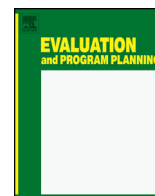




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Conclusion: Agency in the face of complexity and the future of assumption-aware evaluation practice

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ABSTRACT

This final chapter in the volume pulls together common themes from the diverse set of articles by a group of eight authors in this issue, and presents some reflections on the next steps for improving the ways in which evaluators work with assumptions. Collectively, the authors provide a broad overview of existing and emerging approaches to the articulation and use of assumptions in evaluation theory and practice. The authors reiterate the rationale and key terminology as a common basis for working with assumption in program design and evaluation. They highlight some useful concepts and categorizations to promote more rigorous treatment of assumptions in evaluation. A three-tier framework for fostering agency for assumption-aware evaluation practice is proposed—agency for themselves (evaluators); agency for others (stakeholders); and agency for standards and principles.

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1. Introduction

The articles in this special issue outline the philosophical basis, mechanisms, and evidence from recent cases to illustrate how working with assumptions improves evaluations and program design particularly in complex environments. Nkwake and Morrow lay out the philosophical basis for working with assumptions and make an argument for the development of a typology of the assumptions that permeate our practice of Evaluation. Mertens in the second article links the practice of working with assumptions in evaluation to the transformative power of rooting evaluative practice in social justice and human rights. Chen makes an argument for better approaches to working with assumptions on a pragmatic basis – they improve both program theory and evaluation theory—leading to more effective programs and better evaluation designs.

Archibald et al. present evidence of how working with assumptions specifically enables adaptive management, adapting program theory to context and resulting in greater agency and empowerment of front line staff. The final article, by Morrow and Nkwake, attempts to put these concepts into some historical

perspective by underlining the changing role of the evaluator and development of assumption-aware tools as our profession seeks to improve evaluation and design for increasingly complex evaluands in ever dynamic and more complex contexts. The particular focus on the development of tools is intended to both provide insight to the development of assumption-aware practice but also provide readers with some options for integrating more assumption-aware design and evaluation into their own work.

1.1. Diverse view points on assumptions found in this volume

Nkwake and Morrow open this volume arguing the case for a more systematic approach to working with assumptions in program evaluation and design. The practice of surfacing and examining assumptions has deep historical and philosophical roots. Although evaluators face a plethora of unexamined assumptions in their practice and work with stakeholders, the research and has taken place in a piece-meal fashion with the concept of evaluations being picked up by a variety of authors. Nkwake and Morrow believe that better approaches and tools for working with assumptions is fundamental to improving evaluation and program design in complex contexts and with complex evaluands for a variety of reasons including unexpected outcomes, ubiquitous feedbacks, fuzzy boundaries and linkages at a variety of scales. Articulating and testing assumptions is one way for making incremental progress and learn through reflection. Ultimately

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working with assumptions enables the agency of evaluators and stakeholders to move forward despite uncertainty. The first step to evolving an assumption-aware practice is development of a common typology for the most common types of assumptions found in evaluative practice. The authors propose the following as the basis for an assumption aware typology for evaluands:

1.1.1. Normative assumptions

These are the considerations, right from before an intervention is devised, that there exists and problem (or opportunity) that deserves a response—that there is a discrepancy between the reality and what is ideal.

1.1.2. Diagnostic assumptions

Diagnostic assumptions are stated as stakeholders’ perceptions of the major and minor causes of the core problems. Since the intervention to address a problem is based on the causes of that problem, diagnostic assumptions are crucial to a normative theory and need to be examined from design, implementation and evaluation perspectives

1.1.3. Prescriptive assumptions

Prescriptive assumptions have to do with the intervention or strategy devised to resolve the problem or to reach a stated program goal, which represents stakeholders’ beliefs of what could be the most appropriate approach for addressing the problem or responding to an opportunity.

1.1.4. Causal assumptions

Causal assumptions explain how initial and intermediate changes resulting from program implementation will bring about longer term changes. The difference between prescriptive and causal assumptions is that while prescriptive assumptions are related to strategies (and alternatives) devised to address a problem, causal assumptions relate to how the immediate results of a strategy program or intervention (outputs) are expected to lead to long-term desired changes (outcomes and impacts).

1.1.5. External or contextual assumptions

Considered to be factors in the external environment of a program beyond stakeholders’ control that are preconditions for achieving expected outcomes.

At the foundation of evaluation practice is the determination of value and how to go about assessing it. Mertens’ Transformative Evaluation begins with articulating the underlying assumption of all evaluands as action for the promotion of social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2008). By starting with a clear articulation of the primary purpose of program or intervention, there is a larger framework to guide design and methodological choices. With this articulation of the axiological basis of Transformative Evaluation, a complete evaluation approach can be built on a foundation that clearly favors cultural relevance and responsiveness, promotion of underrepresented and marginalized voices, and the promotion of social change. Understanding the power dynamics and the assumptions behind actions and relationships are therefore the key to obtaining the desired programmatic or policy impacts. In this volume, Mertens extends these ideas of Transformative Evaluation to the different types of assumptions that are made in design and evaluation processes. She then provides examples of the utility in assumption awareness when working with wicked problems that involve the interaction of multiple systems, contradictory perspective and complexity of interactions that obscure causal relations such as climate change, health behaviours and sexual violence. The transformative perspective is then articulated with respect to axiological, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (see Fig. 1).

Transformative Axiological Assumption holds that evaluation should be performed in the service of social justice; this is important because discrimination and oppression are systemic; failure to address these problems sustains an oppressive status quo.
Transformative Ontological Assumption holds that different versions of reality exist and these come from different social positionalities; there are consequences associated with accepting one version of reality over another; evaluators have a responsibility to make visible those versions of reality that sustain oppression and those that support the path to social justice.
Transformative Epistemological Assumption holds that differences in power impact the ability to accurately identify problems and solutions; evaluators need to establish trusting relationships with the full range of stakeholder groups in order to obtain an accurate picture of the phenomenon under study.
Transformative Methodological Assumption holds that dialogic moments are critical to understanding phenomenon from different perspectives; evaluators can use mixed methods to be responsive to diverse stakeholder groups and to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under study in ways that contribute to social transformation.

Fig. 1. Different levels of transformative assumptions (Mertens this volume).

Mertens argues that interrogating assumptions from a social justice perspective leads to more culturally relevant and therefore more appropriate and effective interventions. In particular, transformative causal assumptions take into account contextual assumptions related to cultural complexity and human rights. A clear outcome of transformative evaluation is a focus on the role of the evaluator, the participation of a diversity of participants, and a focus on process. “Evaluators reflect and make explicit their axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions, they are better able to choose the methodologies, for use in their inquiries” (Mertens this volume).

Choice of methodology is perhaps the most concrete and visible aspect of the transformative approach and implies many of the aspects seen in assumption-aware tools including iterative participation and surfacing underrepresented or unarticulated theories of change.

Furthermore, surfacing assumptions helps avoid the misunderstanding of the nature of problems from the stakeholders’ perspective—so they can use their assets and actions to participate in the solution. Purposeful inclusion, local oversight and mixed methods are the recommendations derived from cases presented from India, Mali, Kyrgyzstan—examples of problems that had more complex roots in context of power relations than perhaps initially considered by program designers.

Finally, examining assumptions increases potential for social change. Focus on composition of the team, governance and context are the often unstated but crucially important aspects of successful program design and evaluation. Mertens (this volume) then incites evaluators to base evaluation questions on the central axiological assumption of the proposition of social justice and human rights and to focus inquire on resilience and capabilities of the stakeholders. Evaluators should use mixed methods with a focus on participation and broad qualitative understanding of contextual aspects and a focus on stakeholder experience and world-view. Applying the transformative approach to working with assumptions ultimately promotes empowerment, dignity and agency of all stakeholders involved.

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