

JOBS AND EVALUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION INTRODUCTION

JOBS AND EVALUATIONS

by Pascal PANSU* and Cyril TARQUINIO**

The word “evaluate” has become a key term in the discourse of many working individuals, although it potentially applies to several different objects, fields, and implications. Often used by the layman¹ in everyday talk, “evaluation” usually means any appraisal or judgment of an object, a procedure, or a person that is based on how valuable that person or thing appears in the eyes of the evaluator. To evaluate is thus to perform an eminently social act which, in a given context (a firm, a circle of friends, etc., or society in general), leads the evaluating body to look for some intrinsic value in the object; this in turn will provide knowledge of the object’s utility. Evaluating, then, amounts to making a judgment about an object, procedure, or person by referring solely to its social utility. In the broadest sense of the term, “evaluations” are present in a large part of the activities of any person engaged in interpersonal or social relations, since they include the common (value) judgments each and every one of us makes about other persons or about oneself, *i.e.* judgments of a behavior, a personality, an ability, etc. In the institutional sense of the term, “evaluation” refers to certain necessary practices that ensure a number of functions of social life, for example, those carried out to manage an organization. Evaluations enter into organizational and operational processes like recruitment, occupational retraining, promotions, job assistance, awarding of diplomas, previsional management of jobs, defining objectives, training employees, etc. In this sense, evaluative activity is an institutionally delegated activity that must be defined and controlled. In this case, it is a formal activity –*i.e.* the concerned judgments are tied to *social evaluation practices* instituted as such– and calls upon presumably expressible knowledge and techniques that contribute to ensuring the stability of the social system (see Pansu & Beauvois, 2004).

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1. As Enriquez (1976) stressed, the evaluation process is not a standardized activity, and the criteria upon which it is based are not necessarily explicit.

This special issue falls into this dynamic framework. Its primary aim is to address the question of evaluation and its many facets, not only in its institutional form where it relies on a diverse body of knowledge and techniques that answer to social demands (see Cadet & Kouabéban, Touzé, and Vischer & Fischer herein), but also in its broader sense that refers to the everyday judgments and impressions we make of the people we meet at the workplace (see Pansu, Tarquinio, & Gilibert). In other words, this issue stresses the importance of considering the many objects, fields, and implications of evaluation in the organization, at the same time as it reminds us that, as a scientific object, evaluation can be studied as a process, as a practice, or as a method and technique (see Monteil, 1989). It is thus deliberately –and to stand apart from the often too unified and/or one-directional perspectives in matters of knowledge– that the four papers in this issue deal with distinct topics and are connected to variable extents to the conventional branches of psychology: work psychology, personality psychology, social psychology, and environmental psychology.

The first paper, by Cadet and Kouabéban, reviews various risk evaluation models used in the different disciplines of psychology. The question of risks and risk management is critical in high-tech societies where the idea of “zero risk” is becoming increasingly frequent. In general, so-called “at risk” situations require the implementation of risk evaluation procedures, whether implicit or explicit, which in turn have an impact on prevention. The aim of this paper is to show how psychology can contribute to understanding the processes underlying risk evaluation and modelling. But before one can speak of evaluation, it must be possible, at the very least, to define the to-be-evaluated object. Taking this approach, the authors begin by attempting to determine what constitutes an at-risk situation, and then go on to present three major models of risk evaluation that clearly illustrate the options chosen by the different branches of psychology on the question of risk evaluation. The first, that of expected utility, revolves around assessing expected utility and determining what risks can be considered “acceptable”. The second or psychometric paradigm points out the importance of social factors in perceived risk and risk evaluation, particularly the critical role played by social representations and/or values. The third model pertains to the cognitive mechanisms used to process information and arrive at an evaluation. By analyzing these three paradigms, this article attempts to clarify the specificities and merits of each of these ways of evaluating risk. At a more practical level, a point that stands out in this paper is that there are a number of different evaluation strategies, but that they are not based on the same principles and rules, nor on the same sources of information. The choice of one strategy over another is therefore only meaningful with respect to the goals set for the evaluation.

The second paper, proposed by Touzé, falls within a long-standing tradition in occupational psychology aimed at carefully classifying the characteristics of individuals, with the objective of providing as accurate a description as possible of the persons being evaluated. For the advocates of this view, decisions about personnel (recruitment, career management, job assignment, etc.) should rest on the description and evaluation of

personality. This approach is in line with the North American research trend, which postulates that personality tests can be effectively used to determine whether or not job applicants exhibit certain desirable or undesirable personality traits (*i.e.* stable, unchanging characteristics). After reviewing this question and pointing out the new surge of interest (since Digman, 1990) in an approach to personality centered on five basic factors assessed in personality tests (emotional stability, extraversion, intellectual openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness), this article shows that the study of personality, and *a fortiori* that of its sub-dimensions, can in certain cases supply relevant information for predicting performance on the job.

Both of the above papers attack the evaluation process from the standpoint of a particular work activity. Yet outside the formal framework of work evaluations *per se*, we are also often led in our interpersonal and work relations to form impressions of people, and thus to judge the protagonists of those relations, both ourselves and others.

The third paper, by Pansu, Tarquinio, and Gilibert, deals precisely with the fact that in the course of our private or work relations, we often try to imagine the reactions or opinions of the people around us. This anticipatory process involves not only forming an impression of others, but also rating how “valuable” those persons are from the motivational or strategic standpoint. This paper takes the sociocognitive approach to internality initiated in France by Jean-Léon Beauvois, which postulates that our social thinking (*i.e.* that of Western societies) leads us, at a very general level, to prefer people who account for what they do and what happens to them in an “internal” way (*e.g.*, Beauvois, 2004). In this view, internal explanations –which bring to bear not only a person’s effort and motivation, but also his/her nature or personality– are more normative than other types of explanations because they meet social requirements and are acknowledged by social groups. We shall see in this paper that internality norm theory provides a unique view of value attribution in interpersonal relations that depends on group membership. More specifically, this norm is shown to play a role in the categorical differentiation process, and allows us to grasp the ingroup-valuing process from a different angle than proposed so far in the research on intergroup causal attributions. Moreover, this way of understanding intergroup relations is related to many other, more or less formal evaluation activities that enter into decision-making in personnel evaluations, and more generally in matters of human resource management (relations between work teams or activity sectors within an organization, career management, employee claims and demands, etc.).

The last article, by Vischer and Fischer, differs from the other three by its approach to the work environment, which it sees not as a simple material setting in which individuals evolve, but as an entity of its own, a full-fledged variable that must be taken into account in understanding the relationship between the individual and his/her environment. In this perspective, it is easy to understand why investigators quickly took an interest in the evaluation of the work space. Rooted in environmental psychology, this approach is part of the broader framework of research on

the functional and psychological value of the environment, here, the work environment (Vischer, 1989). Vischer and Fischer's paper falls perfectly in line with this approach and presents a method specifically designed for evaluating work environments: the diagnostic method. The arrangement of a person's work space is seen as a factor in the organization and accomplishment of tasks on the job. Granted, a work space is a set of organized, equipped areas (overall architectural, interior furnishings, etc.) used to carry out a predefined activity, but it must also be seen as an entity that encompasses the set of task the worker performs, and a space where work and social relations take place. The diagnostic method of evaluating work environments is presented by the authors as a technique permitting not only the proper understanding of the psychology of work-space users, but also as a means of setting priorities for improving and optimizing that space.

In sum, the diversity of the approaches and contributions presented in this issue are a clear testimony to the multiple forms and levels at which evaluation, as a scientific object, can be grasped and analyzed.

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