

ACTION EVALUATION: A RESPONSE TO MARK HOFFMAN'S COMMENTS

Jay Rothman

Mark Hoffman's discussion of the Action Evaluation process is, on the whole, accurate and insightful. However, there are a few corrections I would like to point out as well as respond to his provocative questions about the possible limitations of the still-evolving methodology.

I. Action Evaluation as a Tool

Action Evaluation (AE) has evolved over the last 8 years in parallel with my conflict resolution process called ARIA (Antagonism, Resonance, Invention and Action). AE builds on ARIA (i.e. the last phase of ARIA is the first of AE), yet for clarity they should be distinguished (for a full discussion of the ARIA framework, see Rothman, 1997, or www.ariagroup.com; for a full discussion of AE, please go to www.aepro.org).

AE was developed in part to address what I found to be a serious limitation in my own conflict resolution work (it is useful to note that in trying to improve my own work, I have also aimed at contributing to the field itself, and yet it is perhaps most accurate and less over-reaching to speak purely in first person here). In my decade-and-a-half of conflict intervention, I am satisfied that by using the ARIA process I have effectively assisted many disputants to reframe their differences constructively – from *antagonism to resonance* (see Rothman 1997). Moreover, I have contributed to their ability to *invent* creative options for deepening their *resonance* of shared goals and needs between them. However, I am less satisfied that I have been successful in helping disputants sustain *action* that promotes lasting and structural changes. This led me to ask two questions: What could I do in my work as an intervener to help disputants move from good ideas to good implementation for social and structural change?; and, How could I know?

This led me to develop Action Evaluation, a methodology designed to assist key stakeholders in a conflict intervention initiative (e.g. third-parties, participants, funders) to collaboratively define

success (baseline stage) as a vehicle for helping to promote and enact it. Moreover, having systematically articulated a shared and operational set of definitions of success, the ability for systematic monitoring and self-evaluation would also be fostered (formative stage). Then, participants' interest in systematic self-reflection and self-evaluation, as part of their overall experience in a conflict resolution initiative, should grow as they help to define and then monitor "success". As Ross concludes in his comments on *PCIA as Peacebuilding Tool* "[o]nly when people feel sufficiently secure with the knowledge that failure is not an end but a new beginning will practitioners embrace evaluation as a tool rather than a seeing it as a problem to be overcome."

Box 1 Action Evaluation	
Stage	Action
<i>Establishing a Baseline</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ articulation of definitions of success ▪ negotiation of definitions between individual stakeholders ▪ individual definitions are woven into shared goal of success.
<i>Formative Monitoring</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ enactment of the definitions of success ▪ monitoring and adjustment of definitions based on insights gained during real-life activity
<i>Summative Assessment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ questions are asked and measures are taken to see how well an intervention has "stacked up" against its own internally derived and dynamically evolved well an intervention has "stacked up" against its own internally derived and dynamically evolved goals

As outlined in Box 1, the three stages in Action Evaluation are: *establishing baseline, formative monitoring and summative assessment*. The first, *establishing a baseline*, begins by having key stakeholders individually articulate their prospective definitions of success prior to the launch of a given project or intervention; Hoffman accurately describes this first part. The next step is rather different from Hoffman's description. What he described as the "second layer" of negotiating shared definitions between individual stakeholders, is the second step in establishing a baseline. Here the individual definitions are interwoven into a single platform through a collaborative negotiation process (for an example of this go to <http://www.aepro.org/inprint/papers/aedayton.html>)

The second phase of action evaluation, “formative assessment” is similar to what Hoffman describes as the “third layer”. In this process, baseline definitions of success are enacted and then self-consciously adjusted to give a systematic monitoring of how well those definitions are or are not matching up with the reality of real-life activity (as distinct from theory-driven hypotheses that are made during baseline stage). Finally, there is a *summative assessment* stage, or more traditional “evaluation-as-judgment” in which, based on evolved criteria of success, questions are asked and measures are taken to see how well an intervention has “stacked up” against its own internally derived and consciously evolved goals.

II. Some Critical Remarks

In seeking to summarize some general criteria of success, Hoffman has expanded on definitions that were derived from one specific project between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and, after us, has suggested these could be used more broadly (see his discussion of “illustrative standards”, and chapter 13 in Ross and Rothman 2000). This is indeed a goal of action evaluation, but as it evolves, it can begin to probe for more data-driven generalizations, and not by extrapolating from just one intervention as was the case here. Rather, our goal now is to draw conclusions and generalizations by employing the now extensive data base of stakeholders goals we have developed of over 75 projects, and begin to develop something of a contingency based analysis of success. We concur with Hoffman’s first challenge, or goal, that AE must move from specific project focus to generalizations across projects if it is to be usefully applied in the field (Hoffman , in this volume, p. 28). We believe that by focusing on specific cases, and comparing them with many other cases, we may be able to generalize useful hypotheses about patterns where we can begin to match types of conflict intervention, such as training, needs-based, interest based, and the goals that are developed for each with different types of conflicts.

For example, Ghais in her AE of CDR’s intervention in Bulgaria (Ghais 1999 available at www.aepro.org/inprint/conference/ghais.html), surmised that the further away a given set of stakeholders are from the intervention, the more wide-ranging are their goals (e.g. CDR’s goals were to build local capacity, enhance democratic processes and pilot test a model that could be applied in other settings); while those closer to the situation itself would have more immediate and concrete goals (e.g. the Bulgarian participants sought to improve education and social welfare of Roma youth). Ghais concludes “[a]t the end of the baseline section of this paper, we noted that the four stakeholder groups, participants, conveners, supervisors and sponsors,

articulated goals that differed along a spectrum from practical, direct charity work for the underprivileged (expressed by participants) to such lofty goals as building a culture of democracy and dialogue (expressed by sponsors).“

With such a detailed analysis of a single case study, we can now begin to see if we might hypothesize goals of various stakeholders based on their proximity to an intervention and see if the kinds of goals they articulate line up with Ghais’ experience. More generally, Ross, in his above-mentioned essay, comments on this inside/outside difference in goals: “There are often tensions between the development of local capacity building and meeting immediate human needs and service delivery.” As we articulate broad goals by the end of the baseline phase in one project, we can begin to analyse the types of goals that are generated across types of conflicts and interventions. Thus, the systematic collection and documentation of multiple cases across type and level could contribute to systematic and comparative research on this and other applied hypotheses, which in turn could help expand the field.

While both Ross and Hoffman inquire about how to generalize from specific interventions, to the “field” itself, my proposition (still awaiting a sustained effort to test the voluminous data we’ve collected over the past half dozen years from 1,000’s of stakeholders in almost 75 projects) is that by supporting contextualized efforts to define success in specific, small scale, often NGO-directed efforts, we can begin to find all sorts of rich and theory-driven hypotheses to test (e.g. such as Ghais’ hypothesis about distance from intervention influencing types of goals) across a range of projects.

Hoffman’s second question about AE (Hoffman , in this volume, p. 29), about the danger of goals falling to the level of the lowest common denominator, misses the important emphasis in AE about evolving goals; indeed, this is perhaps the most important aspect of the entire iterative process that constitutes AE. Thus, in addition to giving participants a “place at the table” in the project design from the start, and indeed it is true that the goals first articulated are usually broad and overarching, as they are consensual and inclusive, it also facilitates a process of successive approximation of “success” as the initial and general goals are translated into practice and revisions of those goals are required to ensure project vitality and relevance. Thus, goals become more nuanced, operational and practical.

Concerning Hoffman’s third point that AE is rooted in the Western (and more specifically Burtonian) problem-solving approach, and therefore may be guilty of imposing a framework even as it asserts

its desire to elicit “local models,” is well-taken. I would be the first, in fact, to agree that AE is linear (although also iterative) and clearly rational in orientation. However, what systematic social science is not? This, it seems to me, is a challenge for the conflict resolution field generally as it seeks to extend itself beyond its Western roots and orientation. However, clearly the beginning of wisdom here is clarity about the origins of this work, not apology for them, and where such origins may run counter to, or nicely dovetail with, local contexts and culture.

I join Marc Ross in applauding this initiative to dialogue about the challenges and opportunities of rigorous evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives. This is still the next frontier in our developing field and is well-served by serious efforts of scholar-practitioners such as Hoffman and Bush to frame the agenda and respectfully, if frankly, debate the issues they raise. Thank you for inviting me to lend my voice as well.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Kenneth Bush is a Geneva-based Research Fellow with the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University. He received his Ph.D. in International Relations and Comparative Politics from Cornell University and has worked with such organisations as UNICEF, OECD DAC, the World Bank, DFAIT, CIDA, IDRC and a host of NGOs on the challenges of peacebuilding.

Christoph Feyen is an expert in organisational development and works as a team leader at the Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit of GTZ Sri Lanka. He also serves as senior advisor to the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka.

Hans Gsänger has worked extensively on rural development issues in Africa and South-East Asia. After working with the German Development Institute in Bonn for several years, he is currently senior consultant for German Agro Action (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe) and GTZ.

Mark Hoffman is Lecturer in International Relations and Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the London School of Economics. In addition he is Director of the Conflict Analysis and Development Unit in the Department of International Relations. He has worked extensively with the UN in developing staff training on conflict prevention.

Manuela Leonhardt is an independent consultant for a range of bilateral organisations and NGOs. Trained in social anthropology, she previously held positions with International Alert and GTZ. Her particular interests include the strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation of peace building, the role of development and humanitarian assistance in conflict situations and indigenous forms of conflict management.

Marc Howard Ross is the William Rand Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College. He is especially interested in the cross-cultural analysis of culture and conflict and of issues of theory and practice in conflict resolution. He is currently analyzing the politics of cultural performance and memory as a source conflict but also of constructive conflict management in long-term ethnic disputes.

Jay Rothman is president of the ARIA Group, Inc. - a conflict resolution training and consulting company. He is also founder and Research Director of the Action Evaluation Research Institute, which promotes systematic goal setting, formative monitoring and participatory evaluation.