Cultural Codes – Who Holds the Key?

The Concept and Conduct of Evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe

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This article examines the impact of cultural codes on the conduct and outcomes of evaluation. Cultural codes are defined as symbols and systems of meaning that are relevant to members of a particular culture (or sub-culture). These codes can be utilized to facilitate communication within the 'inside group' and also to obscure the meaning to 'outside groups'. Drawing on the authors' combined experiences in Central and Eastern Europe, the article explores how cultural codes emerged in these contexts and the challenges they presented to the conduct and utilization of evaluation and to the evaluators themselves. Evaluators must be prepared, it is suggested, to unlock their own internal codes in relation to those of other cultures in order to create the appropriate socio-political relationships that are a prerequisite for learning and change. The article concludes with a discussion of the kind of partnerships and trust it is necessary to establish to underpin a mutual unlocking of codes.

Introduction

'... we all carry inscribed within us the reasons for our actions, what the Germans call Grund; a code determining the essence of our fate. ...' (Milan Kundera, *Immortality*)

To be a stranger in a 'foreign' culture is a familiar theme in evaluation even in cultures we think we know and understand. Evaluation as a social and political process always involves getting to grips with a specific context and the norms and values, often unspoken, which govern political and social interaction. Failure to unlock and engage appropriately with the cultural codes which implicitly, if not explicitly, guide social life, may hinder the process and lead to misunderstanding and conflict, and sometimes direct opposition to the evaluation.

Cultural codes are those symbols and systems of meaning that have a specific relevance to members of a particular group or society. This article explores the influence and impact of these codes in the conduct of evaluation. The central argument is that cross-cultural evaluation needs to recognize and have strategies for mutual engagement of cultural codes if it is to aid development and change. Revealing cultural codes, however, is by no means simple, as they are the accumulation of years of experience rooted in historical traditions that take time to understand. It is a challenge for contemporary evaluation, bounded by timescales that are often too short, to discern the underlying codes which govern social and political action. It is an even greater challenge to do so in a culture foreign to one's own.

The exploration which follows offers a strategy for determining who holds the key to unlocking codes that govern the culture in which evaluation is taking place. Such a process applies to any culture, including our own.² However, the primary focus in this article is Central and Eastern Europe as the cultural codes in these countries are perhaps more intricately locked than in others and specific to their 'closed' histories. They therefore represent the issues and the opportunities for learning more sharply.

There are four factors to take into account when trying to understand these codes. The first and most obvious is the difference in mother tongue languages and where the link language (often English) may vary in meaning and usage. Where translation is involved, directly or indirectly, precise meaning is sometimes at risk, if not lost. Secondly, these meanings often have deep cultural assumptions that take time and much interaction to fully comprehend. Thirdly, the disciplines within which we work have their own professional vernacular, frequently coded for shorthand exchange. This presents a double task for transactions in collaborative ventures – understanding meanings in a different language and culture as well as understanding the professional meanings in a particular field of study. The problem is exacerbated where the discipline or field is new or relatively new to a particular culture. In this situation some concepts do not exist, and words often do not translate directly, which requires the creation of new words or phrases to convey exact meaning.

Finally, there is the context of use. Over many years particular messages – intellectual, political and emotional – become encoded and embedded through social and professional interchange in the particular culture. Pre-1989 in Central and Eastern European countries, that context has included closed societies, marked by low trust and limited sharing of knowledge, norms and values. Since 1989, although there have been moves towards a greater openness, some mutual suspicion has remained.

To talk about unlocking codes in such contexts may seem a daunting task. However, this is a necessary prerequisite, we suggest, to establish effective field relationships which

- create an appropriate political dynamic and partnership;
- allow the findings of the evaluation to be utilized; and
- ensure lessons are learned for the future.

The process also applies to ourselves. As evaluators we need to unlock our own codes in relation to those of other cultures. We need to understand their interplay and the specific role we may have to adopt to create and sustain effective conditions for development.

The article is based upon the authors' experiences of evaluation in nine different countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These have been conducted over the last four years and have involved both governmental and non-governmental organizations. They have invariably been conducted in 'partnership' with a range of different local agencies and usually for external Western funders. The article begins with an examination of what we mean by culture and cultural codes and how they underlie and impact upon the conduct and practice of evaluation. This is followed by a brief summary of the purposes and political nature of evaluation and the perspectives we, and those we have worked with, bring to the task in Central and Eastern Europe.

Some examples of codes that were revealed in the process of conducting evaluations in Central and Eastern Europe are then presented. We indicate how these codes were expressed and the effect that they had on participants, on ourselves and on the evaluation. In the concluding section we return to the impact of cultural codes in the changing political context in Central and Eastern Europe and offer a brief analysis of what conditions and style of partnership it may be necessary to establish if we wish evaluation to present opportunities for development and change.

Culture and Cultural Codes

a) Culture

The concept of culture has long occupied theoreticians from many schools and disciplines. In 1952, for example, Kroeber and Kluckhohn found 164 definitions of the term. Definitions have varied from the complex and academic, in sociology and social anthropology, to the simple and pragmatic, in organization development theory. This article employs a conceptual framework that draws on both these traditions.

Turning first to sociology and social anthropology, one of the earliest and classic definitions of culture was that of E. B. Tylor (1871). Culture is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, 1871). This view of culture was later refined and developed by sociologists and social theorists such as Sorokin (1947), Parsons (1952) and Merton (1968) to include the significance of interaction.

In his exploration of society, culture and personality, Sorokin (1947) emphasized that all interaction is founded on culture which encompasses the totality of meanings, norms and values held by those interacting and which is carried by material vehicles like rituals and symbolic objects. In his earlier work he had addressed what occurs when two 'alien' cultures meet.

The kind of values that penetrate first depends, primarily, upon the kinds of human agents that first come into . . . contact with the other culture. If they are merchants . . .

Evaluation 5(1)

then various commercial commodities penetrate first. If they are missionaries . . . then the 'ideological values' penetrate first. If they are conquerors and soldiers, then partly material, partly non-material values penetrate simultaneously. If they are students of philosophy or social science . . . they may bring back and spread the theories and ideologies they studied. (Sorokin, 1937–41, Vol. IV: 283)

Similarly, Parsons (1952) indicates that culture is transmitted (constituting a heritage or social tradition), learned and, most importantly, shared. In other words, culture is both the product of and the determinant of human social interaction. More recently, Rosaldo (1993) has introduced some further insights into social anthropology's approach to culture. Most significantly, for this article, he has highlighted that

Encounters with cultural and related differences belong to all of us in our most mundane experiences . . . [whilst] the classic norms of anthropology have attended more to the unity of cultural wholes than to their myriad crossroads and borderlands. (Rosaldo, 1993)

Rosaldo also indicates that power is a prime determinant in the shaping and change of cultures which themselves can only be understood through relational analysis.

The study of differences, formerly defined in opposition to an invisible 'self', now becomes the play of similarities and differences relative to socially explicit identities. How do 'they' see 'us'? Who are 'we' looking at 'them'? Social analysis thus becomes a relational form of understanding in which both parties actively engage in the interpretation of cultures. (Rosaldo, 1993: 209)

These different strands in sociological and anthropological thought variously provide some important conceptual bases for this article. Explicitly or implicitly they refer to five characteristics of culture that we believe to be fundamental to our understanding of cultural codes in evaluation. First, they indicate the centrality of *interaction* in cultural formation and understanding. Second, some note the importance of viewing culture as *organic and mutable* rather than fixed with a consistently definable set of properties. Third, the potential *influence* of different cultures upon one another is highlighted. Fourth, *power* is recognized as a primary force in cultural formation and interaction. Fifth, Rosaldo (1993) recognizes the *mutuality* of cultural understanding and interpretation. These five characteristics draw attention to the opportunity that exists in human social interaction for culture to change.

Turning to organizational theory, we find another set of definitions. Many of these are more overtly pragmatic and explicitly framed to enable cultural analysis and change. For example, Williams et al. (1989) state 'We are going to adopt a working definition of culture that describes it as an entity . . . that can be subjected to empirical investigation and, being a determinant of behaviour, is of practical relevance'.

Schein, after first acknowledging that we must build upon complex anthropological models of culture, moves to a consideration of how we can understand the 'hidden and complex aspects of organizational life' (Schein, 1992).

Our own model of culture draws upon the central precepts of culture identified

earlier from sociological and anthropological thought and upon the work of organizational theorists such as Williams et al. (1989) and Schein (1992). Both these authors view culture on three levels which in broad terms move from conscious patterns of behaviour to unconscious belief.

Level One: At the *observable* level, there are identifiable behaviours which are often stated in frameworks, rules and norms. These characterize the unique features of an organization or group's way of thinking and acting.

Level Two: These observable attributes are predicated on sets of values and attitudes which can be *inferred* from symbols, rituals and signs within organizations or groups. We do not always know precisely what our values are and may not be able to state them although these 'unconscious values' may become manifest during the process of evaluation.

Level Three: In turn, these inferred values and attitudes are based on *tacit* beliefs, some of which may be unconscious.

One way in which to conceive of these three levels of cultures, particularly in the context of this article where the codes may be deliberately used to disguise or prevent access to information, is to envisage a lock with a complex mechanism that requires the 'right' key to unlock it (see Figure 1). Alternatively, we could take an oceanic metaphor in which the waves represent the turbulence of the surface observations; the shallow waters beneath, the signs and symbols; and the depths of the ocean, the bedrock in which tacit beliefs are buried. The advantage of the oceanic metaphor is that it has a fluidity which allows for movement and

Figure 1

Evaluation 5(1)

change as the levels are recognized and interact. This in many senses suits our purpose for part of our argument is that culture is not immutable nor static. However, from what we have observed, cultural codes are currently not being used in this way in Central and Eastern Europe but rather more mechanically as a conditioned response. Hence we have chosen the metaphor of the lock. In time it may be that the oceanic metaphor will become more prominent if the opportunity to work with cultural codes for development purposes is accepted.

This approach of three levels provides a useful framework for examining culture in evaluation contexts and for analysing how change and development do or do not occur. It has the potential to bring cultural assumptions and beliefs to the surface, which can facilitate interaction and development between cultures. Evaluators who are sensitive to these levels can facilitate a dynamic process that may lead to a change in the social and political interaction of organizations and groups as well as to an effective working context for evaluation.

This process needs to heighten awareness of:

- how the levels inter-relate;
- what underlies the observable and inferable;
- what impact this has on social and political interaction in organizations and groups.

It is important to recognize that the levels are not static nor is there essentially a logical or linear relationship between observable behaviours, inferable values and attitudes and tacit beliefs. The relationship is often more complex and interactive than the model suggests. It is dependent upon factors such as the complexity of the problem structure, the nature of established and emergent social relationships and the stability of the political context. All of these elements have been particularly volatile in Central and Eastern Europe.

b) Cultural Codes

The inter-relationship between the levels and hence the understanding of culture is often expressed through the use of codes. Codes are 'a secret system of words, symbols or behaviours' that are used to convey messages that are contextually bound. Codes are generally expressed at an observable level, through verbal and non-verbal means, but they are the result of the effects of, and interaction with, the other levels of culture. This means that what is observed often does not make sense to the outsider. The codes are known only to their authors and inventors, the insider group. They can be used as shorthand by such a group for brevity or to allow rapid communication. They can also be used to disguise the 'real message' and to keep it hidden from outsiders. This is not only true of masons and intelligence workers, we use codes for this purpose in our research.

Codes can be used both consciously and unconsciously and they are invariably difficult to comprehend. Like an enigmatic crossword, it is necessary to divine the rules that will expose the underlying themes to enable the puzzle to be fitted together. However, unless the codes are cracked we are left floundering in a world of assumption, guesswork and false premise. This means that our ability to influence change, through evaluation and other similar processes, is significantly

curtailed. We are in danger of acting on miscomprehension which means that our efforts to bring about change are likely to be misdirected.

Codes exist in all cultures and sub-cultures. However, they would appear to have been a particularly important phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe in the post-Communist era. Pre-1989, it could be argued, the use of codes was vital to keep alive beliefs unacceptable to the Party State, to subvert the imposition of homogenized cultures and to work within a system that fostered low trust, suspicion and self-protection. The collapse of a wall did not bring an end to these psychologies overnight. Moreover, a new set of beliefs came into play including a strange and powerful tension between a 'wish for things Western' and memories of 'abandonment' by the West nearly 50 years before. Culturally, many of these countries entered a state of flux and correspondingly codes became difficult to open and comprehend. This was further exacerbated by an historical equation of outside interest in performance with control. Similarly, the notion of self-reflection had been rendered meaningless since professional (and even personal) development was rarely self-determined. In short, many Central and Eastern Europeans experienced a deep, cultural confusion where codes served both to keep the 'old order' alive and to give expression to the new.

Within this context Western funders and policy-makers introduced the concept and practice of evaluation. These funders and policy-makers, particularly those with control of large resources, tended to frame evaluation in terms of meeting targets and monitoring resource use. This was the case, for example, with many programmes funded by the European Union (EU) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In Sorokin's terms, the first 'human agents' to enter the 'alien' culture brought a new word 'evaluation' tied to familiar concepts such as 'control' and regulated outputs. Moreover, these influences on the culture were strong because they were backed by an enormous resource power, which was lacking in Central and Eastern Europe at that time. Many foreign evaluators moved into this environment with different understandings of the purposes of evaluation, predicated on a belief in development and learning. They also carried power but the power of expertise not resource.

All of these actors use codes in their professional, social and political positions. Understanding codes is complex enough in our own culture. When groups of people, from different institutions and countries with different social and political histories, are brought together to perform a task that is differently perceived, there is huge potential for misunderstanding. This provides a significant challenge to the conduct of effective evaluation and the opportunity for change.

Evaluation Perspectives and Purpose

a) Perspective

Having clarified what we mean by culture and presented a framework for examining cultural codes, this section outlines our perspective of evaluation and the values which underlie our practice. Evaluation has different meanings to different people and can serve many purposes. Misunderstandings often occur because

individuals in the context we are evaluating have a perception of evaluation which is different from the purpose we are serving.

This is particularly true in Central and Eastern Europe where programme evaluation has a relatively recent history. Though much has been written about programme evaluation and there is a great deal of ethnographic work to draw on in examining cultures (see, for instance, Geertz, 1993a, 1993b), little has been written about cross-cultural evaluation *per se*, let alone cross-cultural evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe.³

Chelimsky (1997) offers a useful summary of the various purposes an evaluation can serve. These may be characterized into three dominant perspectives:

- Evaluation for accountability (e.g. measuring results or efficiency);
- Evaluation for development (e.g. providing evaluative help to strengthen institutions; and
- Evaluation for knowledge (e.g. obtaining a deeper understanding in some specific area or policy field).

Looking at Chelimsky's three main perspectives, we would suggest that the current and prevalent understanding of the purpose of evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe is accountability rather than development or knowledge.⁴ This is particularly the case with evaluations funded by the European Commission (and other international agencies), whose 'legalistic/bureaucratic features make it difficult for an open questioning, evaluative culture to take root' (Pollitt, 1997: 387).⁵

This emphasis on accountability may well be related to the nature of interaction with the West where groups and organizations have to demonstrate their effective and efficient use of Western monies. If we take the EU and USAID as examples of government funding practice, it is clear that the primary emphasis of their evaluation function is accountability – for financial management and cost effectiveness. The major concern is to set up structures to ensure that the money is going in the appropriate direction and is properly managed (Stern, 1995: 256). In the context of evaluating development aid in the European Commission, Cracknell (1996) also notes that the emphasis of evaluation 'was, until very recently, on accountability rather than on lesson learning at the policy level'. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Cracknell goes on to note, have similar problems (Cracknell, 1996: 27).

From the Central and Eastern European perspective, evaluation is also viewed within a framework of 'accountability' but from a different perspective. Historically, the Western concept of accountability did not exist under Communism. Rather, there was policing and control of performance, as well as the development of strategies for avoiding its regulation.

Contrast this accountability perspective with the developmental perspective which we and many other professional evaluators frequently bring to the task of evaluating programmes in Central and Eastern Europe. This developmental perspective may be characterized in different ways but essentially it aims to

- match the developmental character of the programme itself;
- build on strengths and address weaknesses;

- signpost lessons for future learning at the policy level;
- increase the capacity of organizations and groups to evaluate themselves through the exchange of evaluation knowledge, processes and practices.

For the most part the evaluations which provide the experiential basis for the analysis in this article have been conducted within this second, developmental perspective which aspires to use evaluation to facilitate the process of change. In many cases, however, this perspective has had to operate within a context which emphasizes strict lines of accountability and rules and regulations governing inputs and outputs.

It is important to recognize of course that the way in which the concept of development is interpreted is itself culturally and politically bound. This theme will be explored in greater depth in a later article. For current purposes we noted the various perceptions, participants, managers and sponsors had of evaluation as accountability within Central and Eastern Europe. These are summarized in Table 1 in comparison with our characterization of evaluation as development.

Table 1

<i>Accountability</i>	<i>Development</i>
Audit (external requirement)	Self-evaluation (internal need)
Legitimization	Change
Criticism	Learning
Exposure	Understanding
Disenfranchisement	Empowerment
Inspection	Self-monitoring

The characterizations in the accountability column are essentially underpinned by a belief in the value of hierarchy, power in the hands of the few and management by command.⁶ Those in the development column are rooted in a belief in the value of collaboration, shared power and autonomous communities.

These different perspectives, although not always explicit, have played a fundamental role in understanding cultural codes during evaluation projects in Central and Eastern Europe.

b) Role of Evaluators

Given the dominant perception of evaluation as accountability or inspection within a culture of external regulation, it was important that we were clear about our role. Our evaluation perspective was different from the prevalent tradition. Our role, similarly, had to be different. The reason we were working in Central and Eastern Europe was to facilitate development programmes of various kinds. To do that through evaluation we first had to understand the context and, secondly, introduce processes that would lead to learning. This required us to be aware of our own cultural codes and their impact.

Of the many roles that an evaluator can assume in the conduct and dissemination of evaluation, the roles we chose, consistent with the above perspective, were

those of observer, documenter of experience and negotiator in the sharing of knowledge. What underpins these roles and purpose is a commitment to participatory democratic modes of evaluation (even in contexts where it may appear difficult to operationalize), to empowering all participants to gain in self-knowledge and to furthering development and the process of change.⁷

Roles we did not choose and largely resisted having imposed upon us were those of judge, tool of management, inspection or audit. In practice, as we shall see, it is not always possible to maintain a 'pure' line or a single role. In a complex environment evaluators sometimes have to adopt a variety of different roles to create and maintain an effective political dynamic. In the cases from which we draw our data we had to employ different roles on occasions to further the process of the evaluation. Generally these were consistent with the aspiration to democratize the evaluation findings so that key players could learn from the process to guide future decision-making. However, there were times when our basic value position was severely tested, especially where we were working in a highly bureaucratized hierarchical context, as one of the later examples of cultural codes will demonstrate.

The dominant perspective and expectations of the contracting parties were often different as they variously had roles of management, financial integrity and accountability for the execution of programmes. These foci were sometimes at odds with a development framework. It is the task of evaluator(s) to recognize such differences of roles and responsibilities but not be dominated or captured by them. To perform this task effectively may well be one of the most significant challenges in cross-cultural evaluation. Some of these differences in perspectives and expectations may underlie the extent to which we were, or were not, able to fathom the cultural codes explored in the next section. Before examining the codes themselves we need to consider a little further the inherent political nature of evaluation and the political context in which evaluation takes place.

c) The Political Nature of Evaluation

Evaluation in any culture has to engage with a range of different interest groups vying for representation in the programme or for dominance at particular points in the process. All claims or vested interests may be legitimate but at times these may conflict. Evaluation needs to find a way of including all these interests and balancing them. That evaluation is inherently political and an 'integral part of the political processes of our society' (House, 1973) has been recognized now for over 25 years. Evaluation is a practical political art, not a technical process (Simons, 1987), even though many groups still treat it as such. This means that evaluators (whether we like it or not) have to engage with the plurality of legitimate interests and values which surface in an evaluation and which need to be negotiated or mediated in any specific political context and we need a theory of political interaction to guide and sustain the evaluation.

In the countries in which we have been working there were a large number of vested interests at varying levels in the programme. The groups involved held different perspectives of evaluation, had different reasons for involvement and had different information needs. And there were several cultures we had to

comprehend and interact with at one and the same time. First there was the culture within the funding institutions. Secondly, there was the culture within the development programme. Thirdly, there was the wider culture within the countries themselves.

Within these three cultures there were a number of levels at which we had to work. First we had to understand which evaluation framework the different groups held. Secondly, we had to try to comprehend the power relationships and influences in the culture. Thirdly, we needed to identify the degree to which concepts were mutually shared and understood and could be changed through interaction. Fourthly, we had to explore the range of cultural codes that were operating and how they might be unlocked. This was a complex social/political process, certainly not a technical exercise.

Evaluators working in such multi-layered political contexts have to be alert and responsive to the formal and informal power structures that govern how the programme is set up and managed. They also need, if they are not to be torn between competing vested interests, to have a clear set of principles and procedures which underpin and maintain the consistency of their practice.

As previously stated, the authors primarily adopted a developmental stance in evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe but were cognizant of having to marry this role with managing politics inside the case, meeting managerial requirements and working within political contexts that were often far from stable. These factors had a fundamental impact on what was feasible to accomplish and to learn.

Cultural Codes in Evaluation

We turn now to examine the nature and impact of some of the cultural codes we encountered keeping the following summary of culture, codes and evaluation in mind. Culture we take to mean that set of assumptions, values and beliefs and practical norms that guide and underpin a group, organization or a society's principles and precepts of behaviour. It can be transmitted, learned and shared through social interaction and education. Through this process it is also open to modification and change.

Cultural codes are those hidden systems of meaning that guide social and political action in specific settings which are initially only known to insider groups. Meanings are conveyed in shorthand, language and symbols known only to that group for ease of communication or deliberately to disguise.

Evaluation is a political process that takes place in a specific political context that affects how the cultural codes are embedded and understood. The evaluation perspective we adopted was primarily developmental in political contexts where the primary understanding of evaluation was a particular characterization of accountability.

We have chosen three examples, one focusing on the process, the second on the move from process to product and the third on the product itself.

Example 1: Process

Setting

A workshop on evaluation design and methods.

Observable behaviour

‘We already know these methods.’ (Verbal rebukes)

Sitting back from the table, working on other papers.

Disinterest.

Switching from English to another language at vital moments.

Inferred values and attitudes

Insufficient acknowledgement of their knowledge, hierarchy, status.

We do not hold as much power in this situation.

Tacit beliefs

I am equal.

My status is my power (and it is threatened).

Implications

We experienced the observable behaviour as resistance, rejection and the redundancy of our role. The group appeared to experience it as not being treated as equals. No-one opened the possibility of exploring the different responsibilities that we all held and what they signified in this context. We were all too task-driven. Whilst we espoused the developmental framework (which they endorsed in many respects) we were all working within the accountability framework. This caused a lot of stress. We did not challenge the characterization of the accountability framework nor did we acknowledge sufficiently that we had shifted towards it and away from development as more and more external pressure was put upon us to ‘deliver the outputs’. We also created our own internal pressure through our aim to provide high quality training and outcome. At root, we did not unlock the code or the context within which it was operating.

Example 2: Process into product

Setting

Transcripts from interviews, discussions of fieldwork and preliminary reports.

Observable behaviour

Lack of any critique of others in the system who were being evaluated.

Inferred values and attitudes

Concern about retribution.

A united front in the face of Westerners.

Tacit beliefs

The system punishes those who criticize.
Outsiders will exploit any signs of weakness.

Implications

Through discussion and listening over time, we did recognize some of the attitudes if not the beliefs that underpinned the behaviour. We proposed a strategy to enable constructive criticism to be used in the evaluation. This strategy was positive framing of critical commentary to enable learning (the developmental model). However, positive framing was then interpreted as a mere change in device and not in approach. In fact, it had a detrimental outcome of changing the language of criticism to that of positive statements rather than reframing how criticism was presented in order to facilitate learning. We did unlock the code and both groups recognized (if unspoken) some of the cultural issues, but no change ensued. What we did in effect was to provide a developmental tool that allowed the code to be double-locked within the accountability framework as previously characterized.

Example 3: Product

Setting

A report required negotiation as parts of it were found unacceptable by a management group.

Observable behaviour

'X (senior person) wants this to go.'	}	
'We can't accept that.'	}	
'It should be deleted.'	}	(Politicization)
'There will be political repercussions.'	}	
'There is not enough data from x . . .'	}	(Discreditation)
'People will lose their jobs.'	}	
'You have personally hurt me.'	}	(Personalization)

Inferred values and attitudes

Fear of hierarchy's reaction.
Fear of unknown.
Anxiety about personal futures in the organization/system.

Tacit beliefs

The system will punish. (As Milosz noted in *The Captive Mind* – 'Experience has taught the Eastern intellectual to measure his moves carefully. He has seen too many who fell into the abyss of disfavour for a single thoughtless step, for a simple impulsively written article'.) (Milosz, 1980)
Hierarchical status is the basis of power.
The unknown is dangerous.

Evaluation 5(1)

Implications

Some of the observable behaviour was a complex code as it appeared to cue into our developmental model ('if you want this to assist change then . . .') – an attempted manipulation, one might say, of our belief system. The fear may have been legitimate and that was a cause for concern. However, the strategies used to bring about our capitulation (undermining data, including management views as add-on data, placing of emphasis or blame, changing words) were so many and so diverse in form that legitimacy and reality became clouded. Early on, we decided what could not be changed in the report, what was negotiable and what could be modified (on the basis of findings and to maximize learning). Initially we experienced some confusion about the meaning of the codes and had to work very hard to understand 'their' conflict. The changes eventually made acknowledged some of the managerial, political and cultural concerns but did not compromise the integrity of the data or our basic value position. However, while the codes were unlocked, the jury is still out on what the outcome will be.

If we look at a summary of these three examples in relation to the evaluation perspectives noted earlier it becomes clear that cultural codes have a significant role in the conduct and utilization of evaluation (see Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Process</i>	<i>Process to product</i>	<i>Product</i>
Code locked	Code unlocked but then double locked	Code unlocked but outcome unknown
<i>Reinforcement accountability framework</i>	<i>Development framework turned to accountability framework</i>	<i>Development framework in conflict with accountability framework</i>

Failure to recognize or unlock a code, the inability to influence beliefs protected by a code and cracking a code which leaves enormous vulnerability all had a negative impact on what it was possible to achieve in the evaluation as well as on relationships between local teams, managers, funders and foreign teams. With greater mutual awareness of the codes each was using and how they influenced the interaction, the process may have been less frustrating and time-consuming and the outcomes more positive. From our perspective, for example, it would appear that the codes we used for shorthand communication were as difficult for foreign colleagues and participants to unlock as theirs were for us. This was often exacerbated by the contractual designation of us as 'EU experts'. At times we could have been more conscious of the power imbalance this created which may have been reinforced by our unconscious use of cultural codes. This is not to say that relationships were not cordial throughout and the evaluation successfully accomplished. It is the deeper levels of meaning and potential for change that we are interested in here. The experience has left us with a number of questions that

we would now ask ourselves in future in determining whether we would undertake an evaluation in a different culture. Policy makers, funders, developers and Central and Eastern European (CEE) professionals may also find such questions relevant prior to their involvement in an evaluation.

Self-Reflective Questions

- How can we determine what underlying framework of evaluation is being used?
- How can we identify whether we are entering a closed or open learning system?
- Are we prepared to re-examine our established theories and ways of working?
- Are we willing to address our own issues of power and control?
- Are we ready to identify and unlock our own cultural codes?
- What strategies have we devised to maintain our sense of perspective in situations of tension and conflict?
- Which are the values that we will not give up?
- Under what conditions would we consider involvement in another contract?

Conclusion

This article began by noting that the theme of being a stranger in a foreign culture is familiar in evaluation but is exacerbated where the language is different, where patterns of social life are unfamiliar and where there has been limited interaction with other cultures. Conducting evaluations in such contexts requires a strategy to get beneath the surface of behaviours and actions. We have suggested that a key to understanding these cultures is the recognition and opening of cultural codes that govern social and political life. Cultural codes become embedded in the context over many years and so may be unconscious but they may also be used to hide or protect the values and beliefs which underlie interaction. In this sense, they are obscurers or barriers to change as they conceal the motivation for particular patterns of behaviour and do not allow others to enter in.

We have seen that cultural codes and the self-protection they provide have been of particular importance in Central and Eastern Europe due to historical factors and specifically the 'opening' of 'closed' systems. In the evaluation context this has been exacerbated by a conceptualization of evaluation as 'control' or 'audit' of performance. This conceptualization (although with a different focus and origin) stemmed from both CEE professionals as well as foreign funders and agencies which have tended to import a managerialist view of evaluation

In such a context it is not immediately obvious how one can best serve evaluation needs. What is clear is that cultural codes need to be opened. This requires a strategy which takes account of the five principal characteristics of culture we identified earlier. These are the centrality of *interaction*, a view of culture as *organic and mutable*, openness to *influence* of one culture on another, a recognition of the nature and role of *power* and an awareness of the *mutuality* of cultural understanding and interpretation. Engaging in partnership with other

Evaluation 5(1)

cultures brings these to life, but they are better served by some forms of partnership than others.

Working in Central and Eastern Europe usually means entering a formal partnership with a number of groups or institutions which have defined boundaries, if not rules and regulations which govern the formal operation of the contract. However, there is another level at which partnership is manifest – in the conduct of the contract itself. Partnerships do not exist simply by the statement of formal alliances. It is through the process of realizing the contract and reaching a product that the partnership comes to be defined. And we have choices to make about what kind of partnership we will subscribe to or aim to develop.

Our experiences of working in Eastern and Central Europe suggest four different kinds of partnerships may operate. These are *creative*, *collaborative*, *collusive* and *coercive*.

Creative partnerships operate with codes that are unlocked or predisposed to be open and flexible. Collaborative partnerships are characterized by the recognition that some codes will be unlocked in the course of the evaluation but that there may well be a need for others (at least initially) to remain unrevealed. Such a position recognizes respect for differences that maintain people's equilibrium and space which may be particularly important at the beginning of a project. Collusive partnerships feature locked codes that are recognized by each party involved but which are not challenged because mutual gain under existing arrangements is accepted by those involved and task completion becomes more important than understanding or development. This is a not uncommon scenario in policy evaluation. Coercive partnerships are those where the codes (whatever the processes engaged in to uncover them) remain locked.

It is our contention that the greatest opportunity to establish a developmental perspective and climate for evaluation comes with creative partnership. For this to happen, as previously stated, codes need to be unlocked. However, the opening of a code is only the first step. It is the values and beliefs that are thereby exposed which really need to be influenced for change to occur.

In our experience such a change in attitude and belief structures requires a great deal of time, energy and psychological space for people and institutions to learn to work together. The time limitations on projects often do not allow this. It also requires a shared understanding of the role and use of evaluation as a tool for development. As long as a managerial model of evaluation dominates the thinking of policy-makers and funders, creative partnerships are unlikely to occur. In such contexts collaborative partnerships are perhaps the most we can expect to achieve.

Ultimately, of course, whether codes can be unlocked and creative partnerships develop depends upon trust between individuals, between institutions and between systems. It also rests on the degree to which individuals are prepared to take risks in exposing their values and beliefs. Trust is a key to effective relationships but this is something that cannot be assumed. It has to be built through democratic practices realized through consistent procedures and actions in context (Simons, 1987).

The systems in which many of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe lived

before 1989 did not encourage trust. Indeed in some countries trust was systematically destroyed. With the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and communism in 1989–90, expectations of democratic practice changed rapidly but not the culture. As Fukuyama has pointed out:

What cannot change nearly as quickly is culture. The experience of many former communist societies is that communism created many habits – excessive dependence on the state, leading to an absence of entrepreneurial energy, an inability to compromise, and a disinclination to co-operate voluntarily in groups like companies or political parties – that have greatly slowed the consolidation of either democracy or a market economy. People in these societies have given their intellectual assent to the replacement of communism with democracy and capitalism by voting for ‘democratic’ reformers, but they do not have the social habits necessary to make either work. (Fukuyama, 1995: 40)

Similarly, the West has been struggling to trust that which has been hidden, unknown and the subject of cheap spy stories for more than four decades.

So there is learning required on both sides for trust to develop. Creating safe spaces for individuals to express their vulnerabilities, to self-reflect with impunity and to take the risks needed to re-examine how they view the world is no easy task. Without this, however, there is less potential to change attitudes, behaviours and possibly even beliefs. The greater the trust, the safer people and institutions will feel to take such risks. The greater the trust, the greater the potential for unlocking the codes.

This would suggest a developmental and not a managerialist model of evaluation based upon shared power, openness to learning, recognition of the expertise and equal worth of others. In such a context we may begin to influence the social habits essential to a shift in culture which encourages people to be aware of their behaviours, to explore their attitudes and values, to re-examine their tacit beliefs and possibly to change them. The danger is that changes in observable behaviours and symbols disguise the lack of change in attitudes, values and beliefs. In other words, the complex codes remain closed.

As one travels the lands where communism used to rule, one is struck by the rapid disappearance of its everpresent trappings: the Lenin statues, the red flags, the red stars, and the slogans. They are gone nearly overnight, leaving behind very few visible reminders of a system that existed for the better part of the second half of this century. The invisible, intangible legacies left behind by communism, however, unfortunately will remain with the people of the region for a long time to come. (Volgyes, 1995: 19)

We must also recognize that our own codes may remain closed in order to protect ourselves in environments that are uncertain and which we may not fully understand.

To conclude with the metaphor and title of this article, who holds the key? Locks are made to keep things safe, hidden or private. The keys are held by those who choose to expose what they value. That of course means us – all of us – evaluators as well as those with whom we work.

Notes

1. Though the authors' names are in conventional alphabetical order both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of this article.
2. The authors are aware that many of the issues presented in this article are also relevant to the conduct of programme evaluation in Western industrialized countries where evaluation frequently encounters complex differences in racial, ethnic and class 'sub-cultures'. This not only applies to the inherent differences in the society but also to the tensions that can arise from different conceptions of the role and meaning of evaluation.
3. A recent article subtitled cross-cultural evaluation (Garaway, 1996) presented an organizational strategy for multi-site case study evaluation in India but did not focus on the strategic analysis of culture as the precursor for development which is the subject of this article.
4. It is possible of course for an evaluation to have more than one of the above perspectives within the same project, although this can send mixed messages to those involved. It can also result in tension unless the different purposes are clearly understood and accepted by all the key players and are not seen as competing for dominance within the programme. However, evaluations that aspire to meet everyone's interests may end up meeting no-one's, warns Pollitt (1997), a danger particularly manifest, he comments, in many evaluations carried out under EU auspices (Pollitt, 1997: 388).
5. See also Stern (1995, 1997) in his respective interviews in the journal *Evaluation* with Alan Pratley, the European Commission's Financial Controller, and Erkki Liikanen, a European Union Commissioner.
6. Accountability can be interpreted more positively. For example, in development and evaluation work in other contexts the authors have operated with a different concept of accountability, one that is grounded in self-evaluation, and through processes that promote the potential for learning within organizations as well as reporting to legitimate audiences outside the organization. Accountability in this context is self-accountability or professional accountability. (See, for example, Simons, 1989.)
7. Not all evaluations or evaluators work from this perspective. But in a social and political context where development is the aim of the funding, it seems appropriate to take a parallel developmental stance to the evaluation.

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