

QUALITY EVALUATIONS AND THEIR IMPACTS: THE ROLES OF LEGITIMACY AND SIGNIFICANCE

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Literature on academic assessment, as well as on total quality management more generally, has traditionally paid little attention to the role of cognition in the implementation of these assessment programs. Research in this area has focused instead on issues of design such as the need for performance indicators (Kells, 1990; Jongbloed and Westerheijden, 1993; Sizer, Spee, and Bormans, 1992) or on the effects of control versus improvement oriented evaluation systems (Vroeijensteijn and Acherman, 1990). This type of research analyzes the technical difficulties involved in designing protocols that accurately assess and compare different academic programs, schools or departments, but does not pay much attention to appraisees' cognitive processes beyond trying to understand the impact of different designs on commitment.

In organization studies there is a great deal of research that has addressed the role of cognition in organizational change and that can help researchers investigate more thoroughly the underlying mechanisms that make quality evaluations in universities more or less successful. Recent studies in that area have paid increasing attention to the sensemaking processes of organizational members who carry out the changes initiated by others (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999; George and Jones, 2001; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006). In this study I have built on

previous research on organizational change and cognition to shed new light on reactions to quality assessments in universities. In particular, I assessed the effects of several antecedents on faculty perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance, and tested their mediating role in the formation of faculty attitudes towards a future re-evaluation process.

My work focused on the evaluation of twenty degree programs in four different universities in Catalonia (Spain). These universities were evaluated between 2000 and 2004. My research aimed at: 1) Studying the impacts that past evaluation fidelity to the model of the Evaluation Agency, faculty identification with the degree programs being evaluated, and faculty disciplinary background had on faculty perceptions of evaluations, and 2) testing if these perceptions mediated the relationship between those antecedents and faculty attitudes towards a future program re-evaluation. This study adds further evidence regarding the importance that members' perceptions have for carrying out quality evaluations successfully. This work also sheds new light on what factors can significantly impact those perceptions.

Faculty Perceptions of Quality Evaluations

Managers tend to justify their interventions by appealing to both their seriousness or potential impact (Rousseau, 1996; Poole, 1998) and the functional reasons associated with them such as improved performance or increased autonomy (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999, Boiral, 2003). But the extent to which these framings are shared by change recipients varies. For example, Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) showed that many nurses did not believe the reasons offered by managers as a justification for the change: what managers understood as job enrichment, nurses perceived as added

responsibilities for the same pay or simply as more useless paperwork. Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, and DePalma (2006), using the same sample, later analyzed how nurses made sense of the empowerment initiative by classifying nurses' descriptions of what the intervention meant to them in two major categories: those responses that were consistent with the ideas of empowerment put forward by management, and those others that described contradictions and inconsistencies (e.g. the intervention served as a pretext to get rid of middle managers).

Lau and Woodman's (1995) work on change schemas also provides an encompassing framework to analyze recipients' sensemaking of organizational change. The authors identified in the literature three general dimensions that all change schemas share: causality, valence, and inferences. Individuals made sense of change, they argued, by thinking of why the change was taking place (causality), how relevant it was for them (valence), and what was going to happen while implementing the change (inference).

Following the Lau and Woodman (1995) and the Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) studies, I pay attention to faculty perceptions of the legitimacy of the reasons behind evaluations. In addition, I also assess faculty perceptions about the impact that the evaluations will have on their work (the evaluations' significance). I contend that these two perceptions are crucial for predisposing faculty positively or negatively towards evaluations. Legitimacy is defined as the *perceived appropriateness and acceptability* (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999; Suchman, 2005) of (the reasons behind) the evaluation. Significance is defined as the extent to which faculty *expect the evaluation to have meaningful consequences for their work*. By focusing on perceptions of legitimacy and significance I do not imply that these are the only ones involved in interpreting

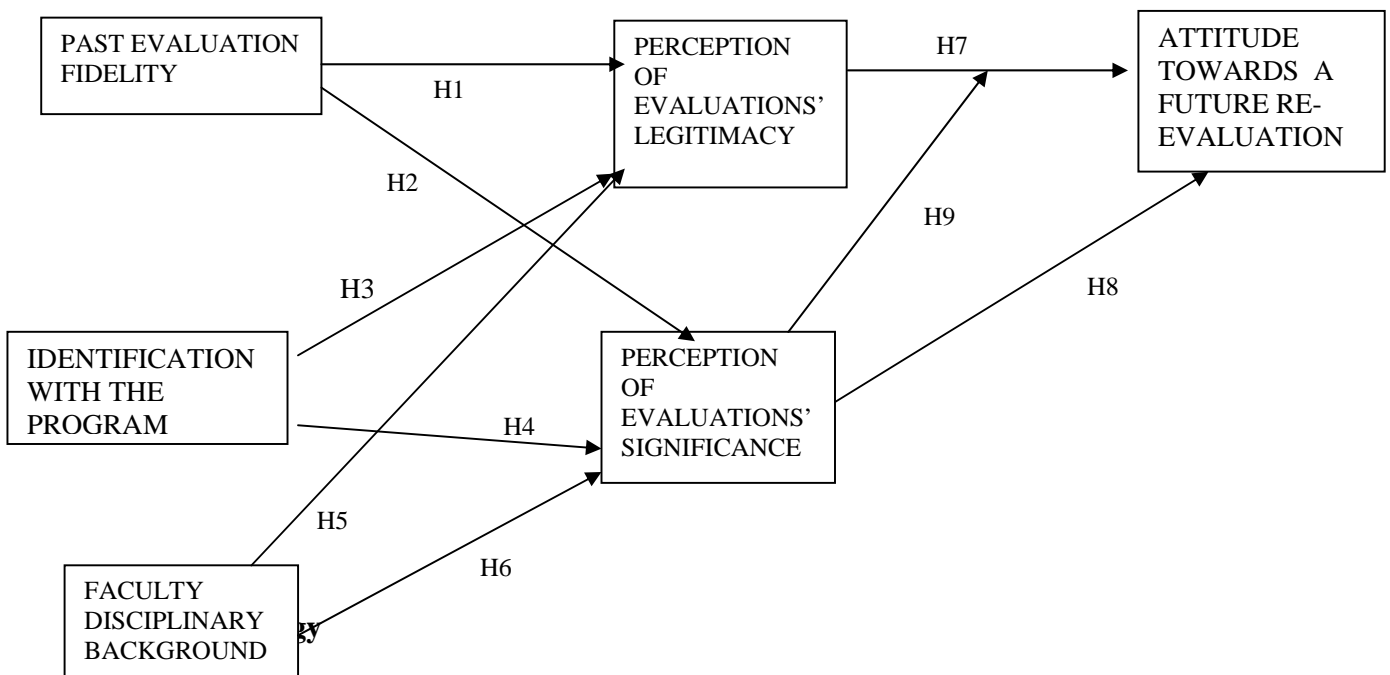
evaluations, but I argue that they are very relevant to understand how faculty will react to evaluations.

Conceptual model. For this particular study I also chose three predictors of faculty perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance that were related to some of the potential antecedents mentioned in the literature and that at the same time were appropriate in my research context. The conceptual model appears in figure 1. The first predictor was past evaluation fidelity to the Evaluation Agency model. The Agency expected that those evaluations that were closer to their ideal model would be better accepted and have more of an impact on faculty. The ideal model of the Agency involved: a) high level of participation and involvement from faculty during the process, b) explicit support of the evaluation process (in terms of material resources and symbolic acts) by the university and school authorities, and c) a high level of implementation of the resulting proposals for improvement. The second predictor was faculty level of identification with the program being evaluated. Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail (1994) have defined organizational identification as the extent to which the individual self-concept is tied to his or her organizational membership. Finally, the third predictor in my model was faculty disciplinary background (either from humanities and social sciences or from technical and pure sciences).

I expected that the higher the fidelity of the past evaluation to the ideal model and the higher the identification of faculty with the program under evaluations the higher their perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance would be. I also expected faculty from technical disciplines and pure sciences to rate the evaluations as more legitimate and significant.

Finally, as the outcome variable in my theoretical model, I assessed the extent to which faculty held supportive attitudes towards a future re-evaluation at their school. Therefore, in my theoretical model I argued that faculty perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance would mediate the impact of a series of antecedents (i.e. past evaluation fidelity to the Agency model, program identification, and faculty disciplinary background) on attitudes towards a future re-evaluation.

FIGURE 1
Theoretical Model



Measures

My study took place at four different universities in Barcelona, Spain. I studied twenty different schools in these universities that offered degree programs which had been evaluated by the Agency. These twenty degree programs had been evaluated at

some point between 2000 and 2004, and all the evaluations followed exactly the same steps that have been described. I chose approximately the same number of programs (seven) from the two bigger universities to avoid university biases in my sample. I also looked at approximately the same number of evaluations in two areas: humanities/social sciences (11), and natural sciences/technical sciences (9), to avoid disciplinary biases.

I collected archival, interview, and survey data. The archival data were obtained from the Agency. This archival information included the evaluation reports that were written by the Internal Evaluation Committees in these schools in preparation for the final evaluation. Sometimes I referred to these reports during my interviews to ask specific questions.

I interviewed thirty five senior faculty who had been involved in Internal Evaluation Committees. The Internal Committees included as members the Program Director, the Dean, a group of senior faculty, and a representation of both student and administrative personnel. The thirty five interviewed faculty members were chosen so that there was one, and usually two members per degree program being evaluated. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted an average of thirty minutes each. The interviews' goal was to obtain information about the level of participation, support, and proposal implementation associated with past program evaluations, and thus the evaluation's degree of fidelity to the Agency model.

In addition to the interviews, I also collected data through a survey that was distributed both by regular mail and in electronic format to senior faculty (associate and full professors) from the twenty programs in my sample. A total of 375 faculty members (250 electronically) answered my survey, although only 303 completed all the

questionnaire sections. This represented a response rate of 41%. From these 375, 65 had been involved in Internal Committees.

The survey was divided in three sections. The first part asked respondents about the legitimacy of several reasons for evaluations. In the second part I asked for the significance of quality evaluations for faculty and for the respondent's attitudes towards a future re-evaluation at their school. Finally, the survey concluded by asking the interviewees about their identification with their program. Brief demographic questions followed as a conclusion.

Summary of Results

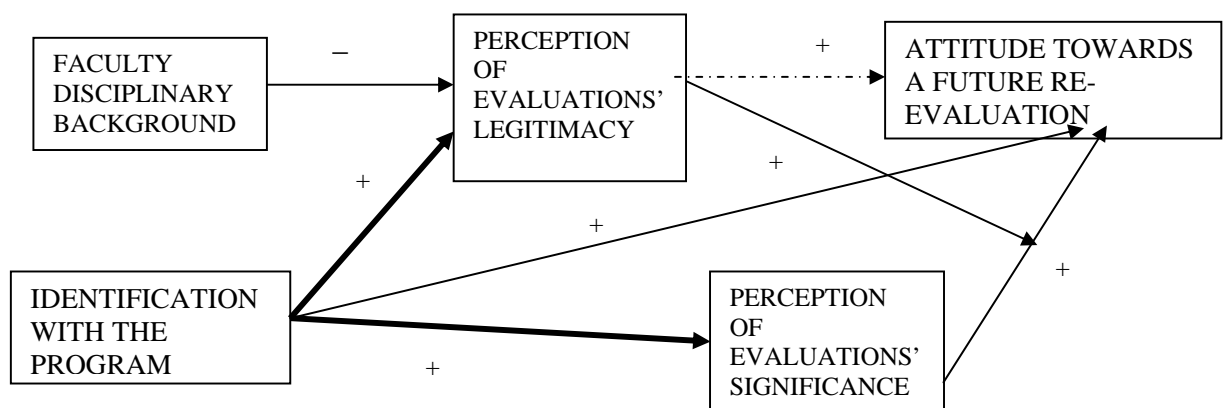
The results for the antecedent main effects were mixed. Past evaluation fidelity was found not to have any effects on perceptions of legitimacy and significance. Faculty identification with the program being evaluated positively affected their perceptions of legitimacy and significance. Finally, faculty background was a significant predictor of perceptions of legitimacy, but the effect's direction was opposite to what I expected. Faculty from social sciences and humanities tended to think more positively about evaluations' legitimacy than their counterparts in more technical disciplines and pure sciences.

In addition to assessing the effect of several predictors on faculty perceptions, I also analyzed the effects that these perceptions had on faculty attitudes towards a future program re-evaluation. Perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance had a positive influence on attitude towards a future re-evaluation, although the effect of legitimacy was weaker than that of significance.

In summary, I found that faculty identification with their program led them to rate the legitimacy and significance of program quality evaluations more highly. I also found that faculty in the humanities and social sciences were more likely to perceive program evaluations as legitimate. The more evaluations were rated as legitimate and significant the more positive the attitude towards a future re-evaluation. Perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance partially mediated the effect of identification with the program on attitude towards a future re-evaluation, although in the case of legitimacy this mediation was only marginally significant, and perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy moderated the impact of perceptions of significance on attitude towards a future re-evaluation. I summarize all these findings in figure 2 by drawing only the statistical significant (continuous line) and marginally significant (discontinuous line) paths in my original theoretical model. Those paths that are thicker than the rest indicate stronger effects.

FIGURE 2

Theoretical Model with Significant Paths



The Meanings of the Findings

The irrelevance of the last evaluation. Past evaluation fidelity to the Agency model was shown not to have any effect on perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance. There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, it is possible that faculty held strong beliefs about evaluations in universities, be those program assessments or any other kind of evaluations, and that these beliefs affected their overall perceptions of program evaluations regardless of how the first Agency program evaluation was carried out. Second, it is also possible that in spite of some evaluations being more faithful to the Agency model than others, their effects were still too weak to be noticed by faculty. Both tentative explanations are based on evidence from the interviews.

The relevance of program identification. The results show that faculty identification increases both legitimacy and significance perceptions, as well as their attitude towards a future re-evaluation. The results of my study extend Lau and Woodman's (1995) findings of the effect of organizational commitment on perceived significance of the change. Higher identified faculty did not only rate evaluations as more significant but also as more legitimate. By definition a highly identified employee values his or her membership as something positive due to the perceived attractiveness of the organization to which he or she belongs (Dutton et al., 1994). Therefore, such individual is likely to perceive an evaluation of any aspect of the organization as something positive rather than negative, because it will reinforce the positive image that he or she has of the organization. Further research though should explore how identification plays out in a context where evaluations can have more negative consequences than in the present case.

Faculty disciplinary background. I expected that faculty from social sciences and humanities would have a harder time interpreting and applying evaluation protocols in consistent ways because traditionally social sciences show lower levels of agreement on what is taught in class than natural sciences (Lodahl and Gordon, 1972). Yet, my results show that disciplinary background has no influence on perceptions of evaluations' significance.

In addition to disciplinary background not having any effect on significance perceptions, I also found that faculty from social sciences and humanities were indeed more likely to perceive evaluations as legitimate than faculty from the natural sciences or from technical disciplines. In some of my interviews, interviewees argued that faculty from pure sciences were in Spain more focused on research than teaching, since research was in their case a clearer indicator by which their performance was judged. Therefore, a plausible explanation for my findings would be that faculty from pure sciences are not as interested as their colleagues in the social sciences and humanities in devoting as much time and effort to improve the quality of teaching in their programs. Nevertheless, this explanation is very speculative and would need to be tested in a future study as well.

The effect of faculty perceptions on attitude towards a future re-evaluation. The effect of legitimacy on attitude towards a future re-evaluation was rather weak (when controlling for identification). Believing that evaluations are done for legitimate reasons does not necessarily mean that the individual will have a positive attitude towards a future re-evaluation. My results confirm that we need to distinguish between diffuse and specific support. Whereas faculty may find evaluations appropriate and acceptable ways to deal with quality issues in universities, increases in perceived legitimacy may not lead

to increases in positive attitudes towards a specific evaluation at their own school. In other words, beliefs about program evaluations in general may not translate into attitudes towards a particular evaluation process.

Perceptions of significance were a stronger predictor of attitude towards a future re-evaluation than legitimacy. My results show that one of the ways in which identification can shape faculty attitudes towards a future re-evaluation is by increasing evaluations' perceived significance, that is, faculty expectations that the evaluations are consequential. Identification is associated with self-perceptions of "oneness" with a group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), so that individuals experience organizational failures and successes as their own (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). Within the context of my research, this means that highly identified faculty will perceive evaluations as an event that may affect them personally, which will increase their predisposition to develop positive attitudes towards a forthcoming evaluation at their school.

The interaction of perceptions of evaluations' legitimacy and significance.

Although the effect of legitimacy on attitude towards a future re-evaluation was rather weak, its role as a moderator of perceptions of significance on attitude towards a future re-evaluation was quite relevant. When faculty believed that evaluations were not legitimate, significance did not affect attitude towards a future re-evaluation. For evaluations to generate supportive attitudes they need to be perceived as appropriate and acceptable, as well as potentially having an impact on employees' work.

Conclusions

The evaluations studied here were framed by the Agency in developmental terms. One of the main objectives of these evaluations was to start creating a culture or sensitivity for internal assessments that was able to involve faculty in improving their own programs. However, the results from this study show that most faculty (both those who were part of Internal Evaluation Committees and those who were not) were quite skeptical about these evaluations' legitimacy and significance.

My results also indicate that the evaluations' fidelity to the Agency model did not affect faculty perceptions. Other factors such as faculty level of identification with the program being evaluated and their disciplinary background proved to be more relevant in shaping faculty perceptions of evaluations. These results point at the need for the Agency to look at additional evaluation aspects beyond participation, support, and proposal implementation. In addition to technical aspects of the evaluation process, evaluation agents should be more aware of the kind of faculty audiences they are engaging with. What is their background? Why are they more or less identified with their programs?

Faculty tend to remain skeptical about evaluations that do not seem to have any direct consequences and that are not supported by extra funding. In addition, faculty with low levels of program identification may simply be more concerned with their own research than with their teaching responsibilities in connection with the programs.

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