

# The Development of Evaluation Culture in Spain

## A Historical Approach Based on the Biographical Method

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a retrospective explanation as to how evaluation culture has been slowly incorporated into politics and public institutions in Spain during the last three decades. Evaluation, quality, and excellence are relevant concepts embedded in the design of current political programs. At this moment in history, it is important to ask, what has been the evaluation history in Spain? Where do influences on research designs come from? I address these questions in order to describe the evaluation process in the public sphere based on the biographical method, specifically on the testimony of five Spanish evaluators with recognized experience in this field. The aim is to set up a historical vision that represents the evolution of evaluation culture in Spain, analyzing and linking the individual perceptions of evaluators with the specific characteristics of a particular social context.

**KEYWORDS:** *evaluation culture in Spain; history of evaluation; political accountability; biographical method*

Biographical analysis is shaped by a family of terms which, combined in different ways and levels, define the biographical methodology (Denzin, 1989). This kind of inquiry involves textual and intercontextual elements like letters, personal diaries, biograms, or life history based on oral testimony (Valle, 1994). These are interesting resources in historical studies. “History from the bottom” emphasizes individual testimony as a way of criticizing and demystifying macrohistory (Ferraroti, 1990). This research project is based on works by authors such as Burke (1993), Levy (1993), and Sharpe (1993).

Using the biographical approach in a Spanish case study, this paper explains the transition of evaluation culture by connecting the social context factors with the experience of five prestigious Spanish evaluators. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to distinguish among

three historical periods: 1) Genesis of evaluation—First projects and the American influence (1982-86); 2) The essential boost—Spain in the European Union (1986-99); 3) Consolidation and institutionalization of the evaluation process (2000-present).

### Genesis of Evaluation: First Projects and the American Influence (1982-86)

In Spain, the first democratic period after Franco’s dictatorship ended in 1975 was called *la transición* (the transition). The new Spanish government undertook a stabilization plan, creating a set of measures to steady the financial system. In 1982, after the presidential election, the evaluation process was included within public policy for the first time. The

management model adopted was called *Presupuesto por Programas* (Budget for Programs). It was an adapted version of the American Programming Planning and Budgeting System (PPBS) and the French *Rationalisation des Choix Budgétaires* (Ballart, 1992). Results have shown that there were a lot of drawbacks to the definition and implementation of the evaluation process. In the words of Subirats (1989), “The negative balance of this management model is due to the emphasis on the research method instead of the feedback given by findings” (p. 24).

To put this in perspective, it is important to find out how evaluation was perceived in Spain at that time and why the evaluation process was an essential core in the political design. The testimony of Interviewee 1 helps address these questions:

At the beginning, people talked about *evaluation* but nobody knew exactly what it meant. I mean, there are fashion words, now it is *quality*, later it will be substituted by another. So, in that moment, the *research* word had old-fashion connotations, and *evaluation* looked more accurate. On the other hand, political pressures were emerging. In my field, the social service area, I heard several times, “the project has to be evaluated!” That happens from different stakeholders. However, it was evident that there was a political interest.

—Interviewee 1

Regarding this quotation, the evaluation process in Spain was driven by a desire for political accountability, which must be internalized by the government. In that moment, evaluation was conceived as a procedure to inform what was happening. Besides that, this testimony intrinsically exposes other relevant points related to the interdependent relationship between politicians and researchers. This issue, described by Carol Weiss in 1975, provides insights for understanding the evaluation process and the evaluation culture in public policy. Politicians needed evaluations to justify and strengthen

their programs, and evaluators looked for new areas of research.

It is also important to pay attention to designs of evaluation in this first period. For instance, from the testimony of the director of evaluation in the Ministry of Education of Spain, it is obvious that Spanish evaluations were influenced by American evaluation practice:

I made quantitative evaluations for the Ministry of Education from 1982 to 1983, taking several approaches from the Educational Testing Service, which also had a quantitative orientation. I had contact with people there. In fact, I moved there for short period of time, and then I could extend my stay in the United States because I had a Fulbright scholarship. I took part in international projects led by them.

—Interviewee 2

This extract contributes to identifying various aspects of the evaluation process within the educational field. Linking these individual perceptions, the evaluation process emerged as an accountability system influenced by American designs. In hindsight, it is possible to recognize a fine parallel between the Spanish case and the evaluation of the War on Poverty programs in United States described by Stufflebeam and Shinkfield in 1987.

Evaluation processes increased in popularity in Spain at this time. However, there was not an evaluation culture yet. The third interviewee focused attention on that point:

It is an evaluation I made in 1988 when there was not really an effective demand and evaluation requirements. I had to persuade and inform people that evaluation would be useful.

—Interviewee 3

In essence, from this perspective, the first stage of evaluation history in Spain was focused on management models in specific public areas such as education and social service. The American approach constituted the main reference for designing and developing educational evaluations in Spain. Nevertheless,

there was a still vague concept of evaluation and unclear definition of the function and utility of this procedure.

## The Essential Boost: Spain in the European Union (1986-99)

On January 1, 1986, Spain was included as a new member of the European Economic Community, the predecessor institution of the European Union. This insertion created an advantageous economic position for Spain, specifically from Structural and Cohesion Funds (Carrasco, 1999). Under that premise, the Spanish government carried out a significant number of programs and projects, mainly in education, social service, and healthcare.

European Union policymakers contributed to the development of the member countries, and logically, one of the most significant needs was to know the effectiveness and efficiency of those programs. In 1988, regulations concerning Structural Funds for 1989-93 made systematic evaluation mandatory. They stipulated that “with a view to assessing the effectiveness of structural interventions, community action is subject to ex ante and ex post evaluation of its impact” (Toulemonde, 2000). In others words, the evaluation process was progressively incorporated as a part of political accountability, not only in Spain, but also in the whole European Union.

Evaluation processes were more important than ever in the European Union directives. In that sense, the “efficacy reserve” constituted a significant element that encouraged and promoted an evaluation culture in their countries. The efficacy reserve was defined as a portion (4%) of each state member’s budget that would later be allocated to implement the most efficient programs.

Under the measures and requirements imposed by the European Union, the evaluation process acquired high visibility in the different levels of the Spanish Public Administration (Ballart, 1992). Consequently, there was an

effective demand for evaluations and, therefore, for professional evaluators. The evaluation concept was also affected. During this time, the term “evaluation” became popular and was identified as a systematic research procedure, as recognized by Interviewee 4:

The word “evaluation” existed in the ‘90s because it was used in conversations. People talked about evaluation, and it had technical and rigorous connotations.

—Interviewee 4

The decade of the 1990s was a transformational moment in the history of evaluation in Spain due to the endorsement of specific regulations. Spain followed the path proposed by Europe and integrated the evaluation procedure in legislation, particularly in three important systems of the Public Administration.

*Educational system.* In Article 62 of the Act on the General Organization of the Education System of 1990, the Ministry of Education approved the creation of the National Institute for the Evaluation and Quality of Education System.

*Healthcare system.* In Royal Decree 1415/1994, the Ministry of Healthcare approved the creation of the Healthcare Technology Evaluation Center in 1994.

*Social services and international cooperation.* In Article 19 of the International Cooperation for Development Act, 23/1998, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation emphasized the importance of evaluating programs funded by the Spanish government.

To conclude with this part, the inclusion in the European Economic Community provided a significant boost for the evaluation process in Spain. European funds provided to the Spanish government allowed for the undertaking of innovative programs and projects. At that time, the evaluation process was required as an instrument of government accountability. This is the core to understanding the subsequent

regulations and consequently, the generalization of evaluation in Spain.

## Consolidation and Institutionalization of the Evaluation Process (2000-08)

The last historical stage in the Spanish evaluation process started at the beginning of the twenty-first century. After adopting regulations and foundations of specific evaluation centers in the 1990s, the next step was commonly known as “the global institutionalization of the evolution process.” From 2001 to the present, the Spanish government promoted and created different kinds of evaluation agencies to serve different political areas. The next chronological description identifies the most important organization approved thus far.

*Spanish Evaluation Society (SES)*. Founded in 2001 with support from the European Evaluation Society, its main goal is to improve instruments and methodological approaches for evaluating the Spanish Public Administration.

*National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (NAQAAS)*. Created in 2002 under requirements endorsed at the Berlin Conference on European Higher Education, its main objective is to evaluate quality and excellence of the Spanish higher educational system.

*Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)*. Established according to the 16/2003 Act in 2003, AHRQ is an institution that depends on the Health Care Ministry. Its principal aim is to promote the evaluation procedure as a way of ensuring transparency and quality of the healthcare system.

*State Agency for Evaluation of Public Policies and Quality of Services (SAEPPQS)*. Constituted under the 28/2006 Act in 2006, SAEPPQS is the most recent evaluation institution in Spain. It focuses on endorsing the evaluation process in every single program of the Public Administration.

The priority objective of SAEPPQS is to establish and develop a rational methodology for designing systems of quality and excellence in the Public Administration.

As a result of this institutionalization, the evaluation process and, consequently, evaluation culture, are concepts perfectly embedded in the Spanish research context. Predisposition to evaluate is currently beyond political accountability. It is a procedure to ensure and promote the quality and improvement of services. This mental change is also verified by Interviewee 5, who explained the third stage of Spanish evaluation in terms of its beneficial effects:

Context and circumstances have radically changed. The importance of the evaluation process is much more present now. The evaluation practice was institutionalized in a short period of time. Now, we have the Spanish Evaluation Society....

If you ask anybody what the evaluation process is, most of them talk about concrete criteria and types of assessment. They know that there are results from evaluations, etc.... People are much more knowledgeable than before. At the same time, there are a lot of people working in the evaluation field, and therefore, there are a lot of evaluation projects.

—Interviewee 5

The extension and scope of the evaluation process involved other dimensions, such as employment policies, quality services, and/or regional development projects. Currently, one of the most representative areas where evaluation and accreditation processes have an essential function is the European Higher Education Area (Reboloso, Fernández, & Cantón, 2008). The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), in coordination with the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain is in charge of the assessment process to control the quality and excellence of the new unified higher education system in Europe.

Summing up, the evaluation process has progressively become consolidated in Spanish Public Administration due to support from the Spanish government. After establishing specific directives in the 1990s, the emergence of a number of evaluation agencies has positively contributed to the identification of a clear concept of this research procedure. This political strategy has contributed to growing confidence in and commitment to the evaluation culture in Spain.

## Conclusions

The description of the Spanish evaluation culture in this article emphasized the political decisions which had a remarkable influence on the development of the evaluation process in the past three decades. In that sense, it is important to point out two ideas that summarize the current importance of this procedure. Foremost, the interdependent relationship between politicians and researchers involved a beneficial situation for each group. The evaluation process supported political accountability and permitted the implementation of effective and efficient public programs. The second important point concerns quality and excellence. The institutionalization of the evaluation process in Spain implied a reconceptualization of these issues. From then on, evaluations were conceived as a process to promote and ensure the value of programs. Quality and excellence were effects of the feedback obtained from the evaluation reports. It was more than a transparent way to justify programs and projects in certain political areas. Evaluation provided a precedent for improvements, which was tremendously useful in the design of the next program or policy.

Regarding the biographical approach, experts evaluators interviewed were selected according to the importance of their theoretical and practical contributions to the evaluation process in Spain. They are considered as the “evaluation pioneers” in their evaluation areas,

and a part of the Spanish evaluation history. The intention of this paper is to link their evaluation experiences with a macrovision of the evaluation process in Spain. In that sense, the biographical method constituted a plausible way to achieve this objective.

On the other hand, it is also crucial to understand the historical concept as something dynamic over time. As has been mentioned, to comprehend the present, it is necessary to examine the past. In the case of the evaluation process, this approach was described in the “The Oral History of Evaluation,” a project undertaken by Jean King, Melvin Mark, Robin Miller, and Stacey Stockdill and published periodically in the *American Journal of Evaluation*. The perspective of the interviews gave me the idea to dig deeper into the historical context of the evaluation process in Spain.

Finally, the main limitation of this article is that it paid attention only to the evaluation process applied in the education, healthcare, and social service systems. Nevertheless, there are more evaluation contexts in Spain where evaluative practices play a crucial role at the present time. The European Higher Education Area, the public administration sector, and/or employment policies constitute clear examples, and it would be very interesting and necessary to extend similar analyses in those areas in the future. By using retrospective analysis as a part of the evaluation profession, it will be possible to recognize methodological developments, important authors’ contributions, and definitively to identify the profession. It is a responsibility of all of us to be aware of and explain evaluation in the present moment for the sake of future evaluation generations.

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## About the Interviewees

Mariano Álvaro Page was the director of educational evaluations for the Ministry of Education at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (1983-92). During this period, he collaborated on several projects with the Educational Testing Service. Currently, he is in charge of evaluating gender policies for the Spanish government.

Francisco Alvira Martín was a visiting professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and a visiting scholar at Northwestern University, supported by Professor Robert Boruch. He has specialized in social service evaluations and wrote *Methodology of Evaluation Programs* (1991), one of the most important references in the evaluation field in Spain. Currently, he is the head of the Methodology of Social Research Department at Complutense University (Madrid).

María Bustelo Ruesa was a visiting scholar at the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation at the University of Illinois, supported by Professor Robert Stake. She has worked mainly on evaluations of public policies. Currently, she is Professor in the Political Science Department at Complutense University (Madrid) and director of the Master on Evaluation of Programmes and Public Policies.

María José Aguilar Idáñez is the head of the Social Services and Social Work Department at the University of Castilla-La Mancha. She has worked in the United Nations Development Programme for a long time evaluating international cooperation and development projects in Latin America. She is presently the director of the Institute for Regional Development at the University of Castilla-La Mancha.

Juan Andres Ligeró Lasa is Professor in the Sociology and Political Science Department at the Carlos III University. He has a recognized career as an external evaluator for the Spanish Public Administration, especially, in the social service and educational areas. He is also co-director of the Master on Evaluation of Programmes and Public Policies.