

# Preface

As program evaluators, we often operate in the liminal space between research and evaluation; the institutions in (or for) which we work often require both research and evaluation skills from their practitioners. We also self-identify as feminists and have been influenced by feminist theory, women's movements, feminist political action, and the feminists we have known. These identities and experiences have motivated us to practice and contribute to the development of feminist evaluation.

The path leading us to take on the project of promoting and further developing feminist evaluation began in the early 1990s. At that time, the Feminist Issues Topical Interest Group of the American Evaluation Association had just begun promoting the integration of feminist theory and research methods into the practice of evaluation. Early on, progressive evaluators like Donna Mertens, Joanne Farley, and Elizabeth Whitmore were instrumental in advancing the work of practitioners with feminist inclinations and calling attention to the strong need for evaluations that were attentive and responsive to gender and women's issues. We owe a huge debt to these visionary leaders for setting the direction that we now follow. This edited volume is the result of many conversations with these visionaries, among ourselves, and with a growing network of feminist evaluators and researchers who have been looking for ways to incorporate feminist approaches in their evaluation practice. It builds upon our earlier publication "Feminist Evaluation: Explorations and Experiences," a special issue of the journal *New Directions for Evaluation* (Seigart & Brisolara, 2002), which was the first substantive collection of feminist articles to be accepted for publication within the evaluation arena (not that others hadn't tried for several years).

We have strived to present some of the extraordinary work that is being done all over the world by feminist evaluators and researchers, including those in countries and communities that do not respond well to

the “f” word (“feminist”). We are indebted to each of the authors whose work appears within this text, and we consider ourselves privileged to present this volume to you, the reader. The following is a brief outline of what each of the chapters holds in store for you. Please be mindful that most chapters include an introduction of concepts along with detailed case examples, but all chapters, whether theoretical or more practical, add rich fodder to the evaluation field for discussion and learning.

## Part I

In Part I of this volume, we offer chapters that focus on the theory of feminist evaluation and research, some of the early influences of feminist theory on the evaluation field, the differences between evaluation and research, and the role(s) of the feminist evaluator. In Chapter 1, Sharon Brisolara focuses on the development and application of feminist theory within the evaluation field. She identifies common themes and underlying regularities within many feminist theories that researchers and evaluators can and have applied to their work in order to investigate women’s and men’s experiences more deeply and from a sometimes unexpected vantage point. Discussion includes a description of the distinct contributions that feminist approaches make to the practices and fields of research and evaluation.

In Chapter 2, Sandra Mathison presents a clear differentiation of research and evaluation. There are key differences between research and evaluation, and understanding these differences is important to situating our understanding of how best to design a feminist approach to our work. This chapter sets the framework for subsequent discussions by defining evaluation and research, describing the similarities and elements common to both, and indicating areas of difference, especially those salient to future and current practitioners interested in integrating feminist principles into their work. The chapter begins by providing basic definitions of research and evaluation elements for the reader’s benefit and ends with a brief discussion of the range of evaluator and researcher roles, with their possible overlapping concerns.

In Chapter 3, Elizabeth Whitmore explores in detail the frequently raised challenge to feminist approaches to evaluation and research, as well as to other “nontraditional” approaches, a concern over the role of the practitioner. Within these fields, consideration about the practitioner’s relationship with research “subjects,” involvement in taking action on findings, intention in integrating theory into design, and self-revelation are salient and often central. What roles are appropriate and possible vary by research and evaluation model. Models that work from the intention of

contributing to greater social justice share beliefs about professional roles and responsibilities. As social-justice-focused models, feminist research and evaluation draw from and contribute to this textured conversation. Whitmore extends the discussion on researcher roles begun by Mathison and presents current issues in the debate on what constitutes appropriate professional roles for evaluators and researchers. She discusses the ways in which an interest in social justice has led to the development of models and approaches focused on the promotion of social justice within the fields of research and especially of evaluation. Key social-justice-related models are described in conjunction with the implications of the philosophical underpinnings of these models for project selection, design, method, and researcher/evaluator roles. The discussion raises questions for the reader considering or reconsidering his or her beliefs and values with respect to the role they play as researcher or evaluator. The chapter ends with guidelines for determining, articulating, and monitoring one's role within the context of such structured inquiry.

Chapter 4, by Donna M. Mertens, focuses on the transformative promise of evaluation, particularly for women and other oppressed groups. Addressing the philosophical and theoretical stances that provide frameworks for relevant dimensions of diversity within projects that address the needs of women, the transformative paradigm provides a philosophical umbrella for evaluators who are concerned with issues of discrimination and oppression based on a multitude of dimensions of diversity, including gender, race/ethnicity, disability, deafness, socioeconomic status, refugee or immigrant status, and indigenous status and tribal affiliation. A variety of theoretical frames that provide guidance in working in culturally diverse contexts are discussed in order to derive direction for evaluation methods. Implications for ethical methodological decisions are drawn from the philosophical and theoretical stances.

In the last chapter in this section (Chapter 5), Donna Podems reflects on development programs that aim to change the lives of women, the disempowered, and the "poorest of the poor." Within the international development setting it is generally accepted that if an organization, or government, accepts program funds from a donor, a responsibility to conduct a program evaluation is likely to be attached. While every evaluation approach pursues this knowledge laden with its own, often implicit and often Western, values, few come under as heavy criticism as feminist evaluation when discussed in the international development context. This chapter discusses feminist evaluation and its often more politically, socially, and culturally accepted and incorrectly assumed doppelgänger—gender approaches—and suggests that with an in-depth understanding of the history, challenges, and benefits of each, these approaches can bring particular value to various international development evaluations.

## Part II

In Part II, the reader will find deeply reflective chapters on the application of feminist theory and methods in a variety of contexts. Authored by evaluators and researchers who have worked and are currently working from a feminist standpoint, these chapters present the challenges, opportunities, and results of applying feminist theory and methods in their work.

In Chapter 6, Kathryn Sielbeck-Mathes and Rebecca Selove address the challenges of involving program staff in a feminist evaluation, particularly with regard to utilization of the results. They examine the problem of substance abuse treatment among traumatized women with co-occurring mental health issues from a feminist perspective. This includes a description of the program, the evaluation design, and outcomes, and a brief overview of frame theory. Strategies to help the feminist evaluator frame the evaluation processes and findings in a language that creates resonance rather than resistance are discussed. Sielbeck-Mathes and Selove remind feminist evaluators to stay closely attuned to their core values and to intentionally strive to understand the core values of those in respective evaluation environments. This awareness, they argue, helps evaluators stay firmly rooted in feminist principles while understanding and considering program stakeholders' values, thus fostering better communication of findings, observations, and recommendations. Frames that foster good communication contribute to better connections and motivate action that can bring about social change to improve the lives of vulnerable women.

In Chapter 7, Tristi Nichols discusses the benefits of utilizing ecological inquiry and feminist approaches in the context of international development. Noting that the crux of feminism is gender equality, Nichols points out that commonly utilized approaches (economist lens, social lens), while useful in elucidating the critical components of progressing toward gender equality, nonetheless present challenges when attempting to apply such constructs in the international development context. Namely, measuring and validating constructs at the community level are challenging processes/endeavors that many stakeholders and field practitioners dare not even initiate. Nichols describes how to design, conduct, and interpret findings of evaluations of international development interventions, ensuring that gender inequality and ecological concerns are fully considered. Pertinent questions to ask throughout the process are examined, and examples of what framing the evaluation with stakeholder values looks like add illumination.

Katherine Hay also addresses the challenges of implementing feminist evaluation in Chapter 8, but in the context of evaluations conducted

in India. Noting that the practice of evaluating women's empowerment programs or the "gender" component in development has expanded in recent years, Hay examines (1) the contributions of feminist research (and analysis) to international development theory; (2) the value of feminist evaluation for evaluating development discourse, programs, and projects; and (3) ways to engage in, and use, feminist evaluation in international development. In discussing these issues, Hay makes the case that evaluations informed by feminist analysis lead to opportunities to engender or make equitable development discourse, policies, and programs in the international arena.

Silvia Salinas Mulder and Fabiola Amariles describe their work in Latin America in Chapter 9, reflecting on their practice and contemplating the improvement of evaluation through the utilization of feminist approaches. They share experiences and suggestions on how to make feminist evaluation principles operational in the context of Latin American countries and include examples of and tips about what may or may not work in complex multicultural environments. The chapter, as they describe it, is "reality-based" and "solution-oriented," creatively contributing with effective, new, and inspiring ideas.

### Part III

The third part of this volume provides the reader with some very practical examples of feminist research less easily categorized as evaluation. Authored by evaluators and researchers who have worked and are currently working from a feminist standpoint, these chapters present the challenges, opportunities, and results of applying feminist theory and methods in their work.

In Chapter 10, Denise Seigart explores the challenges of incorporating feminist research approaches into the examination of school health programs in the United States, Australia, and Canada. While conducting case studies of school-based health care in these countries, it became apparent to her that inequities in the provision of health care exist and are often related to gender inequities. Racism, sexism, and classism due to religious, economic, and cultural influences were all noted, and these all play a part in the quality and accessibility of health care in these countries. Examples of gender inequities in access to health care are presented, as well as reflections on the challenges of implementing a research project from a feminist perspective. Seigart also highlights the potential for fostering community learning through a feminist research approach, in the context of promoting school-based health care.

In Chapter 11, Alessandra Galiè discusses her work in Syria (prior to the current civil war); her study reflects the findings of an assessment of the empowerment of women farmers from three Syrian villages involved in a Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) program coordinated at the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. The assessment adopted four indicators of empowerment (recognition of women farmers, distribution of resources, access to opportunities, and decision making) that were monitored over a period of 4 years (2007–2010). The findings show that PPB has the potential to enhance women’s recognition as farmers, facilitate their access to relevant varieties of crop and information, increase their access to opportunities, and support their decision making. Galiè also discusses the difficulties and pitfalls of some of the strategies adopted by the program, and suggests possible adjustments. Finally, the chapter discusses the advantages and shortcomings of the application of the chosen methodology and techniques in the sociopolitical culture and technical context of the research and in the framework of feminist evaluation.

Elaine Dietsch (an Australian midwife) continues the discussion in Chapter 12 as she describes how one research project reflects feminist research values and guidelines. A synopsis of “The Experience of Being a Traditional Midwife” study is provided prior to discussion on how it was informed, influenced, and underpinned by feminist research ideology. The feminist values guiding the conceptualization, design, implementation, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings from the study are made explicit. The contributions that feminist research values and guidelines made to the study are also explored. The study is undeniably feminist in spirit, intent, and practical outworking, but was not labeled as such in its proposal, implementation, or dissemination; the reasons for these choices are thoughtfully considered. Lessons learned from working within a feminist research framework are shared with the reader.

## Final Reflection

In conclusion, Jennifer C. Greene wraps up this text with her own analysis of all the chapters, as well as her own thoughtful contributions to the field of evaluation. Her thorough and insightful reflections illuminate points made by each author, and add depth and breadth to the ongoing discussion that infuses feminist evaluation and the evaluation field. This book is a foray into the questions we all hold regarding the role of evaluation and research in our societies, the methods we use, the role of the evaluator and/or researcher, the values so many of us hold dear, and the effect we

have on programs, policies, and people. We hope that our contribution to the discussions will engage you, and spur you to continue the search for ever better ways to improve our world.

## REFERENCE

Seigart, D., & Brisolaro, S. (Eds.). (2002). Feminist evaluation: Explorations and experiences. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2002(96), 1-14.

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