

Social transformation and evaluation

Evaluators work in contexts in which social inequities create tensions with regard to decisions about programs and their evaluation. In this article, Donna Mertens explores the meaning of ethics for evaluators who consciously position themselves as promoters of human rights and social justice. The transformative paradigm is offered as a framework for considering the assumptions that guide evaluators who take such a position in terms of methodological implications. This brings evaluators into the complex territory of cultural beliefs and norms that might support or inhibit transformative social change.

Introduction

If the world was perfect, one might argue that there would be no need for interventions to improve conditions of life and, consequently, no need for evaluators to evaluate those interventions. However, evidence in the form of inequities in the form of access to safe environments, employment opportunities, land ownership and housing, as well as educational and health services, are visible in our work settings, the media, and the world around us. The bases of these inequities are sometimes visible in the form of societal responses to groups of people whose characteristics historically have been used as a basis for discrimination, such as gender, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion, language, economic status, refugee or immigrant status, disability and deafness. Given that evaluators often find themselves working in conditions that involve the aforementioned inequities that are designed to serve groups of less privilege, it behoves us as a community to give specific attention to the challenges that are inherent in this type of work and figure out strategies that enhance the likelihood that our evaluations will contribute to social transformation.

The purpose of this article is to describe one framework for thinking about how evaluators can situate their work on ethical principles that directly address issues of social justice. The transformative paradigm is such a framework that builds on Guba and Lincoln's (2005) contribution to the scholarly community's understandings of the meaning of a paradigm in the evaluation context. Guba and Lincoln describe four major philosophical belief categories that constitute a paradigm:

- 1 The axiological assumption asks about the nature of ethics.
- 2 The ontological assumption asks about the nature of reality.
- 3 The epistemological assumption asks about the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and that which would be known.
- 4 The methodological assumption asks about the nature of systematic inquiry.

The transformative paradigm (Mertens 2009, 2010) is made up of these four philosophical assumptions with priority placed on the pursuit of social justice and the furtherance of human rights. The transformative paradigm offers a metaphysical umbrella that brings together commensurate philosophical strands. It:

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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. Finally,

indigenous peoples and scholars from marginalised communities have much to teach us about respect for culture and the generation of knowledge for social change (Mertens 2009, p. 4).

The philosophical assumptions associated with the transformative paradigm provide a framework for exploring the use of a social justice lens in evaluation (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: TRANSFORMATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS

Axiological assumption

Identification and respect for cultural norms that support human rights and social justice
 Identification and challenge of cultural norms that sustain an oppressive system
 Reciprocity—what evaluators give back to the community
 Resilience—recognition and validation of the knowledge, expertise and strengths in the community
 Sustainability—facilitating conditions such that actions to continue to enhance social justice and human rights are feasible once the evaluator leaves the community
 Recognition of limitations—not overstepping the evaluator's boundaries or over-promising

Ontological assumption

Recognises that different versions of reality exist
 Considers that all versions of reality are not equal
 Recognises privilege given to what is perceived to be real based on: social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, religion and disability positionality
 Interrogates versions of reality that sustain oppressive systems
 Makes visible versions of reality that have the potential to further human rights

Epistemological assumption

Establishment of an interactive link between the evaluator and stakeholders
 Acknowledges that knowledge is socially and historically located
 Explicit acknowledgement of power inequities
 Development of a trusting relationship

Methodological assumption

Evaluators need qualitative/dialogic moments in the beginning of their planning in order to ascertain the cultural context in which they are working
 Qualitative and quantitative data facilitate responsiveness to different stakeholders and issues
 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.

An examination of the status of human rights protections and violations is needed to address the goal of promoting social justice and furthering human rights explicitly. The transformative paradigm is based on recognition of human rights as they are articulated by the United Nations and as it is understood in the targeted communities. The United Nations passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations 1948). It would seem that a universal declaration of human rights would protect the rights of people from all walks of life. However, the UN has since acknowledged that specific groups of people have not had their rights protected and enforced. Consequently, it undertook to recognise those constituencies by passing resolutions that recognise the rights of women (United Nations 1979), racial minorities (United Nations 1969), children (United Nations 1990a), migrant workers (United Nations 1990b), people with disabilities (United Nations 2006a), and indigenous peoples (United Nations 2006b). This gives us a partial listing of subgroups whose rights need to be consciously addressed in our evaluations. Depending on the context, other groups might also need to be recognised along with the diversity within these groups. Dimensions of diversity are contextually dependent; different dimensions will be of relevance in different evaluations.

Transformative axiological assumption

The axiological belief is the first listed of transformative assumptions because it has a critical influence on the character of the subsequent assumptions. Evaluators might ask themselves such questions as:

- What are the ethical principles that guide my work?
- What is the connection between those ethical principles and issues of social justice?
- How do the ethical principles reflect issues of culture and power differences?
- How can this evaluation contribute to social justice and human rights?
- If I accept that this is a desirable goal for the evaluation, what would I do differently in terms of methodology?

To conduct an ethical transformative evaluation, evaluators need to be able to identify the cultural norms and beliefs that are present in the communities in which we work. If we are to act respectfully, then we need to include mechanisms for entering communities that permit the identification of these cultural norms and beliefs and to understand the implications of those norms, either to support the pursuit of human rights or those that are used to sustain an oppressive system. Such an ethical assumption calls upon us to be proactive in the identification of cultural beliefs and norms and

to be interactive with community members to solicit their understandings of how those norms and beliefs impact upon their lives. In order to be inclusive of a variety of beliefs and norms, evaluators need also to be aware of relevant cultural groups in the context of the inquiry and the cultural norms associated with those groups.

As evaluators, it is easy to focus only on the problems in a community. However, such a focus ignores the strengths and resilience within such communities. Rather than painting a picture of a downtrodden, victimised group, evaluators should be aware of the strengths in the communities and make sure that those are made visible along with the challenges that the community members experience. In addition, evaluators should be cognisant of the history of researchers and evaluators taking information from communities without giving anything in return. There is also a need to consider how the findings of the evaluation can be used to sustain change in the community when the evaluators leave—or how to give proactive attention to issues of sustainability. At the same time, evaluators have an ethical obligation to communicate the limitations of their work clearly, in terms of being realistic about the potential for change.

The transformative methodological assumption is discussed later in this article. However, each of the transformative assumptions has implications for methodological decisions and criteria for determining if these assumptions have been realised. For example, the transformative axiological assumption suggests that evaluators ask questions such as the following to examine critically the consistency of their ethical beliefs and their methods choices:

- To what extent is the evaluator able to identify cultural norms within communities that are supportive of, or deleterious to, the pursuit of social justice and human rights?
- How does the evaluator demonstrate that they have taken action to support those norms that support human rights and social justice while challenging those that sustain an oppressive system?
- How does the evaluator demonstrate that they are leaving the community better off than when they began the evaluation—in terms of increased knowledge, capacity or changes in policies or practices?
- In what ways was the evaluation framed to take into account the expertise, knowledge and strengths of the community in order to provide a platform for authentic engagement between the evaluator and the community?
- How does the evaluation address the sustainability of the changes in the community that provide for the possibility of taking action to enhance social justice and human rights after the evaluator leaves the community?

Transformative ontological assumption

The logical connection between the axiological and ontological assumptions is clear. If some cultural norms and beliefs support the enhancement of social justice and human rights and some do not, then the evaluator needs to design the evaluation so that it can reveal those versions of reality and to understand the dimensions of diversity that influence which versions of reality are given privilege. The evaluator also needs to build in mechanisms to reveal versions of reality that sustain oppressive systems and those that have the potential to further human rights. These beliefs and their implications for methodological decisions lead to criteria by which to assess the quality of evaluations that include:

- To what extent did the evaluator reveal different versions of reality?
- How did the evaluator determine those versions of reality that have the potential either to support or impede progress towards social justice and human rights?
- What were the consequences of identifying these versions of reality?
- How did this evaluation contribute to the change in understandings of what is real?

Transformative epistemological assumption

The transformative epistemological assumption explores the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and that which would be known, or in evaluation parlance, between the evaluator and the stakeholders. In order for the evaluator to design and implement an evaluation that is commensurate with the assumptions that have been explained previously, they need to establish an interactive link between themselves and the full range of stakeholders. Taking the word of the most powerful about the viewpoints of the least powerful can result in evaluations that do not address the most important concerns of the least powerful. Thus, criteria for quality in methods related to the transformative epistemological assumption include:

- What is the nature of the relationship between the evaluator and the stakeholders?
- What evidence is there that the evaluator addressed issues of power differentials explicitly and that the voices of the least powerful are accurately expressed and acted upon?
- How did the evaluator establish a trusting relationship with the stakeholders?

Evaluators need to understand appropriate strategies for entering cultural groups in order to establish relationships that have the potential to contribute to social transformation. For example, in

Maori communities, there is a specific protocol that should be followed. Cram (2001, 2009) combined her work with that of Smith (1999, 2006) to provide a clear picture of this protocol (See Table 1).

When evaluators attempt to enter cultural groups that are not reflective of their own backgrounds, they need to investigate and make use of appropriate strategies for entry by reading and consulting with members of the community. For example, when I entered the Deaf community as a hearing professor at Gallaudet University, I had to learn American Sign Language and Deaf culture. After 30 years in that environment, I am comfortable communicating in, and interacting with, members of the Deaf community that use American Sign Language. However, I still describe myself as a learner because American Sign Language is not my native language and the Deaf community is not my home culture. I also know that the American Sign Language Deaf group represents only one portion of the deaf population. In order to interact respectfully with other people who are deaf, I need to consult with members of these other deaf subgroups. For example, if deaf people lip-read and use assistive listening devices, it is very important to face the person and to speak distinctively to provide appropriate information needed for communication.

Evaluators who are not working in their native language or in their home culture may not have 30 years to establish their credibility in communities. Therefore, other strategies might be needed when circumstances present themselves in shorter time frames. Importantly, evaluators need to present themselves and their backgrounds in ways that make clear their strengths and limitations in terms of their knowledge and life experiences. This positioning allows the evaluator to acknowledge the need to work together with people from the community who have a stronger understanding of cultural and social issues.

Other strategies that are useful in this context include establishing evaluation teams that are reflective of members of the community and forming relationships with important community gatekeepers who can stand beside the evaluator and vouch for their credibility. For example, Mertens et al. (2007) formed a team to evaluate a federally-funded teacher preparation program. The program was designed to recruit and support teachers who were deaf or hard of hearing in order to increase the number of teachers who reflect the same characteristics as deaf students. Hearing applicants were also accepted into the program. The program was focused on the preparation of teachers to teach deaf students who have an additional disability.¹ We developed the team with one hearing evaluator, two culturally deaf native users of American Sign Language, and one deaf evaluator who uses a cochlear implant and knows American Sign Language but is not a native user. Thus, we were able to represent the variety of cultural groups who were taking part in the program. This allowed us to match the

TABLE 1: PROTOCOL FOR CONDUCTING EVALUATIONS IN MAORI COMMUNITIES

Cultural values (Smith 1999)	Researcher guidelines (Cram 2001)
Aroha ki te tangata	A respect for people—allow people to define their own space and meet on their own terms
He kano ki te tangata	It is important to meet people face-to-face and also to be a face that is known and seen within a community
Titiro, whakarongo ... kōrero	Looking and listening (and then maybe speaking)—develop understanding to find a place from which to speak
Manaaki ki te tangata	Sharing, hosting, being generous
Kia tupato	Be cautious. Be politically astute, culturally safe and reflective about insider/outsider status
Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata	Do not trample on the 'mana' or dignity of a person
Kia mahaki	Be humble. Do not flaunt your knowledge; find ways of sharing it.

Source: adapted from Smith (2006, p. 12, Diagram 1), as cited in Cram 2009, p. 314 as Table 20.2

communication preferences of the participants during the collection of data. Deaf American Sign Language users were interviewed by the two Deaf American Sign Language evaluators working together. The hearing participants were interviewed by the hearing evaluator and the evaluator who used a cochlear implant, working together.

In some communities it is possible to employ evaluators from the targeted communities and to have evaluation teams that reflect those communities. For example: Nan Wehipeihana and Kataraina Pipi (2010) are two Maori evaluators who conducted a study of barriers to take-up of the New Zealand Government's Working for Families Tax Credits scheme among the Maori community; Helen Moewaka Barnes, Tim McCreanor, Shane Edwards and Belinda Borell (2009) are Maori community members who are part of the Whariki Research Group at Massey University in Auckland; the Whariki Research Group provides guidance to ethical review boards for researchers who are working in the Maori community; and Adreanne Ormond is a Maori researcher who conducts studies in the Maori community as part of the National Institute of Research Excellence for Maori Development and Advancement (*Nga Pae o te Maramatanga* in Maori) at the University of Auckland.

Transformative methodological assumption

The transformative methodological assumption does not mandate the use of any particular method. However, it does provide the rationale for choosing to use mixed methods in order to be consistent with the other transformative assumptions within the context of community responsiveness. Evaluators need qualitative/dialogic moments in the beginning of their planning in order to ascertain the cultural context in which they are working. And, the use of qualitative and quantitative data facilitates responsiveness to different stakeholders and issues. Mixed methods can also be used to capture the contextual complexity and provide pluralistic avenues for engaging appropriately with diverse cultural groups in the evaluation. To this end, criteria for assessing quality related to the transformative methodological assumptions include:

- How was a cyclical design used to make use of interim findings throughout the study?
- To what extent did evaluators engage with the full range of stakeholders to gather qualitative data that enhance their understandings of the community?
- To what extent were the methods used responsive to the specific needs of the different stakeholder groups?

- How were the methodologies designed to enhance use of the evaluation findings to support the pursuit of social justice and human rights?

In the Mertens et al. (2007) evaluation, the evaluation team began by reading documents from the previous seven years of the project, such as the original proposal that was funded, the project annual reports, and curriculum materials from the program. They treated these documents as qualitative data sources and identified themes that arose from them as a starting point for decisions about the next steps in data collection. The evaluators noted that the project planned a reflective seminar for the graduates, inviting everyone to the university campus for three days. They asked the Project Director if they could observe the first two days of the seminar and then interview the participants on the last day; he agreed to that strategy. All four evaluators observed each day and at the end of each day, they compared notes about what issues were arising. They identified issues related to successes and challenges in the classroom that were associated with the graduates' positions in the schools in which they worked and how they interacted with their students based on diverse characteristics. From these observations, the evaluators developed interview questions for the participants that focused on their experiences

as they entered their new schools upon graduation and the characteristics of their students that were relevant to their feelings of competence or frustration. The evaluation team analysed the data from the interviews, and found that the new teachers were frustrated by feelings of marginalisation in their schools. This they perceived to be associated with low expectations for their students, and a lack of awareness of the capability of students who are deaf and have a disability, on the part of the other teachers and administrators in their schools.

Only about one-third of the project graduates was able to attend the reflective seminar. The evaluators proposed using the data gathered from the participants to develop a Web-based quantitative survey that could be sent to all the program graduates as a way of determining how the larger group perceived their successes and challenges. The data from both the qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies were used to craft interview questions for both the university faculty and the teachers at the cooperating schools that had hosted project participants for student teaching experiences. For example, the evaluators took a comment from the qualitative data and combined this with participant responses to the quantitative survey and then asked the faculty and cooperating teachers to respond to the data (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTION FOR THE FACULTY AND COOPERATING TEACHERS

I am going to share some of the results of our data collection from the students who graduated from Project SUCCESS with you. I am interested in knowing your reactions to these results. For example, we asked the graduates about how well prepared they felt in various areas. Here is one result that reveals their feelings of how well prepared they were to work with faculty, staff, or administrators in their first teaching placements:

Quantitative data

How well prepared were you in your teaching job in the following areas?

Working with school faculty/staff/administrators

Not at all prepared	—————→			Very prepared	Average rating
1	2	3	4	5	
7%	20%	20%	27%	27%	3.5

Qualitative data

'When I graduated, I thought I was ready to teach. Then the principal gave me my list of students and my classroom and just washed his hands of me. You're on your own. The principal did not require me to submit weekly plans like other teachers because he thought I'd only be teaching sign language. But I told him, 'I'm here to really teach'. We (my students and I) were not invited to field day or assemblies. That first year really hit me—what a challenge and a WOW at the same time. So I changed schools and this one is definitely better. Now I'm in a school where people believe that deaf students can learn.' (Graduate, field notes, May 2007)

When presented with the data in Figure 2, one faculty member commented as follows:

'I would have liked to see a mentoring type relationship that would pair them with a teacher the first year and develop a mentorship—even if it was for the first and second year of teaching. That would really help—especially for the first year of teaching. That would have been another piece that would have been really nice. The students need to be able to remain in contact with each other ... We should also teach them that it is their responsibility to mentor younger teachers.' (Faculty member, June 2007)

This particular faculty member subsequently started a virtual discussion group for the program graduates where they could share their frustrations and experiences with each other, the faculty at the university and more experienced teachers. This is one change that resulted from the evaluation of Project SUCCESS. In addition, the evaluators made a presentation at the professional association for university faculties that prepare teachers of the deaf across the United States and Canada. This presentation also included the data that were used in the faculty and cooperating teachers' interviews. During the presentation, faculty members from across the two countries began a discussion about the increase in the number of deaf students with disabilities and how they might address this population's needs as a professional community. They agreed to work through a virtual discussion board found at <http://www.deafed.net>—a website that was established specifically for this professional community about 10 years earlier and was available to host this type of activity.

This example illustrates how a cyclical approach can be used to be responsive to emerging understandings of the effectiveness of a program and how it can also stimulate transformational change. Even though the grant that stimulated the need for the evaluation was coming to an end, the evaluation was designed to contribute to transformational change that could address the ongoing needs of students who are deaf with disabilities. Each step of the evaluation informed subsequent methodological decisions. The data were used in ways to stimulate change on the part of the university faculties that prepare such teachers across the broader professional community. The evaluators consciously chose to share the results in multiple ways through multiple channels and to monitor the actions that were stimulated by the sharing of the results over time.

Conclusion

The transformative paradigm provides a framework of philosophical assumptions that evaluators can use to guide their methodological choices when issues of social justice and human rights are of central concern. In New Zealand and Australia, such issues

arise from a variety of sources, such as programs designed for Maori or Aboriginal peoples, homeless people, people with disabilities or those who are deaf, refugees or immigrants. The historical contexts in each of the countries are different with regard to their indigenous populations and other marginalised groups. For example, Maori make up a much higher percentage of New Zealand's population than do Aboriginal people in Australia. Maoris use a single language, whereas Australian Aboriginal people have used more than 700 different languages, some of which are no longer spoken. Maori people had a treaty with their colonisers, even though the treaty was interpreted quite differently by each group. Through political action, Maori people have been able to reclaim their rights. Aboriginal people do not have a treaty and they have not yet been able to organise into an effective political force. All of these historical factors need to be taken into consideration when an evaluation is planned. They have implications for evaluators in the sense that they raise issues of power, privilege and access in the general society, but also in terms of participation in the evaluation activities.

Based on the transformative ethical assumption, evaluators have a responsibility to identify those dimensions of diversity that are relevant in the specific context of their study. This means they need to have sufficient familiarity with the communities to determine which dimensions of diversity are relevant and which are associated with more or less power. They also have an obligation to ensure that mechanisms are in place to bring the voices of the less powerful into the evaluation process in respectful and authentic ways. In the end, the goal is for the evaluator to raise the difficult questions and provide a venue for listening to the answers to those difficult questions in the pursuit of social justice. Evaluators have a role to play in bringing their data into communities in ways that facilitate its use for social transformation.

Note

- 1 Members of the Deaf community view themselves as a cultural group who have their own languages, values and shared behavior patterns. They do not view themselves as having a disability. Therefore, if a person who is Deaf has a disability such as blindness or cerebral palsy, they describe themselves as Deaf with a disability.

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