

“ A Hirschmanian approach to development evaluation”¹

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Albert Hirschman is an acknowledged pioneer in the development field, whose contributions have been often quotedⁱ. To some extent his work has also been perceived as relevant for evaluation², but it is remarkable and regrettable the lack of consideration of Hirschman’s work in development evaluation. Table 1, which should be taken into account with the usual caveats for this type of data, is illustrative (see also Table 2, in the note at the end of the paper):

Table 1

	<u>Citation Results</u>
"albert hirschman" evaluation	20200
"albert hirschman" evaluación	24500
"albert hirschman" "development evaluation"	265

Source: Google, August 2nd 2017

In this paper “development evaluation” is defined as the evaluation of development interventions (development projects, programs and/or policies)³.

¹ This note is a revised version finalized on October 22nd, 2017, of a presentation made at a panel of the 6-7th October 2017 **Conference on Albert Hirschman's Legacy** and at the 2014 conference of the European Evaluation Society.

² However, it is worthwhile to mention that the 31 pages index of Adelman (2013) does not include any reference to “evaluation”.

³ See Feinstein (2006) and Feinstein (2017).

Although Hirschman was not an evaluator some of his work such as “Development Projects Observed” and “Getting Ahead Collectively”, can be considered as development evaluations, the former focusing on projects designed and supervised by the World Bank, whereas the latter focused on a set of projects funded by the Inter-American Foundation.

Other works like “The Rethoric of Reaction” and “Exit, Voice and Loyalty ” are also very relevant for development evaluation and for evaluation in general⁴. All these were unintended contributions to development evaluation.

“H questions” to guide development evaluations

Evaluators use questions to guide their work. Based on Hirschman’s work the following questions can play a heuristic role in development evaluations (therefore “H” stands for both, “heuristic” and “Hirschman”), suggesting lines of creative enquiry:

1. Given what you observed, are there any concepts or principles that you can use to explain your observation(s)?

(consider, among others, the following:
inducement mechanisms; inverted sequences; exit, voice and loyalty; perversity, futility and jeopardy; backward and forward linkages; latitude; trait-making and trait-taking characteristics; trespassing; self-subversion; tunnel effect; possibilism; hiding hand; hidden rationalities; fracasomanía; the principle of

⁴ As shown by Picciotto (2015)

conservation and mutation of social energy; and the unintended consequences of human action⁵)

2. Can you explain what you observed as a case of some general principle or concept? (i.e, abduction; contrary to a view that sometimes has been expressed, that Hirschman's approach is "inductive", which would expose Hirschman to the unavoidable critique of induction, Hirschman's approach corresponds to the "context of discovery", in which abduction plays a role, whereas induction corresponds to the "logic of justification" and cannot escape the critique started by Hume and further developed by several philosophers of science). As stated by Hirschman (1967) in the last words of "Development Projects Observed", what he pursued is "the snatching of systematic insights from casual observations", which is one way of describing "abduction"⁶.
3. How this concept relates to other concepts?
4. If based on your observations you identified a new concept, can you find a good name for it?
5. Could things be just the opposite of what they seem to be?
6. Are there any findings or concepts in economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, political science or literature which can help to understand better the development interventions that you are evaluating?

⁵ See Feinstein (2006b) and Meldolesi (1995)

⁶ Douven (2017) provides an introduction to abduction. One of the very few economists who makes explicit reference to abduction is University of Cambridge's Tony Lawson.

In contrast to the “theory of change” or “theory-based evaluation” approach, widely adopted in development evaluation (and in other types of evaluation), a Hirschmanian approach to evaluation is “*observation-based*”. It is not a framework in which a “theory” directs the observations but an approach in which the evaluator develops a dialectical relationship between observations and concepts⁷.

Furthermore, in a Hirschmanian approach to evaluation observations are presented in a sort of “thick description” a la Geertz, and the evaluator would be expected to provide an interpretation of their meaning, for which either existing or new concepts may be used⁸.

It is also worthwhile to compare the Hirschmanian approach with “objectives-based” evaluation, used by development agencies, where the focus is on the objectives of the development intervention. However, the two approaches can be complementary, the latter serving more the accountability function of evaluation whereas the Hirschmanian approach supports evaluation’s learning role.

References:

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⁷ The Hirschmanian approach is compatible with the “Assumptions Based Comprehensive Development Evaluation Framework” (ABCDEF) introduced in Feinstein (2006a).

⁸ Schwandt (1997) discusses evaluation as “practical hermeneutics”, whereas Eco (2016) points out some limits of interpretation in the context of literature which are also relevant for evaluation.

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/abd-uction/>>

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NOTE

As shown below in Table 2, Google Scholar Hirschman's citations exceed by an ample margin the sum of citations of the two economists who shared the 2016 Nobel Prize, Oliver Hart and Bengt Holmström

Table 2

	<u>Citation Results</u>
"albert hirschman"	17700
"oliver hart"	7100
"bengt holmström"	4580

Source: Google Scholar, August 2nd 2017