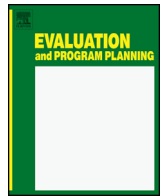




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Assumptions at the philosophical and programmatic levels in evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholders and evaluators hold a variety of levels of assumptions at the philosophical, methodological, and programmatic levels. The use of a transformative philosophical framework is presented as a way for evaluators to become more aware of the implications of various assumptions made by themselves and program stakeholders. The argument is examined and demonstrated that evaluators who are aware of the assumptions that underlie their evaluation choices are able to provide useful support for stakeholders in the examination of the assumptions they hold with regard to the nature of the problem being addressed, the program designed to solve the problem, and the approach to evaluation that is appropriate in that context. Such an informed approach has the potential for development of more appropriate and culturally responsive programs being implemented in ways that lead to the desired impacts, as well as to lead to evaluation approaches that support effective solutions to intransigent social problems. These arguments are illustrated through examples of evaluations from multiple sectors; additional challenges are also identified.

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1. Introduction

Assumptions in evaluation contexts come in many different forms. Stakeholders make assumptions about the nature of the problems being addressed that lead to assumptions about the design, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention to address the problems. Nkwake (2013) refers to these types of assumptions as diagnostic assumptions that entail what is believed to be the root causes of issues addressed by programs and prescriptive assumptions about the nature of the intervention designed to address the problems. Evaluators have a responsibility to make visible the assumptions being made about the nature of the problems and potential solutions by providing data that can increase the potential for an effective intervention. This also encompasses a responsibility to critically examine the assumptions about evaluation strategies and approaches. The critical examination of assumptions is especially important when dealing with intransigent social problems, sometimes called wicked problems (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012; Mertens, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are those that involve multiple interacting systems, are replete with social and institutional uncertainties, and for which there is no certainty in

defining the nature of the problem and potential solutions. In addition, these wicked problems are of such a nature that time is running out to find solutions. Mertens and Wilson (2012) add other dimensions to the definition of wicked problems that include the need to address power inequities, violations of human rights and impediments to developing socially just communities, and strategizing for action to inform policies and change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Examples include climate change, violence, and poverty.

The attempt to resolve issues of poverty and health through improved sanitation provides one example of the importance of using empirical approaches informed by a lens of social justice to critically examine stakeholders' assumptions about problems and solutions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi established a "Clean India" campaign to address sanitation issues (Lakshmi, 2015). He and his advisors assumed that sending government workers into rural villages to install over 10 million brand new toilets in the people's front yards would solve the problems of poor sanitation and contaminated water. However, over 40% of the people in the villages do not use the new toilets; they continue to relieve themselves in open fields as they have always done; they use the toilets to store grain or tether their goats. The residents' resistance to the toilets is rooted in the centuries old caste system in which members of the lowest caste, formerly called untouchables, were responsible for the removal of human waste. Human rights groups

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decried the dependence on this caste to remove human waste as a gross violation of their rights as well as being illegal under the Indian constitution. Hence, people who get the new toilets do not want to fill the toilets with waste because no one is willing to clean them. A solution that might work would be provision of a mechanized system for cleaning pit latrines, sewer lines, and septic tanks. This critical interrogation of the way in which change can happen is termed transformative causal assumptions by [Nkwake \(2013\)](#) and calls upon evaluators and stakeholders to ensure that outputs turn into outcomes in ways that take into account external or contextual assumptions related to cultural complexity and human rights.

Within the context of evaluation, the situation in India illustrates the importance of evaluators being involved in making visible those assumptions about the nature of the problem (viewed as human waste in open fields and water ways that contribute to contaminated water) to a more nuanced understanding of the problem (people do not want to remove the waste from toilets because it is below their status). The former depiction of the problem is accurate, but not complete and led to a solution that was only partially effective.

Evaluators work with assumptions at many levels, including their own and those held by the programmatic stakeholders. Even if evaluators are unaware of their and the stakeholders' assumptions, this does not mean that people are operating without assumptions; it only means that they are working with unexamined assumptions. This is a dangerous position from which to work and has consequences for the quality of the program and the evaluation, and the consequent impact on stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to discuss new insights into the variety of levels of assumptions present in evaluation work at the philosophical, methodological and programmatic levels within a transformative framework. By using a transformative philosophical framework to ground their evaluations, evaluators can become more aware of the implications of various assumptions made by themselves and program stakeholders. The argument is examined and demonstrated that evaluators who are aware of the assumptions that underlie their evaluation choices are able to provide useful support for stakeholders in the examination of the assumptions they hold with regard to the nature of the problem being addressed, the program designed to solve the problem, and appropriate evaluation approaches. Such an informed approach has the potential for development of more appropriate and culturally responsive programs being implemented in ways that lead to the desired impacts.

As William [Shadish \(1998, p. 3\)](#) wrote: many of the debates in the evaluation field are “about epistemology and ontology, about what assumptions we make when we construct knowledge, about the nature of many fundamental concepts that we use in our work like causation, generalization, and truth.” I use the structure of paradigms as developed by [Guba and Lincoln \(1989, 2005\)](#) as a way to illustrate philosophical assumptions associated with a transformative stance. These include assumptions about the nature of ethics and values (axiology), reality (ontology), knowledge and the relationship between the evaluator and stakeholders (epistemology), and systematic inquiry (methodology). The transformative paradigm provides a framework for examining the major assumptions associated with critically assessing assumptions about the nature of the problem and potential solutions with implications for evaluation strategies that can illuminate hidden and visible assumptions held by diverse stakeholders ([Mertens, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2012](#)). The focus is on added insights that evaluators can provide to program stakeholders and participants with regard to the design and implementation of programs that are culturally responsive.

2. Transformative philosophical assumptions

When evaluators reflect and make explicit their axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions, they are better able to choose the methodologies to use in their inquiries. Situating oneself within a framework of philosophical assumptions also means making explicit the assumptions that evaluators make about themselves and their roles as evaluators. Methodologies provide specific guidance to evaluation design: types of questions that can be answered, selection of samples, selection of methods/instruments to collect data, approaches to analyze the collected data, and inferences and use that can be made from their findings. The transformative paradigm lends itself to the design, implementation, and use of evaluation that engages with complexity (both observable and unobservable assumptions and processes), for which a range of data collection and analysis tools are needed; therefore, a mixed-methods approach is relevant. Transformation implies understanding and questioning assumptions about the present status quo, and therefore a critical approach is necessary. However, the process of change does not take place through critique alone. Each context has assets, strengths and opportunities that add value to achieve desirable goals, i.e., increasing social justice and furthering human rights. The evaluator has an ethical responsibility to engage with stakeholders to examine the assumptions about the problem, solution, and evaluation methods in order to increase the potential for social change.

The transformative paradigm is one philosophical framework that helps organize thinking about how evaluators “can serve the interests of social justice through the production of credible evidence that is responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. It provides a meta-physical umbrella to guide evaluators who work in communities that experience discrimination and oppression on whatever basis—gender, disability, immigrant status, race/ethnicity, sexual identification, or a multitude of other characteristics associated with less access to societal privileges” ([Mertens & Hesse Biber, 2013, p. 28](#)). Evaluators often work in contexts in which a variety of possible solutions are possible for a problem, however, in the context of wicked problems, evaluators and stakeholders need to work together to determine which of the solutions are culturally responsive and have the potential to increase social justice.

3. Making values explicit

The transformative axiological assumption ([Mertens, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012](#)) holds that evaluators have a responsibility to direct their work to address issues of social justice and human rights. This explicit ethical stance carries with it the implication that evaluators have a responsibility to make visible the dynamics of discrimination and oppression that are relevant in the evaluation context. Thus, evaluators need to be aware of those dimensions of diversity that are associated with discrimination, on whatever basis, and to build into their evaluations ways to challenge power differences that sustain an oppressive status quo. This also implies that evaluators need to be aware of the strengths found in the multiple stakeholder groups and of how to be culturally respectful with members of the diverse constituencies. Very importantly, the transformative axiological assumption supports the role of evaluation as contributing to change in a form of reciprocity, i.e., those who are being denied their rights can see the evaluation as a means to supporting changes needed so that they do experience a more socially just life. Evaluators with this conscious value-laden positionality can work with stakeholders to provide a frame for evaluation that addresses inclusion of diverse voices in respectful ways as part of the evaluation process.

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