



# Guidelines and Checklist for Constructivist (aka Fourth-Generation) Evaluation

Egon G. Guba & Yvonna S. Lincoln

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NOTE: The guidelines and checklists for constructivist evaluations and reports outlined herein are based upon Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989. Useful background information may be found in Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985.

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**Evaluation Defined** — Evaluation is one of the three basic forms of disciplined inquiry, the others being research and policy analysis. It is that form of inquiry whose focus is some evaluand (program, process, organization, person, etc.) and which results in “merit” and/or “worth” constructions (judgments) about it. Merit constructions converge on the *intrinsic* quality of an evaluand, irrespective of the setting in which it may find applications. Worth constructions converge on the *extrinsic* usefulness or applicability of an evaluand in a concrete local setting. Evaluation of a proposed or developing evaluand is termed “formative,” while evaluation of some developed evaluand is termed “summative.”

**Constructivist Evaluation Defined** — Constructivist evaluation is that form of evaluation based on the propositions (basic assumptions) undergirding the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm differs from other knowledge paradigms commonly in use, including the scientific, the artistic, the religious, the legal, and others of similar broad sweep. It is based on three fundamental assumptions, which are commonly termed the ontological, epistemological, and methodological, viz:

- The basic ontological assumption of constructivism is *relativism*, that is, that human (semiotic) sense-making that organizes experience so as to render it into apparently comprehensible, understandable, and explainable form, is *an act of construal and is independent of any foundational reality*. Under relativism there can be no “objective” truth. This observation should not be taken as an “anything goes” position; see the section on criteria below.
- The basic epistemological assumption of constructivism is *transactional subjectivism*, that is, that assertions about “reality” and “truth” depend solely on the *meaning sets (information) and degree of sophistication available to the individuals and audiences engaged in forming those assertions*.
- The basic methodological assumption of constructivism is *hermeneutic-dialecticism*, that is, a process by which *constructions entertained by the several involved individuals and groups (stakeholders) are*

*first uncovered and plumbed for meaning and then confronted, compared, and contrasted in encounter situations.* The first of these processes is the hermeneutic; the second is the dialectic. See sections on “discovery” and “assimilation” below. Note that this methodological assumption is silent on the subject of *methods* and, in particular, on the subject of “quantitative” vs. “qualitative” methods. Both types of methods may be and often are appropriate in all forms of evaluative inquiries.

It is not appropriate to “mix and match” paradigms in conducting an evaluation, for example, utilizing both scientific (positivist) and constructivist propositions within the same study. This is not a call for “purity” nor is it intended to be exclusionary. It is simply a caveat that mixing paradigms may well result in nonsense approaches and conclusions.

## **The Two Phases of Constructivist Evaluation: Discovery and Assimilation**

The *discovery* phase of constructivist evaluation represents the evaluator’s effort to describe “what’s going on here,” the “here” being the evaluand and its context. The discovery phase may not be needed (or may be needed only minimally) if there is a preexisting construction or constructions relating to the evaluand on which to build (e.g., from a prior evaluation or from a project proposal), that is, some meanings (information) and some level of sophistication in their interpretation are already available. There are many ways in which the discovery question can be answered, depending on what specific relevant and preexisting constructions are brought to the inquiry by the evaluator and by local informants and respondents. Discoveries are themselves semiotic organizations, i.e., mental constructions. CAVEAT: If the preexisting constructions are drawn from sources external to the subject evaluation, and in particular from the professional literature, care must be taken to assess their paradigmatic bases; if those bases are not constructivism, serious disjunctions could easily be overlooked. So, for example, drawing data from a study cast in positivist terms imbues those data with a truth value, a hard and fast character, which in constructivist terms they do not deserve. Within a constructivist framework those same data are seen as variable and transformable, depending on the view of the constructor. To use those positivist data within a constructivist evaluation undermines the essence of the evaluation. Authors of evaluation literature, including evaluation reports, that are based on constructivist principles will almost certainly make their intent plain. In other cases the appearance of key concepts such as generalizability, objectivity, proof, and the like, typical of positivism and other nonconstructivist approaches, may be key signals as to the intent of the author.

The *assimilation* phase of constructivist evaluation represents the evaluator’s effort to incorporate new discoveries into the existing construction or constructions (or, if the new discovery is sufficiently different from or in conflict with the existing construction or constructions, replacing them) so that the “new” (more informed and sophisticated) construction will *fit* (subsume older and newer meanings, work (explain what happens), *demonstrate relevance* (enable the core problems to be resolved, ameliorated, or better defined), and *exhibit modifiability* (be itself open to change).

Discovery and assimilation are not necessarily sequential processes, but may overlap or be carried out in parallel.

## **The Process of Constructivist Evaluation: Responsibilities of the Constructivist Evaluator**

Constructivist evaluation is a process for doing evaluation that meets two conditions: It is organized by the *claims, concerns, and issues of stakeholding audiences*, and it *utilizes the methodology of the constructivist paradigm*. Given that mandate, it is possible to list the nine major responsibilities that the constructivist evaluator must discharge. He or she must:

1. Identify the full array of stakeholders who are at risk by virtue of the stakes they hold in the entity being evaluated. Such stakes may include but not be limited to money, status, power, face, opportunity, or other coin; those stakes are determined by and defined by the stakeholders (in their own terms) and not only by the evaluator or the client seeking the evaluation (although they too are stakeholders and may identify their own stakes and definitions). Negative stakes may include possible exploitation, disempowerment, and disenfranchisement. Stakeholders are entitled to receive and evaluate in their own terms all information that the evaluation may disclose. In the subsequent hermeneutic/dialectic process, the several stakes entering into the evaluation mix are assessed and refined in the effort to come as close as possible to negotiated agreement. It is the evaluator's responsibility to seek out all stakeholders, including even those who may wish to maintain low visibility or to absent themselves entirely.
2. Elicit from the stakeholder groups their constructions about the form and process of the evaluand and the range of claims, concerns, and issues they wish to raise in relation to it. The initial list may be rearranged, deleted, or have additions made as the evaluation proceeds.
3. Provide a context and a methodology (the hermeneutic/dialectic) through which different constructions of the evaluand, and different claims, concerns, and issues, can be understood, subjected to critique, and taken into account. The process is first carried out within specific stakeholder groups; then the products of these intragroup negotiations (defined constructions, claims, concerns, and issues) are further negotiated in hermeneutic circles that cut across stakeholder groups, if necessary, in dialogic, adversarial, or confrontational settings.
4. Generate consensus with respect to as many constructions, and their related claims, concerns, and issues, as possible. Consensus should first be sought on an intragroup basis and then on an intergroup basis. If consensus can be achieved with respect to an item, it can be eliminated from further discussion, but retained for further action (and inclusion in the evaluation report) if there is agreement on that action.
5. Prepare an agenda for negotiation on items about which there is no, or incomplete, consensus. Failure to reach consensus implies the continuation of competing constructions, which disjunction(s) can be ameliorated only through the introduction of new information or an increase in the level of analytic sophistication. The evaluator's task is to identify the information needed. Because more information may be required than it is possible to obtain, given time and/or resource constraints, the evaluator must devise some means (preferably also through a hermeneutic/dialectic process) for

prioritizing the unresolved items. Stakeholder inputs are essential in this determination, lest this need be taken as an opportunity to disempower selected stakeholders.

6. Collect and provide the information called for in the agenda for negotiation. The provision of needed information cannot be guaranteed, but the evaluator must make every good faith effort to do so. Further, if stakeholders lack the sophistication to deal with obtained information, training must be provided, arranged by the evaluator.
7. Establish and mediate a forum of stakeholder representatives in which negotiation can take place. Unresolved differences in constructions, as well as unresolved claims, concerns, and issues, are reviewed in light of the new information and/or level of sophistication, in the hope that their number can be reduced. It is likely that some items will remain unresolved, thereby setting the stage for another, later round of evaluation activity. Outcomes of this forum must include action steps if the negotiation is to be regarded as successful.
8. Develop a report, probably several targeted reports, that communicate to each stakeholder group any consensus on constructions and any resolutions regarding the claims, concerns, and issues that they have raised (as well as those raised by other groups that appear relevant to that group). The most useful form for such report(s) is the case study, which may provide the vicarious experience needed to influence stakeholder constructions. (See below for additional observations on the reporting process.)
9. Recycle the evaluation to take up still unresolved constructions and their attendant claims, concerns, and issues. New aspects may be explored that have emerged on the basis of the first-round evaluation. Constructivist evaluations are never completed; they pause until a further need or opportunity for review and reassessment emerges.

## **Contracting for a Constructivist Evaluation**

It is prudent to initiate a contract for an evaluation of any sort, but especially so for a constructivist evaluation, since this form is neither widely known nor commonly understood. A contract should be drawn that protects both the client from evaluator misrepresentation or malpractice and the evaluator from client misunderstanding or misexpectation. Such a contract should cover the following points at a minimum (other stipulations may be added as seems appropriate in the actual situation).

1. Identification of the client or sponsor of the evaluation. Stakeholders in an evaluation are entitled to know who the client or sponsor is since that position clearly represents a priori power and vested interests.
2. Identification of the evaluand (the entity to be evaluated). The construction held by the client or sponsor is at best an initial form that is likely to evolve into a series or progression of constructions that emerge.
3. A statement of purpose for the evaluation: formative/merit, formative/worth, summative/merit, summative/worth, or some combination of these forms.

4. A statement of agreement from the client or sponsor particularly, but also from stakeholder groups, to adhere to the “Conditions for a Productive Hermeneutic/Dialectic.” These include a commitment from all parties to work from a position of integrity (always recalling that false commitments can be and sometimes are made), minimal competence on the part of all parties to communicate (a condition that may exclude children, the mentally handicapped, and psychotic or self-deluded personalities), a willingness to share power, a willingness to consider change, a willingness to reconsider one’s own value positions, and a willingness to commit the time and energy needed.
  5. A statement of intent from the evaluator with respect to stakeholding audiences. If stakeholder claims, concerns, and issues (including those of the client or sponsor) are to serve as the focus for the evaluation, it is clearly necessary to identify, seek out, and involve all relevant stakeholders. The search for stakeholders should continue throughout the period of the evaluation, since it is highly unlikely that all stakeholders will be known at the onset of the evaluation. Some stakeholders may refuse to participate, for example, because they fear to make their positions known because of retaliation from more powerful groups. In those cases the evaluator must make every effort to construct their likely positions from whatever sources may be available, e.g., other knowledgeable informants, existing documents, residues from earlier actions such as legal cases, and the like.
  6. A brief description of the methodology to be used. The contract should also note and make provision for an emergent evaluation design, particularly since clients are likely to assume that an a priori and thereafter fixed design can be devised. The hermeneutic/dialectic methodology employed in constructivist evaluations clearly militates against that possibility.
  7. A guarantee of access to records, documents, and respondents. This guarantee must take account of legal protections where they exist and must provide for procedures to be followed in the event that access becomes blocked.
  8. A statement of the evaluator’s intent to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity of information sources insofar as that can be legally accomplished. It should be noted that an evaluator does not enjoy special privilege as does, for example, an attorney, clergyman, or physician.
  9. A description of the reporting modes to be utilized. The case report is the preferred mode. The purposes of the case report include providing thick description, giving vicarious experience, serving as a metaphoric springboard (a form of naturalistic generalization), and challenging constructions of various stakeholders in ways that lead to reassessment and reconstruction. Reports must be freely available to all stakeholder groups, and the evaluator must take the responsibility to explicate reports for those stakeholders who may lack the background, information, or sophistication to deal with them.
  10. A listing of technical specifications, including the names and background of the agents who will carry out the evaluation (allowing for additions and deletions as may be required), a tentative schedule (not a design), a budget (at all stages a good faith “best estimate”), and a listing of likely products.
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## **Conducting the Constructivist Evaluation; The Use of the Hermeneutic/Dialectic Methodology**

The constructivist evaluation is carried out through a series of steps which, while listed here in serial form, may well be iterative and reiterative in practice as constructions evolve and as particular claims, concerns, and issues are dealt with. The serial form below is used as a matter of convenience. The listing begins at the point at which a contract satisfactory to all parties has been agreed upon.

1. Organizing the evaluation: Selecting the initial team of evaluators, making entree arrangements, making logistical arrangements, and assessing local political/cultural factors.
2. Identifying stakeholders: Identifying agents commissioning and carrying out the evaluand, identifying “beneficiaries” as well as “victims” of the evaluand’s action, mounting continuing search strategies for other stakeholders, assessing trade-offs and sanctions, and formalizing agreements with and among them.
3. Developing intrastakeholder group constructions: forming multiple hermeneutic circles of 10-12 members each representing one stakeholder audience; soliciting descriptions (constructions) of the evaluand and identifying and probing claims, concerns, and issues that emerge, culminating so far as possible in negotiated agreements on all identified.
4. Enlarging joint intrastakeholder group constructions utilizing the evaluator’s prior construction (but allotting it no special privilege), existing documentary information, interplay of in-group interview data with observational data, literature analects, and other sources found to be relevant.
5. Sorting out constructions, claims, concerns, and issues resolved by consensus, setting these aside as possible case report components.
6. Prioritizing unresolved items via a negotiated prioritizing process determined by and involving the stakeholder group members.
7. Collecting additional information and adding sophistication in its use by training negotiators, seeking new information, performing special studies as needed.
8. Preparing the agenda for negotiation by defining and elucidating competing constructions; working at illuminating, supporting, or refuting items (providing additional training as needed); and testing the agenda derived.
9. Developing intergroup constructions. Step 8 will have resulted in a negotiated agenda for each of the several stakeholder groups. This step 9 effectively recapitulates steps 3-8 for a newly formed hermeneutic circle consisting of persons selected by the individual circles as their representatives. The result is a composite construction that includes all forms of the evaluand constructions as well as their relevant claims, concerns, and issues. It is virtually certain that some items will not have been negotiated to the satisfaction of all stakeholder groups; these are set aside for later reconsideration in a subsequent recycling.

10. Reporting on the results for Step 9. There may be several reports tailored to the claims, concerns, and issues of specific stakeholder groups. Agreements on elements of these reports may lead to proposed action steps. The report should be aimed particularly at the stipulated purpose(s) of the evaluation, that is, formative/merit, formative/worth, summative/merit, and/or summative worth.
11. Recycle the entire process to take particular account of elements set aside in step 9 that were irresolvable at that time.

## **Constructivist Evaluation Reports**

The end product of a constructivist evaluation (but never a final product, since it is subject to successive iterations) is the case report. In a sense, a case study is never finished, it is merely due. There may be multiple reports, targeted to specific stakeholder audiences; and they may take many forms, possibly not including what might normally be termed a “technical” report, if such a report is beyond the competence of a stakeholding audience to deal with. The report does *not* culminate in judgments, conclusions, or recommendations except insofar as these are concurred on by relevant respondent stakeholders.

Instead, the case report is the *joint construction* that emerges as the result of the hermeneutic/dialectic process. Throughout this process the stakeholders—individually, in similar groups, and across groups—are chosen to uncover widely variable viewpoints. They are exposed to new information and new, more sophisticated ways of analysis and interpretation until some level of consensus is reached.

The case report helps the reader realize (in the sense of making real), not only the states of affairs that are believed by stakeholders to exist, but also the underlying motives, feelings, and rationales leading to those beliefs. The case report is characterized by a *thick description* that not only clarifies the all-important context but that makes it possible for the reader to experience it *vicariously*.

The case report must, finally, contain an appendix that describes in detail the methodology followed and makes it possible to judge the extent to which quality criteria (those listed in the following section) are met.

## **Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Constructivist Evaluations and Reports**

Standards normally applied in making quality judgments of evaluations, for example, the Joint Committee Standards or the Guiding Principles for Evaluators of the American Evaluation Association, are inappropriate for constructivist evaluations precisely because they are based upon a fundamentally different theoretical paradigm (as explained in the opening paragraphs of this statement). Two different approaches have been generated to deal with this dilemma; both are useful *during* the evaluation process as procedural checklists and *afterward* in assessing the completed evaluation report (product) for quality:

1. The “parallel” criteria (sometimes called “trustworthiness” or “foundational” criteria). These evolved from an effort to produce criteria more or less parallel to those conventionally used, i.e., internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. They are probably most useful, first, in guiding

methodological decisions during the evaluation and later in auditing the overall evaluation process (see c and d below). However, their very “parallelism” to positivist tenets renders them less than fully adequate for determining the quality of a constructivist approach. These parallel criteria are (full definitions can be found in Fourth Generation Evaluation, pp. 233-43):

- a. *Credibility*, roughly parallel to internal validity, established by prolonged engagement at the site, persistent observation, peer debriefing (a kind of external critic), negative case analysis (a process of reworking postulated hypotheses), progressive subjectivity (continuous checking of developing constructions against records of constructions that were expected prior to data collection), and (most important) member checks, continuous testing of hypotheses, data, preliminary categories, and interpretations with members of stakeholding audiences.
  - b. *Transferability*, roughly parallel to external validity, established not by the evaluator but by receivers of evaluation reports who make personal judgments of the degree to which findings are sufficiently similar to their own situations (judged from the thick description) to warrant testing for the viability of local application (testing for *localization* rather than the more usual *generalization*).
  - c. *Dependability*, roughly parallel to reliability, established through the use of the dependability audit with the assistance of an external auditor, who examines the record of the inquiry in the way a fiscal auditor examines fiscal records, to determine the methodological decisions made and to understand the reasons for them.
  - d. *Confirmability*, roughly parallel to objectivity, which determines the extent to which constructions, assertions, facts, and data can be traced to their sources, the inspection being done by an external auditor (who may be the same or different from the dependability auditor). The “raw products” and the “processes used to compress them” are inspected and confirmed as appropriate.
2. The authenticity criteria. Whereas the parallel criteria are embedded in the assumptions of positivism, the authenticity criteria are based directly on the assumptions of constructivism and are responsive to the hermeneutic/dialectic aspects of that paradigm. These criteria are (full definitions can be found in Fourth Generation Evaluation, pp. 245-250):
- a. *Fairness*, determined by an assessment of the extent to which all competing constructions have been accessed, exposed, and taken into account in the evaluation report, that is, in the negotiated emergent construction.
  - b. *Ontological authenticity*, determined by an assessment of the extent to which individual constructions (including those of the evaluator) have become more informed and sophisticated.
  - c. *Educative authenticity*, determined by an assessment of the extent to which individuals (including the evaluator) have become more understanding (even if not more tolerant) of the constructions of others.



- d. *Catalytic authenticity*, determined by an assessment of the extent to which action (clarifying the focus at issue, moving to eliminate or ameliorate problems, sharpening values) is stimulated and facilitated by the evaluation.
- e. *Tactical authenticity*, determined by an assessment of the extent to which individuals are empowered to take the action that the evaluation implies or proposes.

Two other observations are appropriate in respect to the quality question. First, the ability of the hermeneutic/dialectic process to act as a powerful source of quality control should not be overlooked. In this process, data inputs are analyzed immediately on receipt. They are “fed back” for comment, elaboration, correction, revision, expansion, or emendation to the very respondents who provided them just a moment before. Those inputs will, furthermore, be incorporated into the joint, collaborative reconstruction that emerges as the process continues. Opportunities for errors to go undetected and/or challenged are very small indeed under those circumstances. It is the immediate and continuing interplay of information that militates against the possibility of noncredible outcomes. It is difficult to maintain false fronts or support deliberate deception when information is subject to continuous and multiple challenges from a variety of stakeholders. The publicly inspectable and inspected nature of the hermeneutic/dialectic process itself prevents much of the kinds of secrecy and information poverty that have characterized client-focused evaluations. And finally, any intent on the part of the evaluator to favor particular stakeholders is at least equally detectable.

Second, for a quality evaluation to result, it is necessary for the evaluator to play a dual (and sometimes conflicting) role: advocate and educator. In virtually every situation the stakeholding audiences will differ greatly in the amount of information they bring to the table; the degree to which they can articulate their existing constructions of the evaluand and the claims, concerns, and issues they experience; and the degree of sophistication they possess in processing new information that emerges, some of which may be highly technical. Furthermore, the hermeneutic/dialectic process itself is not one in which they are well versed; thus, it is incumbent on the evaluator to provide the training (and if necessary, the representation) they need. The required balance between these roles is delicate, and the evaluator will need to exercise great care to avoid bias and favoritism.

**Coda** — Constructivist evaluation differs in fundamental ways from other forms of evaluation, of which there are many. In Fourth Generation Evaluation we described the historical evolution of evaluation practice: a first generation focused on measurement, a second generation focused on description, a third generation focused on judgment, and a fourth generation focused on negotiation (the hermeneutic/dialectic). It is this fourth generation form of evaluation that is the subject of this checklist and set of guidelines, now dubbed constructivist evaluation. We believe this form obviates the major problems of the first three generations: a *tendency toward managerialism*, that is, an evaluation approach that favors the point of view of the client or funder, that inappropriately saves the manager harmless, and that is disempowering, unfair, and disenfranchising to selected stakeholders; a *failure to accommodate value-pluralism*; and an *overcommitment to the scientific (positivist) paradigm of inquiry*.

Constructivist evaluation is a difficult model to adopt. It is highly labor intensive. It is ever-recursive and requires frequent recapitulations. It is often adversarial and confrontational. It is a diffuse process impossible to specify in detail (in design form); hence, its personnel and resource commitments can at best be “guesstimated.” It requires the evaluator to play multiple roles which at times may appear to be in conflict. It denies the possibility of reliable generalizations and of determining solutions “that work” everywhere. Yet from a value-oriented view, it is, we think, the best way to evolve viable and acceptable solutions to claims, concerns, and issues widely felt and to the formulation of constructions widely seen to *fit, work, demonstrate relevance, and exhibit continuing modifiability*. It is one of the more realistic and socially—and politically—sensitive approaches to performing useful—and utilized—evaluations.

### **Suggested Citation**

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