

Distant Echo of a Strong Voice: Reflections on Margaret Mead's Evaluation of the Salzburg Seminar

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Samoa knows but one way of life and teaches it to her children. Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?—Margaret Mead (1928), conclusion of *Coming of Age in Samoa*

I don't remember a lot any more about my undergraduate days, but I do remember Margaret Mead. She delivered a lecture at the University of Cincinnati my sophomore year. I arrived early, but the hall was already crowded. I don't remember anything she said. What I remember was her presence.

Born in 1901, she would have been in her late sixties when I saw and heard her. Short, stocky, dowdy in dress, she hobbled to the stage, stood next to the podium rather than behind it, and faced the hushed audience. She held onto her large walking staff throughout her presentation, not leaning on it, but holding it, Moses-like, a kind of anthropological scepter. I was enthralled by her magnetism, authority, presence, but can't remember a damn thing she actually said— affective rather than cognitive outcomes, I suppose.

Those among you who share the disability of being young may recognize her name, perhaps even know a bit about her important contributions to anthropology, but you are unlikely to know her persona. Who of more recent fame might evoke a sense of her celebrity at the time? Carl Sagan on the cosmos. Joseph Campbell on myths. Stephen Jay Gould on evolution. Sir Paul McCartney on "The Long and Winding Road." Scholars all (okay, drop McCartney, though a case can be made that . . .), they each took on the task of educating the general public and, along the way, enriched themselves and became celebrities. Often dismissed by academic peers (sometimes called *jealous academics*) as mere popularizers, these researchers shared a passion for lifting the veil of science and revealing the mysteries of the world to the great unwashed.

The *Biographical Dictionary of Famous American Women* says of Margaret Mead: "In late years she was something of a national oracle as a social critic of unsurpassed influence and celebrity" (McHenry, 1980, p. 277). Given that no evaluators have yet attained the stature

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of Sagan, Campbell, Gould, and Mead, and that Michael Scriven's departure from the United States to New Zealand may mean that we've lost our best immediate chance for such a personage of mythological proportions to capture the public imagination through a public television series on cosmic evaluation as a transdiscipline, we are left as a profession with the default option of claiming as one of our own a person of already-attained celebrity. With the wonderful discovery of her evaluation of the Salzburg Seminar, Margaret Mead is instantly elevated to the status of world famous evaluator. (In a subsequent commentary I hope to nominate Sir Paul McCartney for induction into evaluation's incipient Hall of Fame considering the sheer volume of his evaluative contributions, e.g., "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away, now it seems that they are here to stay"—otherwise known as *implementation failure*.) But, for the moment and to the task at hand, let us give Margaret Mead her due and see what stands out about her early evaluation effort, before she had, as we do, the advantages and the trappings of a profession, things like evaluation textbooks, guidebooks, sourcebooks, handbooks, standards, principles, checklists, frameworks, models, conferences, journals, and membership dues. How did she do it?

VOICE

The first thing that struck me in reading Mead's evaluation report was the strength and clarity of her voice. I could almost see and hear her as I read her evaluation:

This report is presented from a double standpoint. As an anthropologist accustomed to the observation of group behavior, I can compare this experiment with other group situations in which I have been a participant who was also making systematic observations.

As the lecturer in charge of those students who wished to get some familiarity with modern social science methods in a field loosely labeled "sociology", I taught a seminar in which the students undertook to do small pieces of field work . . . I have used these students' observations in preparing this report.

Notice the strong first person active voice. "I can compare . . ." "I have been a participant . . ." "I taught a seminar . . ." "I have used . . ." To appreciate this, place her voice in context. She was writing at a time and in a place and as a member of a gender where the third person passive academic voice would have been the accepted and expected voice of scientific authority, to wit:

This report is presented from a double standpoint. As an anthropologist accustomed to the observation of group behavior, the researcher can compare this experiment with other group situations observed. As a lecturer in charge of students . . . , a seminar was taught in which the students undertook field work . . . and those students' observations have been used in preparing this report.

I recently completed a review of major developments in qualitative inquiry since 1990 as part of revising my qualitative evaluation methods book (Patton, 2002b, 2002c). One of the most prominent themes of the last decade has been the importance of finding and owning one's voice in qualitative reporting. The person, especially in participant observation, is the instrument. Reflecting on and revealing who that person is (Who I am), what that person brings to the inquiry (What I bring), and how that person owns her or his findings and interpretations

(How I engage in sense-making)—these reflexive considerations have come to the fore in writings on qualitative inquiry (e.g., [Denzin & Lincoln, 2000](#); [Hertz, 1997](#)).

Evaluators often hide behind their methods: “The survey was administered. The interviews were conducted. The data were analyzed and interpreted. Recommendations were generated” Margaret Mead provides a different and pioneering role model, essentially saying: “I observed as I participated. I used the students’ fieldwork. I incorporated their work into my report. I make these recommendations. And I did all this drawing upon my own extensive experience.”

COMPARATIVE METHOD

Evaluation is inherently comparative. Determining merit or worth, or providing formative feedback, requires comparison of what the evaluator finds to something, whether it be the program’s goals, participants’ needs, other programs’ results, benchmarks, baselines, norms, standards, hopes . . . something. Margaret Mead, under her anthropological mentors Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, helped pioneer the comparative method. The method that came to characterize her work and that she made explicit in her methodological writings involved contrasting the values, norms, and behaviors of two or more cultures. An exemplar of this was her study of three New Guinea tribes, the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli, that led in 1935 to *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. She stressed that one had to understand a culture’s values in the context of its own environment and relations to surrounding peoples, but that interpreting a culture’s unique and relative values required comparison to other cultures, not judgmentally (one is better than another), but descriptively (here’s what happens and here are its implications within this context). In other words, she is great grandmother to a species that is anathematized in America’s contemporary political environment (aka the religious right). She was a cultural relativist and secular humanist.

At the present time we live in a period of transition. We have many standards but we still believe that only one standard can be right. We present to our children the picture of a battle-field where each group is fully armoured in a conviction of the righteousness of its cause. And each of these groups makes forays among the next generation. But it is unthinkable that a final recognition of the great number of ways in which man, during the course of history at the present time, is solving the problems of life, should not bring with it in turn the downfall of our belief in a single standard. ([Mead, 1928](#), p. 145)

How did Mead’s comparative perspective inform her evaluation of the Salzburg Seminar? Earlier I quoted her explaining the dual standpoints from which she studied the program, one of which was, “As an anthropologist accustomed to the observation of group behavior, the researcher can compare this experiment with other group situations observed.” What other group situations? The answer is found in a footnote: “Wellesley School of Community Affairs, 1944, Vassar Summer Institute in Community Living, 1945, UNESCO Seminar in International Understanding at Sevres, 1947, etc.”

Et cetera? *Et cetera!* What a mischievous, provocative, enticing allusion. *Et cetera*, as in, perhaps, all the rest of her professional and life experience, some 30 years (at that time) of observing human groups cross-culturally, and a half century of being Margaret Mead. This footnote in general, and the *et cetera* in particular, call us back to the strength and clarity of her voice, the evaluative authority and credibility that came from being who she was. I would speculate that the presumed intended users of her report (it is addressed to the Harvard Student

Council) commissioned her work not so much because of her methodological rigor but because of who she was.

In our fixation on evaluation methods, this matter of evaluator credibility has received relatively little attention, mostly in the utilization literature (e.g., *Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979*). Evaluation's principles and standards call for evaluators to be competent and we have enlarged our understanding of competence beyond methods to include communications, conflict resolution, values clarification, and negotiation skills (*King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001*), but Mead's example goes beyond methodological capabilities and other evaluation competences. Her credibility resided in her persona, including, I suspect her clarity of voice and comparative perspective that incorporated who she was, what she had seen, and what she had done over a distinguished career.

This speculation, and it is admittedly speculative, derives from my own experiences and conversations with colleagues who, like me, have traveled many miles and been at this work a long time. When we are commissioned to do evaluations, who we are and what we bring to the table matter. Every evaluation I now do has a comparative framework born not only of whatever comparisons are embedded formally in the design, but "et cetera" comparisons that derive from having examined hundreds of programs. That larger comparative context, often more implicit than explicit, plays a huge role in the feedback I provide programs. I can give them a sense of how their implementation problems compare to a universe of such problems, how their concerns about measuring outcomes compare to myriad such concerns across the landscape of accountability, and how their openness (or lack thereof) to evaluative findings compares to a huge variety of stakeholders.

When we are young, we get evaluation work because of our methodological training and evaluation knowledge. Over time and with experience, we add a score of political, interactive, and organizational competencies and capabilities that let us bring value to those for whom we do evaluations. Eventually, if we have the good fortune to persevere and endure, the whole of who we are becomes the basis of our credibility and attractiveness to evaluation users (or, alternatively, the reason they are repelled by us). I mention this, stimulated by the example of Margaret Mead, because I find it little acknowledged in our literature, perhaps in part because, as a field, we've only now been around long enough to have enough gray heads whose persona—and the variety here is enormous in what it offers as is, fortunately, the demand—is the basis of their practice. That, at least, is true for me, and I infer it was true for Dame Mead. (I also acknowledge that methodological purists will deny or lament this state of affairs. So be it. As for me, I experience it as one of the few, the very few, advantages of aging.)

OPENNESS, ENGAGEMENT, AND SURRENDER

Other aspects derived from experience, confidence, and authority deserve comment, namely, a willingness to undertake the unknown, face uncertainty with openness, and see what emerges. Margaret Mead engaged openly as a participant and observer in this seminar and let the evaluation flow from her engagement, interpreted through her past experiences and reflections. In her autobiography she offered insight into the approach I suspect she followed in evaluating the Salzburg Seminar:

... most people prefer to carry out the kinds of experiments that allow the scientist to feel that he is in full control of the situation rather than surrendering himself to the situation, as one must in studying human beings as they actually live. (*Mead, 1972*)

PROCESS USE AND DEMOCRATIC EVALUATION

Mead's evaluation offers a number of examples of what we have come to call "process use" (Patton, 1998). In studying evaluation utilization we have learned that it can be important to recognize and distinguish process use from findings use (Patton, 1997). Process use refers to the ways in which the people engaged in an evaluation are affected by and learn from the processes of that engagement. Thus, for example, the process of regularly being interviewed about a program experience may make staff and participants more reflective, and make the program culture more learning-oriented, quite apart from the content of those interviews and the findings that emerge from the analysis. In other words, the *evaluation process* can have an impact and utility quite apart from the utility of the evaluation's findings.

In the Salzburg Seminar evaluation the students doing fieldwork and gathering evaluation data were learning by doing, and learning by having the opportunity to observe and engage with Margaret Mead. Given the overall purpose of the seminar, perhaps even more important may have been the way in which the evaluation process modeled open inquiry for the Europeans whose academic and conference experiences were historically hierarchical and authoritarian. Soliciting feedback from the European students about what they preferred, valued, learned from, and disliked must have been eye-opening in a cultural context where students' opinions were traditionally disdained as mere ignorance, an attitude carried forth and visible in contemporary America by Harold Bloom, who famously takes pride in refusing to engage in any form of course evaluation, for why would a *Herr Professor* care in the least about the ignorant and ill-formed opinions of mere students. Mead's processes for conducting the evaluation, including the very act of soliciting and taking seriously student feedback, would constitute interventions in and of themselves—examples of *using the evaluation process* quite apart from the findings generated.

Let me take this a step further. Mead's use of evaluation to demonstrate, model, and infuse democratic approaches to dialogue and interaction in post-War Europe evokes for me the visionary theme of the 2000 European Evaluation Society conference in Lausanne, Switzerland: "Taking Evaluation to the People." That European conference focused on evaluation's contributions to strengthening democracy (Patton, 2002a). Mead would have resonated, I think, to recent work on "democratic evaluation" (Greene, 2000; House & Howe, 2000). Mead writes of the seminar's contribution to modeling democratic relations to the Europeans:

The most unique feature of the Seminar was, of course, the youth of the administrators and the reversal of responsibility as between Harvard students and Harvard visiting faculty members. This plan seemed initially to strain even American capacities for democratic relationships between faculty and students but as it worked out, thanks primarily to the imagination and flexibility and sense of humor of the members of the Harvard faculty, it provided an almost unparalleled demonstration to the European students of some of the aspects of American democracy which are most difficult to communicate. When it was coupled with the other attitudes of the faculty, their willingness to be interrupted at any time, their unselfconscious treatment of the students as individuals and their participation in the ordinary living arrangements of the Seminar, it guaranteed that the European students would definitely experience some of those aspects of American culture which the best intentioned army of occupation is unfitted to convey.

INTEGRATION OF THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Margaret Mead's personal life has received nearly as much attention as her professional contributions. Both have evoked controversy. The quality of her fieldwork has been vehemently attacked (Freeman, 1999). Her three husbands, her male and female lovers, her ambiguous relationship to the women's movement, and her well-known anthropologist daughter (Mary Catherine Bateson) have fueled interest in her personal life (Bateson, 1984, 2001; Heilbrun, 1990). With all that as context, I was quite taken with yet another footnote in her report. She wrote, as an aside, when describing the choice of Leopoldskron as the setting for the seminar and the choice of English as the language of communication:

As my seven-year-old child remarked after asking why English was the language of the Seminar, "But after all, I suppose, it is the language of the producers."

I am writing this review shortly after the American Evaluation Association meeting in which AEA President Molly Engle involved her two young, energetic, and captivating daughters in her opening presidential keynote. Throughout the conference I heard comments, both positive and negative, about what President Engle had done. In the closing session, when audience members were asked to reflect on conference highlights, one commented about being deeply moved by what she considered the altogether appropriate and rare presence of children in our midst at a professional evaluation conference. It seems clear that young Mary Catherine Bateson was being socialized into her mother's work, a commitment Margaret Mead derived as much from her observation of mother-daughter relationships in Oceania as from her own personal desire to be with her child. I suspect that Margaret Mead would have understood and applauded Molly Engle's incorporation of her daughters into her keynote. Her sixth recommendation also speaks to future family involvement at the seminar:

Wives and children of Americans, and of Europeans should be interviewed as possible participants, before inclusion. *They are desirable particularly.* (Emphasis added.)

INTERPRETATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning how to gather data is relatively straightforward compared to learning how to interpret data and generate recommendations. Mead's report reveals a willingness to go beyond the facile and obvious recommendation. For example, the evaluation data included feedback from participants that they wanted more common group activities. She reports this preference, considers it, and then suggests potential downsides.

That the Seminar members in the end expressed a strong desire for common events, dancing, singing, as a group, should not be interpreted as meaning that a program of intensive group activity would have improved the Seminar, but rather that the appreciation of the Seminar members of the group rose steadily through the six weeks. More planned group activity might very easily have produced friction or satiation.

In a similar vein, she adds context and her own take on the suggestion that American students be participants in future seminars. (The seminar was for European faculty and students. The Harvard students organized and supported the seminar, but were not formally participants.) Mead reflects thusly:

Among the comments and requests collected from the students was included the request that there be American students included in a future Seminar. But had there been Americans as regular students at Salzburg this summer, American civilization would not have presented a meeting place in studying which the European students could forget their national differences. The decision to give the Seminar a formal academic tone with scheduled lectures without discussion, while somewhat against modern trends which emphasize more group participation in all parts of the learning process, served a useful purpose in differentiating the Seminar from the sort of vague "international conference" which it was desired to avoid. The success of the plan depended considerably on the fact that the faculty group and the student assistants contributed their services. If a group of similar standing had been paid—even by a most disinterested and selfless undergraduate body—it seems unlikely that in the current European atmosphere of state sponsored propaganda, the Europeans—students and Austrian general public—could not have believed that this was not a propagandic effort, designed to serve nationalistic ends. However, the voluntary character of the whole plan made it possible for the Seminar to offer an opportunity to students interested in America to study about America very much as a group of botanists or zoologists from the United States might have taken a laboratory of American flora or fauna to their fellow botanists or zoologists in Europe, with the simple statement, if this is something in which you are interested, why, we who are after all in a position to make it available for study, will be glad to do so. The Salzburg Seminar committee had course aims of importance to world peace which were more specific than would have been served by the study of American botany. The design of the Seminar was such as to increase understanding—by both the Europeans and the Americans—of those aspects of American life which would be most useful in increasing effective communications between America and Europe, and among Europeans.

This kind of thoughtful and critical reframing of participant feedback strikes me as quite rare in evaluation. The Europeans generously and diplomatically recommended that future seminars be open to American students. But rather than taking the easy path of affirming this recommendation, including yielding to her own expressed value preferences for equity and democracy, Mead considers the proposed action in relation to the larger seminar goals and post-War context and concludes that, in the short term, following the European recommendation would be ill-advised.

The plan was therefore asymmetrical, a group of European students who came as guests, to study, and a group of Americans, faculty, assistants and student staff, who came to contribute their time and effort to the Seminar. The asymmetry has disadvantages. In the evaluation sessions and in the special interviewing done by the sociology seminar members, the European students expressed a wish that they had contributed more to the Seminar in planning and work. While this expressed desire is in conformity with the best democratic practices, and while it will be desirable to enlist as much help as possible among the European students in future years, it is possible that for at least another year it would be better to let them make their contribution after the Seminar is over, and to preserve the essential symmetry in which the Americans remain in a rather dedicated role.

Still another interpretation that I found intriguing was her applause for her Harvard colleagues. She observes that the seminar faculty were of "exceptionally high caliber" and attributes much of the seminar's success to the outstanding faculty among which, of course, she is one. While her objectivity is naturally suspect in making such a judgment, here again she offers an intriguing twist in interpreting and explaining the consequences and implications of faculty quality:

A series of happy accidents made it possible this summer to collect a faculty of exceptionally high caliber, perhaps we cannot hope again to repeat this good fortune. But it seems worthwhile to stress certain special and general characteristics of this faculty. It was very valuable that the faculty members were of such high standing that they were confident and assured in handling their material, because the defensiveness and the tentativeness of lecturers of less standing might easily have seemed—to European listeners—to show a lack of pride and certainly about the American cultural heritage about which they were lecturing.

While her concluding list of recommendations shares with many such lists the difficulty of connecting the recommendations to any supporting data in the report itself, and the corresponding difficulty of determining which recommendations are simply her expert opinion and which are data-based, the excerpts I have quoted above reveal her extraordinary mind at work and increases confidence that all of her recommendations have emerged from such critical thinking and balanced scrutiny, taking context and larger purposes into account.

MARGARET MEAD AS EVALUATOR

I opened these reflections by wondering how well Margaret Mead would do as an evaluator given that she had not had the benefits of the resources and guidance that our profession now affords. Moreover, in their contextual essay framing the report, Russon and Ryback speculate that part of the report is missing. Nevertheless, what we do have tells us a great deal about how she approached her commissioned evaluation mandate. She focuses more on implementation than outcomes in part because she was providing formative insights for seminar improvement and because the obstacles to implementation were so formidable. She does not shy away, however, from summative judgment. I count five times in the report where she declares the seminar a “success.” She closes with a clear summative judgment: “The greatest value of the Salzburg Seminar can be the fact that it happened, that it was thought of and executed successfully against such great odds and that the participants, Americans and Europeans reported so favorably upon it.”

Indeed, she goes farther. By viewing the seminar as a “pilot experiment,” she holds out hope for its widespread influence on others: “If these facts can be sufficiently publicized to fire the imagination of other University groups and set them thinking of comparable—but not closely similar projects—then this single venture can have results far beyond the scope of the 135 lives which were touched by this summer’s Seminar.” An evaluation report that ends with inspiration and vision—how rare is that?

All in all I conclude that, as an internal conference evaluator, she did quite well and that we can, with pride, include Margaret Mead in our professional lineage. We owe Craig Russon and Timothy Ryback a debt of gratitude for uncovering this historical and pioneering gem and for their informative contextual essay. Unfortunately, they couldn’t tell us whether or how Margaret Mead’s evaluation was actually used by intended users in intended ways, but then, it’s not a perfect world. Sigh.

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