



## Mapping the spatial dimensions of participatory practice: A discussion of context in evaluation



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### ABSTRACT

In participatory or collaborative evaluation practice, context is considered a complex, relational and social phenomenon that frames the parameters of the inquiry process in profound ways. To help us expand upon our understanding of context, we borrow the concept of “space” from the critical geographers, as it provides a bridge between the social and geographic complexities of context, enabling us to more fully capture the social and relational dynamic that fundamentally defines participatory evaluation. Our focus is on understanding context and relationships as two interconnected, dynamic and constituent parts of evaluation practices that feature participatory spaces. We then turn to a comparative analysis of participatory practice across two published reviews of distinct sets of empirical studies as a way to extend our understanding of participatory evaluation in relation to its practical, and frequently complex, contextual expressions in the field. This comparative analysis enables us to develop a set of five dimensions (epistemic, temporal/historical, cultural, economic/organizational, political) that we believe captures the spatial and contextual characteristics and contours of participatory practice.

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Confronting the problem of context is like opening up Pandora's box.

E. Mishler, 1979, p. 17.

Context is central to understanding what social science is and can be.

B. Flyvberg, 2001, p. 9.

Program evaluation takes place in multidimensional contexts that shape the contours and parameters of each study's design, process and outcomes. Evaluations occur in a wide range of contexts, from a single, relatively simple program situated in a local setting to more complicated programs located across multiple national or international settings. The literature on program evaluation identifies context as a complex, multifaceted, highly interactive phenomenon encompassing social, historical,

political, ecological and cultural dimensions, all of which interconnect to influence program and evaluation characteristics and possibilities (Mathison, 2005; Vo, 2013). As Dahler-Larsen (2012) has argued, “evaluators (and evaluations) do not simply identify and respond to contextual factors, but by virtue of their actions are always constructing, relating to, engaging in, and taking part in some construction of the context in which they operate” (p. 84).

Although understanding context is essential regardless of evaluation method or design selected, in participatory or collaborative approaches program and community contexts directly influence and shape participatory processes and the level of participation, as well as evaluation outcomes and consequences. In participatory or collaborative evaluations, where evaluators work closely with local program stakeholders in designing and conducting the studies, and in analyzing and interpreting findings, understanding the exigencies of context thus becomes paramount, as it is viewed as the location or space of learning, change and possibility (Mathison, 2005). From a hermeneutic perspective, evaluators working in participatory or collaborative modes not only enter pre-existing programs and community contexts, but also co-create, open up and shape these settings and spaces. As such, from a participatory perspective, context represents and encompasses more than a simple physical manifestation, a ‘place on a map;’ it is a dynamic, relational construct evaluators actively

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create and make use of in their participatory and collaborative work with stakeholders. [de Certeau \(1984\)](#) defines this space as a “practiced place” (p. 117) constructed by the operations that produce, orient, situate and temporize it. Understanding context may thus be considered a key starting point for practicing participatory and collaborative approaches in evaluation ([Cousins, Whitmore, & Shulha, 2013](#)).

In this paper we take advantage of the ‘spatial turn’ ([Gregory, 2009](#)) in the social sciences, drawing upon conceptualizations of space to expand our understanding of context and its influence in participatory research and evaluation. Our rationale for looking at context specifically in terms of participatory evaluation is that in their practices, evaluators using participatory and collaborative approaches create, transform and make (use of) space for and with stakeholders. These spaces are considered the site of production and reproduction of social practices ([Harvey, 1993](#)) and should not be considered neutral places (or blank canvases), as they are infused with their own unique political, social, cultural and historical dynamics that are being shaped and reshaped continually by the people who interact and interconnect within them. Our use here of the spatial metaphor is intentional. Engaging what [Mills \(1959\)](#) might have referred to as the “sociological imagination”, we see this metaphor as providing a bridge (or an interface) between geography and sociology ([Harvey, 1973](#)), highlighting the relationship between program contexts (locations) and program communities (including sponsors or donors, delivery agents, recipients, etc.), and encapsulating the relational dynamic of the participatory process itself.

Our primary goal is to explore the multidimensional and highly interactive space that connects context and participatory practice to more fully capture the social and relational dynamic that fundamentally defines participatory evaluation. We begin with a discussion of context along two dimensions, as the program and community setting or location in which the evaluation takes place and as a spatial concept that reflects the social dynamics of the participatory practice itself. Our focus in this section is defining the participatory setting, milieu or space that is co-constructed by evaluators and program and community stakeholders for evaluation purposes. In the second section we describe participatory evaluation to illustrate the range of approaches that are encompassed by the term, as well as the broad contextual applications in practice. In the third section we turn to a comparative analysis of participatory practice across two published reviews of distinct sets of empirical studies (one set included studies that spanned the globe, the other was focused on studies in the global south). Our purpose in this section is to compare findings from two sets of studies that are situated in very different settings as a way to extend our understanding of participatory evaluation in relation to its practical, and frequently complex, contextual expressions in the field. The focus is on understanding context and relationships as two interconnected, dynamic and constituent parts of evaluation practices that feature participatory spaces. In the fourth section we discuss a set of five dimensions that emerged from our comparative analysis that help us understand the contextual and relational characteristics of participatory spaces. Here we are guided by such questions as: From a participatory perspective, how is context conceptualized and defined? What does ‘participatory space’ look like across different contexts and, more specifically, across two such contrasting geographic settings? How are the exigencies of context made manifest in participatory evaluation practice? How does the program community and context (both broadly conceptualized) influence participatory processes and practices? What insight does the spatial metaphor provide from a participatory perspective? We conclude our paper with implications for practice.

## 1. Exploring the multi-dimensionality of context within participatory research and evaluation

In a participatory evaluation, understanding the particularities and complexities of context is paramount, as the collaboration and evaluation process emerges out of (and is framed by) these local contextual exigencies ([Cousins & Chouinard, 2012](#)). Our depiction of context (in Latin meaning to *inter-weave* or *to compose*) can be understood along two inter-connected dimensions: (1) as the program and community setting (or geographical location) in which the evaluation takes place, and (2) as the participatory environment or milieu (what we refer to as ‘participatory space’) that is jointly created by the interaction (and collaboration) of stakeholders and evaluators, what [Cornwall \(2004\)](#) refers to as an “invited space”. These two dimensions are intimately connected, such that “context and evaluation practice are co-constructed” ([Dahler-Larsen & Schwandt, 2012, p. 81](#)). Our use of the spatial metaphor is thus intended reflexively and as a way to provide a conceptual bridge between geography (the setting and location) and the processes that unfold in participatory or collaborative spaces. In what follows, we turn to a description of these two inter-related dimensions of context from a participatory perspective.

## 2. Context understood as factors and conditions in the program and community setting

Understanding context matters in evaluation, as it helps evaluators make sense of the cultural, historical, social and political dimensions of the program community, and helps evaluators frame their evaluation approaches to be more responsive to local stakeholder and community program needs. In previous work ([Cousins & Chouinard, 2012](#)), we defined context as a set of conditions and factors that influence the decision about whether a participatory or collaborative approach is advisable or feasible, how it should be used, and what it might look like in practice. We characterized these contextual factors and conditions along four dimensions: (1) the characteristics of the evaluator and/or evaluation team (level of expertise, communication and instructional skills, cultural background), (2) community context (demographic, social, economic and historical characteristics of the program community, interpersonal dimensions such as pre-existing relationships, macro influences such as social, economic, political, cultural, environmental factors, and micro-political processes of stakeholder relationships), (3) institutional influences (level of administrative support, availability of resources and time, organizational culture, information and program needs, and level of evaluation skill of participating stakeholders), and (4) program influences (program complexity and breadth, program history, design and objectives, characteristics and role of program staff). While there are numerous approaches to participatory practice (e.g., practical participatory evaluation, participatory action research, democratic deliberative evaluation, etc.), we noted that these four contextual factors and conditions influenced the participatory process itself in terms of the degree of evaluator involvement, diversity among stakeholders, and depth of stakeholder participation ([Cousins & Whitmore, 1998](#)), as well as the consequences of the evaluation ([Cousins & Chouinard, 2012](#)). The spatial understanding of context (as articulated below) highlights the interaction between these four identified dimensions of context and participatory practice.

## 3. Context understood as a spatial dimension

Over the years, numerous social sciences (e.g., anthropology, cultural sociology, community psychology, geography) have explored the multi-dimensionality of context, identifying it as a

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