

Donna M. Mertens

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

Abstract

The transdisciplinary nature of evaluation allows its application in diverse contexts, with diverse stakeholder groups, to address diverse social problems, through the use of diverse methodologies. Given these multiple dimensions of diversity, there are also diverse sets of philosophical assumptions that underlie the choices that evaluators make regarding their methodologies. This essay explores the different philosophical framings that are guiding thinking in the evaluation community through the lens of four paradigms: postpositivist, constructivist, pragmatic, and transformative.

Program evaluation is described by Michael Scriven (2003) as a transdiscipline that is characterized as a discipline that supplies “essential tools for other disciplines, while retaining an autonomous structure and research effort of [its] own” (p. 19). Evaluation is not merely the application of social science methods to solve social problems; rather, evaluators use social science methods to examine the merit, worth and significance of a program or project or policy for the purposes of describing values associated with different stakeholder groups, as well as reaching evaluative conclusions “about good and bad solutions to social problems” (p. 21). The transdisciplinary nature of evaluation allows its application in diverse contexts, with diverse stakeholder groups, to address diverse social problems, through the use of diverse methodologies. With these multiple dimensions of diversity, it should come as no surprise that there are also diverse sets of philosophical assumptions that underlie the choices that evaluators make regarding their methodologies.

“Evaluation is situated in a broad landscape in terms of its diverse meanings in different disciplines, sectors, nations, and venues. The hallmarks of the evaluation field are its interdisciplinary roots and the ways in which the resultant conversations around the meaning of evaluation have benefited from this diversity of perspectives” (Mertens & Wilson 2012, p. 1). The evaluation field has experienced many decades of differences of opinions about which methodologies are best; at times these differences have been acrimonious. However, Shadish (1998) claims that differences about methodologies are not based on arguments about methods choices, but they are reflective of the different philosophical assumptions that guide methodological choices. He wrote that most 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” (p. 3).

Mertens (2009; 2015) and Mertens and Wilson (2012) built on the work of Guba and Lincoln’s (1989; 2005) concept of paradigms in research and evaluation; they described four sets of philosophical assumptions that constitute a paradigm: axiology, ontology, epistemology and methodology. Mertens and Wilson identified four major paradigms that are operating in the world of evaluation: postpositivist, constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic. These paradigms are associated with four branches of evaluation that reflect the diverse perspectives in the field. Christie and Alkin (2013) identified three branches of evaluation: Methods, Use and Values. Mertens and Wilson (2014) added the fourth branch of Social Justice. The paradigms and branches of evaluation align in the following way: The Methods Branch maps onto the postpositivist paradigm, the Use Branch onto the pragmatic paradigm, the Values Branch onto the constructivist paradigm, and the Social Justice Branch onto the transformative paradigm. The following figure depicts the primary focus of each paradigm and its associated evaluation branch.

Figure 1. Evaluation Paradigms and Branches (adapted from Mertens & Wilson 2012, p. 56)

Paradigm	Branch	Description
Postpositivist	Methods	Focuses primarily on quantitative designs and data
Pragmatic	Use	Focuses primarily on data that are found to be useful by stakeholders; advocates for the use of mixed methods
Constructivist	Values	Focuses primarily on identifying multiple values and perspectives through qualitative methods
Transformative	Social Justice	Focuses primarily on viewpoints of marginalized groups and interrogating systemic power structure through mixed methods to further social justice and human rights

At first glance, it should be apparent that there is a possibility of overlap between the various paradigmatic positions and evaluation branches. For example, constructivists or proponents of other paradigms and branches can work to advance social justice and human rights; this is not the sole territory of the transformative social justice evaluator. However, the transformative paradigm arose out of the expressed dissatisfaction of members of marginalized communities about the assumptions that were made in evaluations conducted in their communities and the recognized need for more culturally responsive thinking (Mertens 2009; Hood, Hopson & Frierson 2015). The four paradigms and their associated philosophical assumptions are next discussed in reference to the evaluation branches.

1. *Postpositivism and the Methods Branch*

The philosophical origins of the postpositivist paradigm can be traced back to Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in his articulation of the principles of the scientific method that included the ontological assumption that one reality exists and it is independent of the observer (Howell 2013; Turner 2001). This leads to an epistemological assumption

that tasks researchers with the adoption of a distanced manner in order to capture the knowledge or reality that exists outside of the individual. The axiological assumptions associated with the postpositivist paradigm align with those included in the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) in its Belmont Report. The ethical principles of beneficence, respect and justice from the Belmont Report provide the framework for most ethical review boards in the United States. The interpretation of these principles lead to ethical procedures such as confidentiality, informed consent, and avoidance of coercion (Mertens & Wilson 2012). The methodological assumption reflects the use of scientific methods that allow the evaluator to discover laws about human behavior through empirical observations, prioritizing the use of experimental designs in the form of randomized control trials that require random selection of subjects and random assignment to intervention conditions (Mertens 2015).

White (2013) explains that the use of randomized control trials in evaluation increased in the late 2000's because of the frustration expressed by donors that there was a "lack of rigorous evidence as to which development programs are effective" (p. 62). Although White was writing about international development evaluations, a similar frustration was also expressed by many domestic funders of social programs. Thus, a focus on impact evaluations occurred in order to get an answer to the question: What difference did an intervention make? In keeping with the assumptions of the postpositivist paradigm and the Methods Branch of evaluation, White writes: "For interventions with a large number of units of assignment, this question is best answered with a quantitative experimental or quasi-experimental design. And for prospective, or *ex ante*, evaluation designs a randomized control trial (RCT) is very likely to be the best available method for addressing this attribution question if it is feasible" (p. 61). White goes on to acknowledge that such a design only answers one narrow question: Did it work? In order to obtain answers to other questions, such as how well was the intervention implemented, was the targeted population reached, and what barriers to participation were encountered, White recommends the use of mixed methods designs.

The stated benefits of the randomized control trial design is that it can answer the question about impact whilst requiring no understanding of the complex causal chain associated with the effect of the intervention (White 2013). This is because of the assumption that randomization of the control and treatment groups controls for any differences in baseline characteristics of the participants. Everything is presumed to be equal, except for the administration of the intervention to one group and not to the other. Mixed methods approaches can be added to an RCT by collecting qualitative and quantitative data to answer questions about the causal chain and to interpret results from the statistical analysis of the RCT. Given the real-world context of evaluation, the conditions necessary for RCTs can be difficult to meet. If the intervention is not well-designed and culturally appropriate, then the study will only confirm its failure. Other paradigmatic stances and evaluation branches place greater emphasis on determining what is needed and provision of data to make adjustments throughout the course of the program so that the evaluation is dynamic and responsive to the culture and the community's changing context. The constructivist paradigm and the Values Branch

reflect one of the paradigms that assumes that evaluators need to be more personally involved with the targeted communities.

2. Constructivism and the Values Branch

House (1990) described the movement of evaluation in the direction of the Values Branch as follows: “Philosophically, evaluators ceased to believe their discipline was value-free and realized their practice entailed promoting the values and interests of some groups over others, though they were by no means clear on what to do about this discovery...If diverse groups wanted different things, then collecting the views of people in and around the programs themselves seemed to make sense. Qualitative methodology useful for obtaining the views of participants came into vogue” (p. 25). The arguments that ensued in the world of evaluation as to whether quantitative or qualitative methods were better were based on differences in philosophical assumptions associated with the postpositivist and constructivist paradigms.

The historical, philosophical roots of the constructivist paradigm are found in the late 1700s work of Immanuel Kant (1781/1966) and Husserl (1936/1970). The constructivist ontological assumption holds that humans create knowledge based on processing their experiences through interaction with external stimuli. Epistemologically, the evaluator needs to interact with participants and to engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection to create knowledge (Guba & Lincoln 2005). Schwandt (2000) adds to these assumptions in a methodological sense by noting that a constructivist attempts to reach an understanding of meaning from the perspective of the persons who have the experiences. It is possible that the persons themselves do not understand the experience fully. Thus, an evaluator can use methods that help make visible understandings for diverse stakeholders through the use of multiple methods.

The ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of the constructivist paradigm and the Values Branch serve to expand the understanding of ethics in evaluation. The assumption of diverse values at play in evaluations brings up the issue of the evaluator’s own values and those of the various stakeholder groups. Constructivists in the world of research recognize that because the researcher is the instrument, the researcher needs to make a careful inventory of their own values and how those values color their perceptions in the research context. The same holds true for evaluators. How do they make visible their own values and the values of the various stakeholder groups? How do they insure that the results of their evaluation are accurately reflective of the different values, beliefs, and interests of the different constituencies? Methodologically, this means that evaluators need to develop a relationship with the stakeholders and immerse themselves in the community sufficiently to engage in meaningful reflective dialogue with participants. Constructivists have a strong tendency to use qualitative methods. When mixed methods research emerged as a growing phenomenon in the United States in the late 1990s, some constructivist researchers rejected the possibility of combining qualitative and quantitative methods on the grounds that the assumptions of the postpositivist and constructivist paradigms were

incompatible. As the evaluation world explored how to address this conundrum, adherents of the pragmatic paradigm appeared.

3. *Pragmatic paradigm and the Use Branch*

With the passage of legislation in the United States in the 1960s under the Great Society initiative, evaluators realized that their work had the potential to inform policy decisions at the highest level. Several evaluation scholars, such as Daniel Stufflebeam (1980), Carol Weiss (1998), and Michael Patton (2010), raised the consciousness of the evaluation community regarding the use (or nonuse) of their findings. The pragmatic paradigm aligns closely with the Use Branch in the sense that the focus is on the conduct of evaluations that can provide information in a way that the intended stakeholders can use the results as a basis for informing decision making.

The pragmatic paradigm began in the second half of the 19th century with the contributions of William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and Arthur F. Bentley (Mertens & Wilson 2012). These scholars rejected the idea that truth could be discovered by scientific methods. Neopragmatism emerged in the 1960s, with scholars such as Abraham Kaplan, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West (Maxcy 2003). “These philosophers have distinguished themselves from the early pragmatists by their emphasis on common sense and practical thinking” (Mertens & Wilson 2012, p. 89).

Hall (2013), Greene (2007), and Denzin (2012) argue that the invocation of pragmatism as a philosophical base for the Use Branch of evaluation is misleading. Rather, many evaluators in the Use Branch do not consciously act from the philosophical assumptions associated with pragmatism. Rather, they adopt a utilitarian, “what works” approach that has been criticized as an a-paradigmatic stance that emphasizes convenience instead of engaging with philosophical underpinnings.

The tension between pragmatism as a philosophical frame and utilitarianism as a practical frame for evaluation is one that is generating a great deal of thought in the evaluation world. At present, the Use Branch operates with an axiological assumption that aligns with the utilitarian theory of ethics, which holds that the value of something is a function of its consequences (Christians 2005). Morgan (2007) describes the ethical stance of pragmatism as gaining knowledge in pursuit of desired ends. Rather than doing an evaluation for the sake of an evaluation, pragmatists see the value of the evaluation *as how it is used and the results of that use*” (Mertens & Wilson 2012, p. 90, italics in the original).

In ontological terms, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) state that pragmatists avoid arguing about metaphysical terms such as truth and reality. They argue that the value of evaluation is not based on whether they discover the truth, but on the demonstration that the results work with respect to the problem that is being studied (Mertens & Wilson 2012). Epistemologically, the evaluator is free to develop whatever type of relationships with stakeholders is appropriate for the matter under investigation. The nature of the relationship is judged in terms of its ability to get the results of the evaluation used by the intended stakeholders. Methodologically, this philosophical stance has been used to justify the use of mixed methods in evaluation (Morgan 2007;

Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). The underlying methodological assumption of the Use Branch is that the method should match the purpose of the evaluation (Patton 2010).

Hall (2013) argues that evaluators would benefit by paying closer attention to the tenets of pragmatism, especially as it was conceptualized by Dewey (1923/1998). Dewey contributes the following ideas that are relevant to evaluators: First, his thoughts on intelligent action allows the evaluator to increase their contextual sensitivity and examine “the tangible processes for how inquiry and credible evidence are achieved. Second, his views on intelligent action advance reflection, ethics, and social justice. And third, Dewey’s pragmatism is relevant because, like many evaluators, his main objective is to address societal problems by taking action in an intelligent way” (Hall 2013, p. 17).

Dewey’s reflection on the meaning of Truth include a rejection of the idea of an absolute truth in favor of a transactional realist perspective that sees truth and knowledge as being “temporal and embedded in and generated through our experiential transactions. Truth is linked to action, and has to be tested continuously and substantiated. It is in this way transactional realism supports an experimental inquiry approach in which verification plays a significant role to determine future actions” (Hall 2013, p. 17). Hence, evaluators would adopt a critically reflective stance in a dynamic system to understand the complexity of their work in order to advocate for the use of the results of experimentation for intelligent action.

Dewey emphasized the importance of social inquiry in the advancement of social justice (Hall 2013). However, because of the utilitarian nature of much of the scholarship in the Use Branch, social justice issues have not been given priority. The transformative paradigm emerged as a response to the need for an explicit philosophical framing for evaluations that prioritize human rights and social justice (Mertens 2009; 2015).

4. Transformative paradigm and the Social Justice Branch

The philosophical roots of the transformative paradigm and the Social Justice Branch are eclectic, reflecting early work by Kant (1781/1966) and Hegel (1812/1929) regarding the importance of critically interrogating subjugation and the master-slave relationship in order to address issues of power and inequities (Mertens & Wilson 2012). Later, philosophers such as Marcus (1998), Habermas (1971), and Horkheimer (1972) extended thinking about value-laden perspectives in inquiry and the prioritization of social justice as the starting principle for research and evaluation. A multitude of theoretical perspectives contribute to expanded understandings of the transformative paradigm. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) elucidate the contribution of critical theory as follows: “A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy; matters of race, class, and gender; ideologies, discourses; education; religion and other social institutions; and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (p. 92). While this statement reflects some of the diversity in terms of dimensions that are used as a basis for discrimination and oppression, additional theoretical perspectives also contribute to the transformative paradigm.

Additional theoretical perspectives include feminists such as Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous (see Kincheloe & McLaren 2005); indigenous and postcolonial philosophers such as Asante (1992) and Chilisa (2011) from Africa, Cram (2009) from New Zealand's Maori community, Freire (1970) from Latin America and LaFrance and Crazy Bull (2009) from the American Indian community; and disability and deafness rights theorists (Mertens, Holmes & Harris 2009; Sullivan 2009).

These philosophical roots and theoretical perspectives contribute to the transformative paradigm because they all address issues of power inequities, privilege, and the consequences of these for achieving social justice. The transformative paradigm can be described as follows:

The transformative paradigm offers a meta-physical umbrella that brings together these various philosophical strands. It is applicable to people who experience discrimination and oppression on whatever basis, including (but not limited to) race/ethnicity, disability, immigrant status, political conflicts, sexual orientation, poverty, gender, age, or the multitude of other characteristics that are associated with less access to social justice. In addition the transformative paradigm is applicable to the study of the power structures that perpetuate social inequities (Mertens 2009, p. 4).

The transformative axiological assumption reflects an awareness of the pervasiveness of discrimination that occurs in many communities and the ethical responsibility of the evaluator to understand critical dimensions of diversity in order to challenge societal processes that perpetuate an oppressive status quo (Mertens & Wilson 2012). Thus, the transformative ethical assumptions extend on the ethical principles explicated in the Belmont Report (discussed earlier in this article).

Respect is critically examined in terms of the cultural norms of interaction in diverse communities and across cultural groups. Beneficence is defined in terms of the promotion of human rights and an increase in social justice. An explicit connection is made between the process and outcomes of evaluation studies and the furtherance of a social justice agenda (Mertens 2009, p. 49-50).

Constructivists also place emphasis on evaluators understanding their own positionality and values. However, transformative evaluators have an explicit mandate to take this a step further by working to transform the status quo (Ponterotto 2005). The American Evaluation Association (AEA) revised its guiding principles in 2004 to include an explicit statement about the importance of recognizing diversity and acting in an ethically responsible and culturally competent manner. In 2011, AEA published a *Statement on Cultural Competence* that calls upon evaluators to engage in a constant state of learning in order to guard against being blinded by their own assumptions that differ from those of the stakeholders whose backgrounds are different from their own. "Cultural competence requires awareness of self, reflection on one's own cultural position, awareness of others' positions, and the ability to interact genuinely and respectfully with others" (<http://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=92>).

The transformative ontological assumption recognizes the multi-faceted nature of reality. Human beings often believe that they know what is real, but each concept of what is real is influenced by the positionality of the person. A person who is in a position of unearned privilege by virtue of skin color, gender, or lack of a disability might hold one version of reality. However, a person who is not in that privileged

position may hold quite a different version of reality. The evaluator's responsibility is to design studies in ways that make visible the differences in perspectives about what is real, the factors that influence those perceptions (e.g., poverty, education, gender, race/ethnicity, religion), and then critically examine the consequences of accepting one version of reality over another. History is replete with examples of the acceptance of the privileged views of reality and the harmful consequences of that action. Native American Indians were taken from their families and forced to relinquish all aspects of their culture in the US government's attempt to "civilize" them, resulting in high suicide rates and drug abuse. Similarly, Aboriginal Australians were also taken from their homes and forced to live in boarding schools with disastrous results that are still being felt decades later in the form of cultural disintegration. This concept of ontology comes into play in evaluation work when evaluators encourage stakeholders to critically examine their own assumptions about the target population and the interventions and to obtain data from the targeted population on these topics as well.

Epistemologically, knowledge is not viewed as absolute nor relative; it is created within a context of power and privilege. Evaluators need to develop respectful and collaborative relationships that are culturally responsive to the needs of the various stakeholder groups in order to establish conditions conducive to revealing knowledge from different positions. Tensions can arise because of the power differences and the challenge of working through sensitive issues related to discrimination and oppression. The evaluator needs to develop effective communication strategies in order to navigate the inherently political terrain of an evaluation study.

The transformative methodological assumption does not dictate any particular approach to evaluation. "Rather, methodological decisions are aimed at determining the approach that will best facilitate use of the process and findings to enhance social justice; identify the systemic forces that support the status quo and those that will allow change to happen; and acknowledge the need for a critical and reflexive relationship between the evaluator and the stakeholders" (Mertens & Wilson 2012, p. 172). Mixed methods are often used in transformative evaluations because of the need to establish a dialogic relationship and a deep contextual understanding. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used together because they reveal different aspects of the phenomenon under study and are responsive to different information needs of the various stakeholder groups. "The methods used need to capture the contextual complexity and be appropriate to the cultural groups in the evaluation. A cyclical design can be used to make use of interim findings throughout the evaluation study. And follow-up is needed to facilitate use to enhance the potential for the program evaluation findings to achieve the strengthening of human rights" (Mertens 2013, p. 33). This supports the credibility of findings because the stakeholders are engaged throughout the process and their perspectives are reflected in respectful ways.

Conclusions

As a transdiscipline, evaluation's pathway is complex and fraught with challenges. Evaluation's inherent political nature means that the assumptions for research need to

be critically examined in order to understand their applicability to the evaluation context. The plurality of philosophical paradigms offers opportunity for exploration of ways to understand the assumptions that guide evaluators and the consequences of accepting one set of assumptions over another.

Increased attention to mixed methods has led to increased discussion of how adherents of each paradigm could incorporate mixed methods into their practice (Mertens & Hesse Biber 2013). Claims about program effectiveness can be bolstered by having multiple forms of evidence. However, a definitive claim of causality in the social world is not possible because there is always a margin of error and competing explanations. There are also concerns about who used their power to decide what the intervention should be, who should be included in the program, how they will be recruited and supported, who will implement the program, what kind of changes are made throughout the course of the program, and what kinds of data were collected by what methods. A final important element is who interprets the data and who has the power to use the data to make changes. These elements that are the heart of evaluation raise issues of power, representation, and interpretation and thus inherently lead to questions about ethics in evaluation. Continued exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of evaluation can be fruitfully conducted by integrating consideration of axiological, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Hopefully, these discussions will advance understandings of how evaluators can work with diverse stakeholders in a variety of contexts, build productive and positive linkages with policy makers, and develop and refine new strategies for planning, implementing, and using evaluation.

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