

Weiss' Call for Humility: Further Reflections

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I just think we should have a little more humility about what we promise our sponsors and clients.

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In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility.

William Shakespeare, 1598
King Henry V

Carol and I share a conviction that *context matters*. The context for expressing that shared conviction is concern about over-promised and context-free promulgations of “best practices” and “lessons learned.” One of the questions I raised in the article (Patton, 2001) to which Carol has so kindly responded was what we mean by these terms. Is Carol stating a lesson learned and/or evaluation best practice in recommending “more humility about what we promise our sponsors and clients?” Under what conditions is humility warranted? And when, if ever, is it not warranted?

Shakespeare offers an answer through King Henry V. In the quote above, he asserts “peace” as a context for acting with humility. But, in the context of the play, and even more in the context of the full soliloquy, it turns out that his real concern is with neither peace nor humility:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility.
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the Tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage . . .

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And on he goes, exhorting his listeners to war, warning them to make their fathers proud and “dishonour not your mothers.”

The language of “best practices” has emerged as a way of enlisting science in political and ideological wars. Ideology thrives on certainty. Humility, in contrast, embraces uncertainty. Certainty fosters ideological orthodoxy, intolerance, self-righteousness, and pride. In discussing the seven deadly sins—anger, covetousness, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth, and pride—Saint Thomas Aquinas considered pride to be chief among the deadly sins, not because of its inherent gravity, but because of its potential for leading to still other sins. There’s pridefulness in proclaiming that one is practicing what is “*best*.”

Humility acknowledges respectfully that others, looking at the same facts, may arrive at different interpretations and draw different conclusions, and that in a different context others would pursue different actions. Carol reminds us that “Extracting lessons from a set of evaluations is a tricky business.” Tricky, indeed. Mark Twain observed that a cat that jumps on a hot stove won’t jump on a hot stove again, but also won’t jump on a cold stove. How tricky are interpretations? How open are they to bias, selective perception, and other forms of seeing what we want to see—and what we already believe? Pierpont (2002), in a recent review of interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche, notes that some have credited his writings as the cause of World War I, or what some called at the time “the Euro–Nietzsche War,” or if not the cause of the war, the cause of the “stunning brutality” with which it was fought (p. 82). She goes on to discuss how in the decade after the War, Nietzsche’s ideas “were claimed by virtually every extreme of German political culture.”

[C]rusaders for left-wing causes ranging from socialism to feminism had found in Nietzsche a thrilling incitement Then, as post-war crises propelled Germany ever farther to the right and into policies of racist hatred, readers increasingly drew a different sort of inspiration from the same books—sometimes from the same phrases. Notions of the ‘will to power’ and the *Übermensch*, burdened with meanings never intended by an author who reserved his greatest contempt for anti-Semites, made Nietzsche the philosopher king of the Nazi state. (p. 82)

Do we not find the same phenomenon today, as throughout the ages, when religious followers can read exactly the same texts, whether the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita—pick your inspiration or your poison, depending on perspective—and arrive at radically different and conflicting interpretations, including horrifyingly bloody ones? Oh, and the context for this rant? I’m writing in the spring of our discontent, amidst epidemics of global hatred, terrorism, intolerance, oppression, and outbreaks of genocide, fueled by religious and political fanaticism on all sides, including at home in America.

So what does all this have to do with evaluation? The humility Carol calls for and the questions she asks us to reflect on with sponsors and clients offer at least one helpful antidote to intolerant and self-serving forms of best practice fundamentalism. Instead of supporting the search for *best-ness*, we could be fostering dialogue about and deliberation on multiple interpretations and perspectives. Instead of seeking to elevate inevitably problematic, contextually bound, and uncertain findings to the status of best practices—practices which easily become new orthodoxies, and then mandates, when those practices align with the ideological preferences of the powerful—we could employ the more humble language of “effective practices” or “evidence-based practices” and, in so doing, focus on both the strengths and limitations of the supporting data, including, as Carol admonishes, acknowledging “unmeasured variables and uncontrolled comparisons.”

Ernie House and colleagues (e.g., House & Howe, 2000) have been drawing our attention to evaluation's role in strengthening democracy by nurturing inclusiveness, dialogue, and deliberation. Such processes, good examples of the process use of evaluation if done in a way to build capacity for still deeper dialogues and deliberations, depend on recognizing and honoring diverse perspectives, coming together in humility, and acknowledging, even embracing, uncertainty.

Let me hasten to add that the evidence from human experience, as I interpret it, suggests that such rhetoric can be very difficult to put into practice. Karl Popper, whose contributions to philosophy of science were monumental, argued that nothing could ultimately be proved, only disproved. Applied to best practices, this means *we can never prove that a practice is best*, but we can distinguish practices that are poor and ineffective from those that are less poor and more effective, no small contribution. Popper identified a natural tendency for people to overgeneralize and speculate well beyond the data, thus the importance of carefully considering rival hypotheses and falsification (disproving claims). Science, he argued, was not so much a set of methods as a form of argumentation in which different interpretations were subjected to careful scrutiny and criticism. He fiercely advocated an open society in which differing perspectives engaged in mutual criticism. The great irony, however, perhaps even tragedy, was Popper's infamous arrogance and absolute intolerance of and disdain for criticism of his own ideas. In contemporary lingo, he didn't walk the talk, a reminder to all of us, and I include myself at the top of the list, to examine the correspondence between our rhetoric and our practice, a form of evaluative reflective practice that is not at all easy to undertake alone.

In essence, extending Carol's reflections as she thoughtfully extended mine, I'm suggesting that much more is at stake than our momentary relationships with sponsors and clients. What is at stake is the extent to which our profession can model the dialogic processes that support and nurture democracy and peace, thereby helping to create a context in which humility is possible and valued, and contribute thus not just by the findings we generate, but more crucially and with longer effect, by the way we facilitate engagement with those findings—fostering mutual respect among those with different perspectives and interpretations. That modeling of and nurturing deliberative, inclusive, and, yes, humble dialogue may make a greater contribution to societal welfare than the search for generalizable “best practice” findings, which rapidly become outdated anyway. Carol's questions, in the next to last paragraph of her comment, provide an excellent starting point for such dialogues when interpreting findings and considering lessons learned.

P.S. I acknowledge that not everyone shares this vision of our profession, but they're wrong and I'm right, and there's nothing more to discuss.

Na-na-naaa-na-na-naaa.

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