Inclusiveness and Social Justice in Evaluation: Can the Transformative Agenda Really Alter the Status Quo?

A Conversation with Donna M. Mertens

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Background: Evaluation is sometimes viewed as a professional practice rather than a discipline corresponding to a well defined set of theories. However, Shadish, Cook and Leviton (1991) were able to demonstrate that evaluators' work does have theoretical foundations. In particular, the authors identified five main elements for evaluation theory and described the contribution made to each of them by seven of the most influential scholars in the field over the last five decades.

Purpose: This paper intends to further the discussion on evaluation theory, by examining some of the contributions made by Donna Mertens. The main focus of the paper is on her innovative ideas on each of the five main elements of evaluation theory.

Setting: Not applicable.

Subjects: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: The paper is the result of both a desk review of her work on transformative evaluation, inclusiveness, and social justice, and a phone interview with her. For the sake of accuracy, the text of the interview and the corresponding analysis were submitted to Mertens for review prior to publication.

Findings: The author demonstrates how Mertens has incorporated the five principles into her own work and practice. According to Mertens, evaluators need first to be cognizant of the plurality of values held by the communities where they work and second to let those very same values guide the design, implementation, and use of evaluation. Based on her belief that knowledge is not neutral but is influenced by human interests, Mertens calls upon evaluators to play a more active role in the construction of new and "socially compensatory" knowledge. In doing so, Mertens particularly stresses how evaluation practice could address and challenge the social, cultural and economic inequities perpetuated by the status quo.

Conclusions: Pursuing inclusiveness and social justice in evaluation is possible. Transformative evaluation is capable of altering the status quo. Transformative evaluation is instrumental in bringing about not only social change but also social transformation. This article also shows that the debate on evaluation's main theoretical foundations is still relevant. Such theoretical categories are especially beneficial in that provide common ground for understanding.

Keywords: transformative evaluation, social justice, cultural competence, inclusiveness, valuing, social programming, knowledge, practice, use
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Due to my work in international development over the last eight years, my evaluation practice has been heavily influenced by the values and paradigms promoted by development economists, political scientists, and anthropologists whose main specialty is not evaluation per se, including powerful concepts such as Amartya Sen's "development as freedom," which I became acquainted with during my graduate years at Georgetown, still resonates with me today. Far from providing me directly with the perfect tool or methodology to successfully evaluate a program, the values and theories which I have learned over the years have rather inspired my work in two different ways. First, they have encouraged me tremendously to become more inclusive in my evaluation practice. Second, they have urged me to highlight instances of inequality and injustice in the communities where I have conducted evaluations.

Luckily, the number of evaluators who are contributing to the current discourse on social justice, equity, and diversity in evaluation is growing quite rapidly. As a result, young international development evaluators like me soon will be able to find inspiration (e.g., an altruistic cause to espouse as part of their practice) within the evaluation field rather than somewhere else. One evaluation approach in particular seems quite promising in this regard—transformative evaluation—which emerged in the late 1980's, and espouses the use of mixed methods with the promotion of social justice and inclusiveness in public program evaluations.

This paper will provide the reader with a better understanding of some of the main theories associated with the transformative evaluation approach. In doing so, it will mostly draw upon a recent interview, which I had with Donna Mertens, the most prominent representative of the transformative evaluation movement.

In order to prepare this interview, I first conducted a thorough review of Mertens' relevant work on social change, equity, and diversity in evaluation, by also trying to summarize and classify some of her key ideas under five main categories (Theory of Valuing, Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Social Programming, Theory of Use, and Theory of Practice). In this effort, I drew upon the original work by Shadish, Cook and Leviton (1991) who referred to those same five categories to describe the contribution of seven well-known evaluators to the development of evaluation theory over the last five decades. Then, based on my readings, I formulated a few questions related to each of the five identified theories and had a chance to discuss them directly with Mertens during a 1-hour phone interview held the morning of December 11, 2009.

This paper provides the integral text of the interview. Questions and answers are presented in five different sections depending on the specific aspect of evaluation theory which they refer to. In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the answers provided, each of the five sections will start with a synopsis of Mertens' work on values, knowledge, social programming, use, and practice.

Theory of Valuing

According to Mertens, evaluations need to be imbued with the values of the communities where they are conducted.

Theories, models, and practices—Mertens says—should be embedded in indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews (Mertens, 2008). However, in order for that to happen, evaluators need first to be cognizant of the plurality of values held by the communities where they work, and second to let those very same values guide the design, implementation, and use of their evaluations. However, and this is one of the most peculiar traits of Mertens' (2009) transformative perspective, evaluators will need to specifically take into account the values of those whose voice in society is often dismissed or ignored (e.g., the homeless, women, minorities based on race or ethnicity, deaf or hard-of-hearing children, individuals in abject poverty).

Mertens' theory of valuing is quite straightforward and it has become particularly popular among evaluators over the last decade. However, the clarity of Mertens' thinking is not the only reason for its success. Two other factors seem to explain the large number of practitioners currently inspired by Mertens' transformative framework.

On the one hand, Mertens has been able to develop concepts and methods traditionally associated with two of the most "progressive" evaluation theories from the past: the right-based theory (i.e., every person must be treated with dignity and respect and avoidance of harm must be the primary principle) and the social justice theory (House, 1993) (i.e., social inequalities need to be redressed by giving precedence, or at least equal weight, to the voice of the least advantaged groups in society).

On the other, she has created a comprehensive theoretical framework which, by addressing gaps in both the knowledge and practice of evaluators operating in multicultural contexts, is able to reconcile the differences in views among the myriad of evaluation theories traditionally advocating for social change within a specific community (e.g., critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, disability theory).

TARSILLA: Donna, let's imagine you just met an evaluator who is not familiar with the transformative paradigm. You discuss this with him/her and get the impression that he/she would be a really good transformative evaluator. However, given his/her reluctance, you try to share some information about the transformative approach, by also pointing out the greatest advantage and challenge associated with it. What would you tell him/her exactly?

MERTENS: Of course, there are people who do not see the value of the transformative evaluation approach and I do not feel the need to convert them. I need to admit, though, that quite often those same people who seem skeptical about the transformative approach end up developing a special appreciation for the merits associated with it quite rapidly. The more questions I ask such people the more they reflect upon their own assumptions and the more they understand what the most appropriate data collection or interpretation of certain data from a transformative perspective should be. When you talk about social justice, I do not believe that there is much convincing that needs to be done. I never witnessed any suspicion or animosity to my ideas. Through what I call a "wiggle-in theory," I have been able to work with evaluators so as to free them from preconceived notions of reality. For instance, I would first ask whether the project is about improving education for deaf people. If the answer is yes but I see

that no deaf person is sitting at the table with us, then my next questions would be: Where are the deaf people? Believe it or not, that question in and of itself makes people stop and realize that maybe they should invite deaf to the discussion. In other words, deaf are no longer seen simply as recipients of programs, but as active agents in the evaluation process.

With respect to the bigger challenge in implementing the transformative approach, I would say that this perspective is more explicitly political. Acknowledging that there are many forms of injustices and oppression in our society is uncomfortable for most people and it is often seen as an inappropriate topic (i.e., some believe that the evaluators' role should consist in simply highlighting program effectiveness rather than uncovering social injustice).

TARSILLA: Donna, some argue that evaluators could be trained in cultural competence. However, being in tune with a given community and possessing a good understanding of the plurality of values held by its members is not an easy task for evaluators who do not live in that community or who belong to a different culture than the one of the community which are expected to be evaluated (i.e., as is often the case of evaluators of international development projects). Based on that, to what extent are international development evaluators limited in implementing a truly transformative paradigm?

MERTENS: Well, this is definitely a huge challenge. In an ideal world, it would be nice to be culturally competent everywhere you go. Unfortunately, evaluators often fail to understand the complexity of the communities in which they work. Some of the time, evaluators simply turn down assignments because they do not feel they are competent in the specific culture of the community where the envisaged evaluation will take place. This raises the question: Under what conditions should we decline to conduct an evaluation? The conditions need to be addressed and consideration given to either deciding not to do the evaluation, or building a partnership with members of the community in a respectful way. My position is that we can be advocates for change in communities if we keep asking ourselves some of the following questions: How are we entering the community? How do we interact with our local partner? Are we being respectful? Am I listening to stakeholders' ideas? Am I providing a different perspective to some of the identified issues? Where are the breaking points? Who has power in the community? Who doesn't have power? What is culturally offensive? There is no clear-cut solution to the need for cultural competence in evaluation. However, I strongly believe that a team approach is a good way to go. For example, you could have a team of three evaluators conducting a program evaluation (one international transformative evaluator and two local evaluators).

Theory of Knowledge

According to Mertens, knowledge is not neutral but is influenced by human interests (Mertens, 2003). Similarly, all knowledge reflects the power and social relationships within society. Even academic discourse—Mertens says—is powerful: it is not simply academic writing but also knowledge of traditional rules for creating and disseminating knowledge. As a result, Mertens does not accept cultural relativism as if it means

that different versions of reality are given equal credence. Social constructions can be the expression of dominant social groups rather than a fair representation of all the social, economic and cultural differences existing within communities.

As such, current knowledge of the world is incomplete and something must be done to address the existing "epistemological deficit." Mertens calls upon evaluators to question most of their epistemological certainties and urges them to critically examine their preconceived assumptions (e.g., what variables need to be considered, how and from whom the data will need to be collected) so as to contribute to the construction of new and "socially compensatory" knowledge. Such knowledge, in and of itself, is already a critical step towards the improvement of society (Tarsilla, 2009).

In order to do so, she suggests the focus of the evaluation be determined in collaboration with community members participating in the program which is expected to be evaluated. Similarly, Mertens recommends that program participants get involved throughout the evaluation (i.e., cyclical model of research and evaluation; Mertens 2007b, 2009), including during the validation phase of the evaluation findings (i.e., social justice validity; Mertens, 2009).

While this is an interesting idea, which is likely to influence evaluators' practice in the future, reality shows that practitioners are often more worried with methodological than epistemological issues. Mertens is well aware of this phemonenon and cites an example from a HIV/AIDS project in Botswana, where the inadequate cultural competence of the team in charge of that program evaluation failed to give voice to the most vulnerable affected by the disease (Chilisa, 2005),

thus perpetuating a trite and uncritical epistemological paradigm, and what's worse, compromising the chance to save people's lives (Mertens, 2008).

She believes that evaluators need to be cognizant of the cultural diversity within the community which they work with and adds that this could be done only by building a trusting relationship with program participants. The main reason for this is that knowledge is socially and historically situated (Mertens, 2008). The concept of diversity, for instance, is socially constructed and its meaning is derived from the society's response to individuals who deviate from cultural standards. The term "social program for at-risk youth" provides a clear example of that: the term was coined to simultaneously describe the problem and the youth, thus stigmatizing them further. Mertens drew upon Madison's (2000) work to advocate for a reframing of the problem so that the program's objective would rather read as follows: "provide social program for youth who may be at risk of not making the transition from childhood to adulthood equipped to meet the adult responsibilities required for personal growth and development, work, family life, and full participation in society."

According to Mertens, cultural competence is continued transformation and it is only through self-reflection and interaction with members of the community that evaluators become more aware of the prevailing local power and privilege structures. As a result, ethical protocols should insist that evaluations be carried out in the local language, especially where the less powerful stakeholders are not familiar with English (Mertens, 2008).

In reiterating the relevance of cultural diversity in evaluation, Mertens also

advocates for increasing the contribution of evaluators from diverse origins to the evolving concept of evaluation (e.g., through the strengthening of regional or national evaluation societies).

TARSILLA: Donna, becoming familiar with people of different cultures and ethnicity is often a great way to become more cognizant of the distinctive traits of one's own vision and understanding of the world. Traveling is a great way to do that. However, for those evaluators who do not get to travel as much and who have not been exposed to many people who are "different" from them, it might be a bit harder to become culturally competent and gain an deeper understanding of how their knowledge is the expression of privileges and power imbalances. What could be done about this? Should such evaluators desist from adopting the transformative paradigm or could they do something to become more inclusive and effectively incorporate a transformative paradigm in their practices?

MERTENS: Cultural competence is such a sticky term, isn't it? Understanding the meaning of the word is not easy. My answer to your question, for instance, could very well vary depending on the specific connotation which you give to the term. Going back to the issue of what could be done to enhance one's own cultural competence, I am of the opinion that we cannot learn how to become competent about a culture which is not our own.

We can learn about cultures which we do not belong to and (this is an ongoing process) we could also learn about the influence which power has on evaluation practice. However, we need to stay vigilant and be aware of the great complexity associated with the context where we are asked to work. We need to ask ourselves whether we are actually culturally competent about the culture of a country where we are asked to do evaluations. For instance, the fact that I have had the chance to work in Brazil on several occasions does not make me culturally competent in Brazilian culture. What I normally do is to accept where the boundaries of my understanding are and rely on local partners. It is through them and through the stories shared about that particular culture by either colleagues or specialists in evaluation of that given country that I get to identify some of the most relevant cultural issues at stake in that particular context where I am planning to conduct a transformative evaluation.

Theory of Social Programming

The main objective of transformative evaluators' work is to bring about not only social change but also social transformation (i.e., a more radical and structural modification of attitudes, behaviors, and mentality in society) so as to counteract inequalities existing in today's world. As a result, Mertens asserts that evaluators should aim for the furtherance of human rights and with a specific focus (but not limited to) on gender, identity, race, and socioeconomic status. Mertens adds that evaluators' primary task should be to contribute to the solution of "intransigent social problems" and that, in doing that, they should also challenge the status quo, as necessary (Mertens, 2009).

TARSILLA: Donna, the title of your new book is "Transformative Research and Evaluation." Therefore, my question is whether you find a difference between the

two. If so, how different are they and what implications do such differences entail with respect to the use of findings or the pursuit of social change?

MERTENS: Very interesting question indeed. It is interesting to see how after all these years we are still here discussing the differences between applied research and evaluation. Let me first start by saying that many do not see any particular difference between the two terms. I know many applied researchers who call themselves evaluators. Likewise, I know evaluators with a very strong background in research methodology who still draw from their training and research toolbox when they conduct evaluation.

I personally feel that there is a lot of overlap between the two terms. Many applied researchers today, for instance, understand the need for getting stakeholders involved. This can be seen as a shift to viewing people as active agents in the evaluation as opposed to the view that people are variables to include in a statistical model. Similarly, applied researchers today are increasingly concerned with the use of their research findings, which has been typically a distinctive pattern of evaluators' work for a long time. What makes evaluators unique is the fact that they deal with a much larger variety of stakeholders than applied researchers do. Unlike researchers, evaluators are also expected to understand stakeholders' needs and interest as well as to enhance the utilization of their work's findings to solve social problems and facilitate policy-makers' decision. Right now I see that evaluators could play a key role in making the current U.S. administration more aware of the benefits associated with evaluation, including the opportunities for

using tools and methods other than randomized controlled trials.

In conclusion, what I believe distinguishes evaluators from researchers the most is not only their being cognizant of their profession's intrinsic political nature but also their deep understanding of the broader context (e.g., social, economic, cultural) where they are asked to practice. That includes the capacity to analyze power issues within the communities which they work with, something that researchers generally do not need to contend with.

TARSILLA: Donna, the transformative approach is quite encompassing and aims at social change like some of the "niche" evaluation approaches and paradigms (e.g., critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory"). While many might argue that the transformative evaluation model has not really made any new contribution to the field of evaluation, I believe that this approach had indeed played a significant role. One of its merits, in my view, has been to have different evaluation approaches traditionally associated with a special cause concerning a specific population group (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, racially segregated groups) come together and harmonize some of their values, epistemological paradigms, and methods. Do you agree with that? Also, in your opinion, what are the other major contributions of the transformative evaluation model?

MERTENS: Well, I believe that your interpretation of the transformative approach contribution is a valid one. When we first started implementing it, we tried to address a gap existing among some of the paradigms dominating the discourse on social justice in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Twenty years ago,

I realized, for instance, that no evaluation paradigm or theory existed that related to deaf people and people with disability more generally. Feminists and critical race theorists provided some of the original framing for the development of the transformative paradigm, but they focused almost exclusively on gender and race, and so needed considerable translation to address issues of deafness or disability.

However, the deaf people I was working with back then helped me see how some of those social justice theories could be easily applicable to other population groups once the focus would be more on their main ideological stances and broader values (i.e., equity, diversity, social justice) rather on their narrow focus (e.g., gender or race). After all, there were cases where the focus of existing approaches was so specific that it became hard for someone who was a woman and happened to be Black to ascribe to any particular movement. Transformative evaluation allowed overcoming such barriers and, by recognizing the diversity among communities and within communities, contributed to bridging communication gaps among theories.

Theory of Use

According to Mertens, the evaluator's role mainly consists in developing, critiquing, and refining policy as well as in advocating actions that support changes in policy (Mertens, 2009). Evaluators' primary objective is to redress the unbalances existing within society (e.g., privileges):

> Evaluators must accept that they are part of a team whose function is to bring about social change. Underlying this acceptance is an acknowledgement that we live in a world where social injustice is part of the everyday living experience of many groups of people (Mertens, 2003).

In other words, evaluation findings should be used to reduce inequalities among social groups: Mertens' ideas partly draw from Freire's idea of liberating the oppressed through research and education (Freire, 2006).

Mertens' approach is different from the majority of earlier evaluation models in that it is geared towards social-organizational transformation and focuses on the strengths of communities rather on a problem-oriented view of the evaluand. She also believes that findings should be used not only by program staff but also by the variety of stakeholders involved in the evaluation (e.g., "shared power" in the use of findings). In Mertens' words, this would enhance the improvement of current interventions and favor the community acceptance of the latter as legitimate. An important purpose of knowledge construction is to help people improve society (Mertens, 2003).

By drawing from Lincoln's (2005) theories, Mertens recognizes that use of evaluation findings is often hampered by the reporting format which is conventionally geared towards academic and scientific audiences or policy-makers (i.e., the producers of knowledge) rather than program participants living in the community where the evaluation has been conducted (Mertens, 2009). With the attempt to overcome such gaps between "official" and "social" action, Mertens urges evaluators to be aware of audiences for whom the study findings have implications. She also suggests that reporting take a variety of forms, including ethnodrama, Web-based medium, and songs or group discussions, for example. However, the adoption of

such an inclusive reporting approach expects evaluators to provide guidance, suggestions, and tools to help oppressed people use the information proactively in case the latter do not really know what to do with the new power or status which the evaluation is trying to advocate for on their behalf (Mertens, 2009).

TARSILLA: Donna, I really like your idea that evaluators should not be afraid of getting close to program participants (especially those who have been failed by society the most) and, as a result, of advocating in favor of the latter. My only concern is that evaluators (especially those serving as external evaluators) are not always capable of mapping local stakeholders exhaustively because of the lack of time or the lack of an in-depth knowledge of local customs and practices. The result is that evaluators, despite aiming to be transformative, end up advocating for the group which is not the most vulnerable, but rather the most vocal about their dire living conditions during the contacts with evaluators as well as during the rest of the valuation. Based on that, I would like to ask you how an evaluator could avoid the risk of falling prey to such circumstances and gain a thorough understanding of the complexity underlying the program being evaluated?

MERTENS: Well, as I said earlier, having a mixed evaluation team (i.e., made up of one international and two local evaluators) could help immensely. Likewise, preparing well for the evaluation before arriving in the community where the specific project to be evaluated takes place is critical. That includes discussing with evaluators who have been working in that specific community before. Reading as much as possible on evaluations which have been

conducted in that specific culture and community before your evaluation could also be of great help.

TARSILLA: Donna, did you ever run into a situation where your client was not interested in getting the community to participate in the design, implementation, and utilization of findings? If so, could you please provide a few examples and tell me how you were able to get them to accept the transformative evaluation model?

MERTENS: Yes, it happened on a couple of occasions. One time, I was asked by the Education Department of a state in the U.S. to conduct an evaluation whose main objective was to assess the main factors causing the proliferation of cases of sexual abuse in schools of one particular community. To my surprise, once I got to one of the schools where several sexual abuse cases had been reported during the months preceding my visit, none of the administrators or teachers attending the first stakeholders meeting mentioned the past episodes of sexual abuse which had occurred at that school. Therefore, I decided to raise the issue myself as any true transformative evaluator would have done. However, in doing so, I encountered a lot of resistance from the upper level administrations of the school. In their view, the school had no real problem and the episodes of sexual abuse reported in the past were just isolated cases. However, despite their seeming lack of concern about the sexual abuse issue. Despite the challenge, I was not discouraged and decided to go ahead and implement a transformative evaluation. In order to do that, I specifically referred to the terms of reference for the assignment. As the contract had been signed by the Department of Education for conducting

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an evaluation specifically looking at the reasons for such an increase in the number of reported sexual abuse cases in that school I presented my work as politically mandated rather than driven by a personal agenda. That facilitated my evaluation endeavor, as the State Department of Education was a governmental agency with a large political influence and authority over the school where I was working. As a result, the school staff started cooperating with me and a transformative evaluation was successfully completed.

Theory of Practice

Among Mertens' greatest contributions to evaluation practice is the shift of evaluation from a "blaming of the victim" approach (i.e., primarily focused on assessing the reasons for individual failure from a deficit-perspective) to a more comprehensive understanding of the failure inherent in the prevailing social and economic system or resilience-based perspective (Mertens, 2000). To put it simply, she recommends that evaluators ask why and how schools are failing African-American children, instead of why and how these children are failing in the school system.

One of Mertens' most distinctive theoretical patterns is the relevance assigned to cultural competence and, as a result of that, to the evaluators' ability to be "provocateurs and unsettle the comfortable realities of those traditionally in power" (Mertens, 2008). The evaluator's job is to make sure that strong power imbalances do not distort the study's findings (Mertens, 2003).

By placing a special emphasis on the involvement of those who may not have sufficient power for accurate

representation among stakeholders, Mertens advocates for the use of participatory evaluation methods. This includes the identification of local meanings attached to experiences, otherwise not captured by traditional evaluators. Similarly, Mertens stresses the importance of appreciative inquiry as a democratic and responsive way of conducting program evaluation in today's world.

She also advocates for the use of mixed methods (including case studies, appreciative inquiry and Participatory Learning and Action methods, such as group mapping, direct matrix ranking, and semi-structured interviews) and urges evaluators to conduct organization of cyclical (i.e., nonlinear) studies where a complexity of factors affecting the evaluand are amply taken into account (Mertens 2003). As a result, she stresses the importance of process evaluations (Mertens, 2009). Similarly, she highlights the limitations of experimental designs in which individuals are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, with the result being that those who are most in need of health and social services within a community are often denied them.

As part of the transformative approach, Mertens (2008) asserts that some of the existing methods need to be reframed too:

Sampling needs to be reframed to reveal the dangers of the myth of homogeneity, to understand which dimensions of diversity are important in a specific context, to avoid additional damage to populations by using labels such as "at risk" that can be demeaning and self-defeating, and to recognize the barriers that exist to being part of a group whose data can contribute to a more ethical and accurate evaluation...The transformative paradigm also leads us to reframe data collection decisions to be more inclined to

use mixed methods, and to be consciously aware of the benefits of involving community members in the data collection decisions, the appropriateness of methods with a depth of understanding of the cultural issues involved, the building of trust to obtain valid data, the modifications that may be necessary to collect valid data from various groups, and the need to tie the data collected to social action. These data collection decisions are complex and require an awareness of the cultural values and practices in the specific population of interest.

In conclusion, in order for them to play their inclusive role effectively, evaluators will need to learn more about those groups that have been traditionally under-represented in evaluation practice in two different ways: (1) by interacting with member of those communities in a sustained and meaningful way and (2) by becoming conversant with the scholarly literature originated from feminists, people of color, people with disabilities, and their advocates (Mertens, 2003).

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