approach any program. Often, program practitioners tell me that helping them, as Carol said, “to make their assumptions explicit and to reach consensus with their colleagues about what they are trying to do and why” and how is more valuable than eventual findings. Many of the program people I work with would agree that addressing “theoretical assumptions embedded in programs may have more influence on both policy and popular opinion” (Weiss, 1995, p. 69).

Third, I can evaluate my way. That is, I can design and conduct studies using methods and approaches I believe in rather than apply extant models—on the condition that I use sound and contextually appropriate criteria, explicate the program theory, and aim for program improvement. Carol defined evaluation as “systematic assessment of the operation and/or outcomes of a program, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of that program or service” (Weiss, 1998, p. 4). Generating usable information requires data interpretation, interpretation has a contextual basis, and in any given context the various stakeholders seldom share common beliefs, values, goals, and definitions. Therefore, evaluators who hope to produce useful information need to articulate the criteria for making sense of the data, so they may

be discussed and some agreement reached. Unless conflicting interests and agenda are surfaced and addressed, people with these differing views are not likely to pay attention to results when they come. Through Carol, I recognized the value of the up-front negotiations, the relational work that conceptualizes and reconceptualizes the issues and problems, that surfaces and questions assumptions, that, as Carol often put it, “punctures old myths.” In short, Carol freed me to evaluate using the participatory and collaborative approaches that cut the distance between evaluator and program practitioner.

Finally, Carol’s work has made me a better writer and teacher. My several books each reflect her influence on my conceptualizing as well as my analyses of practice. Her 1998 book, *Evaluation: Methods for Studying Programs and Policies*, 2nd edition, is a marvelous text that makes teaching evaluation easy. She leads readers so clearly through the evaluation process that as teacher, I only need to facilitate and offer context. In summary, Carol became a part of my professional life. I do not have to “remember” Carol; she is still with me in my work as I teach, write, and evaluate.

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