



# Assumptions at the philosophical and programmatic levels in evaluation



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## ABSTRACT

Stakeholders and evaluators hold a variety of levels of assumptions at the philosophical, methodological, and programmatic levels. The use of a transformative philosophical framework is presented as a way for evaluators to become more aware of the implications of various assumptions made by themselves and program stakeholders. The argument is examined and demonstrated that evaluators who are aware of the assumptions that underlie their evaluation choices are able to provide useful support for stakeholders in the examination of the assumptions they hold with regard to the nature of the problem being addressed, the program designed to solve the problem, and the approach to evaluation that is appropriate in that context. Such an informed approach has the potential for development of more appropriate and culturally responsive programs being implemented in ways that lead to the desired impacts, as well as to lead to evaluation approaches that support effective solutions to intransigent social problems. These arguments are illustrated through examples of evaluations from multiple sectors; additional challenges are also identified.

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## 1. Introduction

Assumptions in evaluation contexts come in many different forms. Stakeholders make assumptions about the nature of the problems being addressed that lead to assumptions about the design, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention to address the problems. Nkwake (2013) refers to these types of assumptions as diagnostic assumptions that entail what is believed to be the root causes of issues addressed by programs and prescriptive assumptions about the nature of the intervention designed to address the problems. Evaluators have a responsibility to make visible the assumptions being made about the nature of the problems and potential solutions by providing data that can increase the potential for an effective intervention. This also encompasses a responsibility to critically examine the assumptions about evaluation strategies and approaches. The critical examination of assumptions is especially important when dealing with intransigent social problems, sometimes called wicked problems (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012; Mertens, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are those that involve multiple interacting systems, are replete with social and institutional uncertainties, and for which there is no certainty in

defining the nature of the problem and potential solutions. In addition, these wicked problems are of such a nature that time is running out to find solutions. Mertens and Wilson (2012) add other dimensions to the definition of wicked problems that include the need to address power inequities, violations of human rights and impediments to developing socially just communities, and strategizing for action to inform policies and change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Examples include climate change, violence, and poverty.

The attempt to resolve issues of poverty and health through improved sanitation provides one example of the importance of using empirical approaches informed by a lens of social justice to critically examine stakeholders' assumptions about problems and solutions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi established a "Clean India" campaign to address sanitation issues (Lakshmi, 2015). He and his advisors assumed that sending government workers into rural villages to install over 10 million brand new toilets in the people's front yards would solve the problems of poor sanitation and contaminated water. However, over 40% of the people in the villages do not use the new toilets; they continue to relieve themselves in open fields as they have always done; they use the toilets to store grain or tether their goats. The residents' resistance to the toilets is rooted in the centuries old caste system in which members of the lowest caste, formerly called untouchables, were responsible for the removal of human waste. Human rights groups

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decry the dependence on this caste to remove human waste as a gross violation of their rights as well as being illegal under the Indian constitution. Hence, people who get the new toilets do not want to fill the toilets with waste because no one is willing to clean them. A solution that might work would be provision of a mechanized system for cleaning pit latrines, sewer lines, and septic tanks. This critical interrogation of the way in which change can happen is termed transformative causal assumptions by [Nkwake \(2013\)](#) and calls upon evaluators and stakeholders to ensure that outputs turn into outcomes in ways that take into account external or contextual assumptions related to cultural complexity and human rights.

Within the context of evaluation, the situation in India illustrates the importance of evaluators being involved in making visible those assumptions about the nature of the problem (viewed as human waste in open fields and water ways that contribute to contaminated water) to a more nuanced understanding of the problem (people do not want to remove the waste from toilets because it is below their status). The former depiction of the problem is accurate, but not complete and led to a solution that was only partially effective.

Evaluators work with assumptions at many levels, including their own and those held by the programmatic stakeholders. Even if evaluators are unaware of their and the stakeholders' assumptions, this does not mean that people are operating without assumptions; it only means that they are working with unexamined assumptions. This is a dangerous position from which to work and has consequences for the quality of the program and the evaluation, and the consequent impact on stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to discuss new insights into the variety of levels of assumptions present in evaluation work at the philosophical, methodological and programmatic levels within a transformative framework. By using a transformative philosophical framework to ground their evaluations, evaluators can become more aware of the implications of various assumptions made by themselves and program stakeholders. The argument is examined and demonstrated that evaluators who are aware of the assumptions that underlie their evaluation choices are able to provide useful support for stakeholders in the examination of the assumptions they hold with regard to the nature of the problem being addressed, the program designed to solve the problem, and appropriate evaluation approaches. Such an informed approach has the potential for development of more appropriate and culturally responsive programs being implemented in ways that lead to the desired impacts.

As William [Shadish \(1998, p. 3\)](#) wrote: many of the 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.” I use the structure of paradigms as developed by [Guba and Lincoln \(1989, 2005\)](#) as a way to illustrate philosophical assumptions associated with a transformative stance. These include assumptions about the nature of ethics and values (axiology), reality (ontology), knowledge and the relationship between the evaluator and stakeholders (epistemology), and systematic inquiry (methodology). The transformative paradigm provides a framework for examining the major assumptions associated with critically assessing assumptions about the nature of the problem and potential solutions with implications for evaluation strategies that can illuminate hidden and visible assumptions held by diverse stakeholders ([Mertens, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2012](#)). The focus is on added insights that evaluators can provide to program stakeholders and participants with regard to the design and implementation of programs that are culturally responsive.

## 2. Transformative philosophical assumptions

When evaluators reflect and make explicit their axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions, they are better able to choose the methodologies to use in their inquiries. Situating oneself within a framework of philosophical assumptions also means making explicit the assumptions that evaluators make about themselves and their roles as evaluators. Methodologies provide specific guidance to evaluation design: types of questions that can be answered, selection of samples, selection of methods/instruments to collect data, approaches to analyze the collected data, and inferences and use that can be made from their findings. The transformative paradigm lends itself to the design, implementation, and use of evaluation that engages with complexity (both observable and unobservable assumptions and processes), for which a range of data collection and analysis tools are needed; therefore, a mixed-methods approach is relevant. Transformation implies understanding and questioning assumptions about the present status quo, and therefore a critical approach is necessary. However, the process of change does not take place through critique alone. Each context has assets, strengths and opportunities that add value to achieve desirable goals, i.e., increasing social justice and furthering human rights. The evaluator has an ethical responsibility to engage with stakeholders to examine the assumptions about the problem, solution, and evaluation methods in order to increase the potential for social change.

The transformative paradigm is one philosophical framework that helps organize thinking about how evaluators “can serve the interests of social justice through the production of credible evidence that is responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. It provides a meta-physical umbrella to guide evaluators who work in communities that experience discrimination and oppression on whatever basis—gender, disability, immigrant status, race/ethnicity, sexual identification, or a multitude of other characteristics associated with less access to societal privileges” ([Mertens & Hesse Biber, 2013, p. 28](#)). Evaluators often work in contexts in which a variety of possible solutions are possible for a problem, however, in the context of wicked problems, evaluators and stakeholders need to work together to determine which of the solutions are culturally responsive and have the potential to increase social justice.

## 3. Making values explicit

The transformative axiological assumption ([Mertens, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012](#)) holds that evaluators have a responsibility to direct their work to address issues of social justice and human rights. This explicit ethical stance carries with it the implication that evaluators have a responsibility to make visible the dynamics of discrimination and oppression that are relevant in the evaluation context. Thus, evaluators need to be aware of those dimensions of diversity that are associated with discrimination, on whatever basis, and to build into their evaluations ways to challenge power differences that sustain an oppressive status quo. This also implies that evaluators need to be aware of the strengths found in the multiple stakeholder groups and of how to be culturally respectful with members of the diverse constituencies. Very importantly, the transformative axiological assumption supports the role of evaluation as contributing to change in a form of reciprocity, i.e., those who are being denied their rights can see the evaluation as a means to supporting changes needed so that they do experience a more socially just life. Evaluators with this conscious value-laden positionality can work with stakeholders to provide a frame for evaluation that addresses inclusion of diverse voices in respectful ways as part of the evaluation process.

#### 4. Understanding different versions of reality

The transformative ontological assumption holds that there are different versions of reality and that these versions of reality are created from different social positionalities and degrees of power. The opening example of this chapter about providing toilets in rural India illustrates that acting upon a version of reality that is not congruent with the reality of the intended beneficiaries results in a solution that is not culturally responsive, hence, it does not accomplish the stated goals. Similar situations in terms of misunderstanding the nature of problems are seen in evaluations of programs designed to prevent such wicked problems as HIV/AIDS, sexual violence, and climate change (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014; Kyrgyzstan National Council for Sustainable Development, 2013). Evaluators need to work with stakeholders to explore ways that different versions of reality, especially those that sustain an oppressive status quo and those that support human rights, can come to light.

In Chilisa's work in Botswana (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014), program developers assumed that the reason for a high rate of HIV/AIDS was that young people did not know that the disease can be prevented by abstinence or condom use. Chilisa and her colleagues used multiple methods to conduct a context analysis prior to the implementation of a predetermined intervention. They conducted surveys with youth to determine their level of knowledge about the transmission of the disease. They collected incidence data on characteristics associated with higher rates of infection. They trained youth to go out into the community and gather data about the meaning of the disease for other youth and to determine how to respectfully talk about this sensitive topic in Botswana. Their contextual analysis revealed a different version of reality from that which was first assumed by program developers in that the majority of the youth already knew about abstinence and condoms. They also found that rates of infection were higher in young girls than in boys. And, the youth indicated that the disease, which they called the "sickness", was associated with a strong sense of sadness and loss as they experienced so many of their loved ones dying. Also, witnessing this much death resulted in their feeling that they did not have hope for a future. In other words, sex feels good; I'm going to die anyway, so why not have sex. As sex is a taboo topic in Botswana, the evaluators also discovered that comfortable ways of discussing the topic included through poetry, drama, songs, and proverbs. The evaluators' data were used to change the predetermined intervention that was not based on the version of reality that the youth held of HIV/AIDS. The intervention needed to address power differences between males and females in the context of negotiating about sex, begin with the emotional status of the youth, and provide the youth with a way to construct a positive vision for their future. In this example, the evaluators were able to challenge assumptions about evaluation methods that suggested a test of knowledge was sufficient; they used culturally responsive methods to capture a more accurate picture of the problem from the youth's perspectives.

Another example comes from international development in Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyzstan National Council for Sustainable Development, 2013) that examined issues related to poverty reduction, gender inequalities in terms of education and employment, prevention of domestic violence, and suicide. Many studies in international development have supported the position that investing in women's education leads to stronger returns on investment in terms of poverty reduction than investment in men's education (Psacharopoulos, 1994). Thus, if poverty is defined as the problem, a data-based solution would be to increase women's education. However, a transformative evaluator would want to examine the different versions of reality that surround the conceptualization of the problem and the solution in the specific

context of the study. In Kyrgyzstan, a contextual analysis revealed that women were more likely than men to have higher levels of education. The Kyrgyzstan evaluation community analyzed the context to reveal that more education for women did not translate into higher earnings; women enter lower paying occupations than do men (their pay is 2.5 times lower than men). The evaluators also discovered that there are additional pressing human rights issues that needed to be addressed that the increase in education for women (not a bad idea in itself) would not address. For example, the difficult economic conditions in Kyrgyzstan has challenged the stereotypical view of men as breadwinners. "The suicide rate among men in Kyrgyzstan is four times higher than among women...There is a decline in the level of education of men, which can lead to more conflicts in the family and society, lack of tolerance to differences, and greater willingness to use brute force (p. 46)". Having data to support this more nuanced version of reality that is informed by a broader consideration of human rights and oppression provides the basis for development of an intervention that can be culturally responsive.

##### 4.1. Developing relationships

In the transformative epistemological assumption, the concepts of building respectful relationships with the full range of stakeholders is important. This requires acknowledgement of the historical and social location of knowledge, combined with an understanding of the effect of a legacy of discrimination and oppression. The evaluator's role is to bring to visibility historical knowledge of this nature, link it to the social positioning of those who create the knowledge, and critically examine the consequences of accepting one version of reality over another. Evaluators need to be inclusive in culturally respectful ways with the full range of stakeholders and design their studies to address power inequities that can inhibit the accurate representation of those with less power in the particular context. This can include building capacity of indigenous evaluators to position them to be co-evaluators who can also insure that respectful relationships are developed. Thus, the evaluator introduces new ways for stakeholders to relate to evaluators in the evaluation context; sometimes this involves building capacity for program developers, their staffs, and potential participants to actively engage in evaluation activities such as development of the evaluation design, methods of data collection, and data analysis and interpretation.

The World Bank Educational Resilience Approaches (ERA) program carries out capacity building with evaluators in conflict zones and contexts of adversity using a transformative and resilience-informed lens (Reyes, Mertens, & Diaz Varela, *in press*). As part of this effort, the ERA conducted workshops for evaluators from 12 countries in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa. The workshops involved local, country-specific evaluators who chose a marginalized community to work with and then received training so that they could conduct evaluations in their own contexts on issues and with populations from their countries. Following the first training session, the teams were encouraged to establish Local Advisory Committees (LAC) in order to be inclusive and responsive to issues of importance to their stakeholders. The LAC served as one mechanism for challenging assumptions about the nature of problems and solutions in their specific contexts. A subsequent training session was held several months later to allow opportunities to discuss challenges encountered and strategies to address those challenges.

As part of the ERA capacity building project, the Nepalese team chose to work on the issue of lack of access to education for displaced children who were living in squatter camps in Kathmandu (Luitel, Rai, Gautam, Pant, & Gautam, 2014). Their work provides an excellent example of building relationships as a

first step toward establishing a LAC that aligned with the transformative epistemological assumption. They wrote: “In line with this belief system, we emphasize bringing the potential stakeholders into the research process (Mertens, 2009). We attempted to facilitate their agency by including them from the very beginning, from the development of the research purpose and research questions, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. Specifically to facilitate our participatory approach, we formed a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) of five to eight members in each settlement, comprised of multiple stakeholders from the communities. We disclosed our research purpose and its benefits to the community in meetings that were held on a regular basis.” “Further, LACs helped us build rapport and a bond of trust with the research participants. We mobilized the LACs to share research findings through meetings with stakeholders at the community level. In addition, we involved the LACs in administering the survey, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).” Thus, alignment with the transformative epistemological assumption allowed for dismissing a belief that local evaluators would not be able to conduct rigorous studies in their own countries. In the specific Nepal case study, data from the participants challenged the assumption that parents of displaced children did not value education for their children. The parents did value education, but they faced additional challenges that needed to be addressed in order for their children to have a positive learning experience.

The Educational Research Approach team in India focused on how members of the LGBTQIA student community live through widespread stigma and discrimination, with the goal of supporting a safe educational environment for university students. Given the India Supreme Court decision to uphold a law that declares that being homosexual is illegal, it is not safe for members of this community to be visible and public about their sexual identities. Hence, the India team explained: “We formed a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) with four members. These included: (1) a gay activist working with youth on HIV Prevention; (2) a transgender activist who is a founder of Mitra trust, a community-based organization which works with MSMs [men who have sex with men] and TGs [transgender]; (3) a student activist who is a member of a campus club, QueerCampus; and (4) an expert on LGBTQIA issues and CEO of Amaltas Consulting Pvt. Ltd.” This illustrates the transformative epistemological assumption because the researchers consciously included a diverse representation of their population in order to build trusting relationships and to value knowledge that comes from these different sexual identity groups. They were able to challenge the assumption that everyone who is homosexual (as defined by the law) has similar experiences with discrimination and oppression and that, therefore, different solutions were needed to insure safety in schools and in participation in the evaluation study for this diverse group of people.

## 5. Evaluation methodology in the service of social justice

The transformative methodological assumption includes the concepts of inclusion of the full range of stakeholders in the process of decision making about the evaluation methods, conduct of contextual analyses that identify cultural factors and issues of power as a basis for building trusting relationships, use of mixed methods to capture the cultural complexity and the data necessary to be appropriately responsive and inclusive of diverse stakeholders, building on community assets, and designing the evaluation to challenge assumptions that impede progress toward positive social change (Mertens, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). For many evaluations, the use of a transformative cyclical design allows for alignment with the transformative methodological assumptions (See Fig. 1).

STAGE 1: Qualitative	STAGE 2: CONCURRENT	STAGE 3 : SEQUENTIAL	STAGE 4: SEQUENTIAL
Establish evaluation team	Develop evaluation purpose and questions that reflect transformative principles and variables associated with resilience	Conduct pilot studies: Observations, interviews surveys	Post-tests; interviews, surveys, observations
Engage in dialogue with stakeholder groups	Conduct preliminary studies to identify risks, assets, and other data related to understanding the nature of the problem at multiple levels	Develop interventions as appropriate	Stakeholder involved in analysis, interpretation, reporting and use of findings
Establish Local Advisory Committee		Pretest knowledge, attitudes & skills, as appropriate	Dissemination to multiple audiences
Read documents; literature review		Begin process evaluation	Monitor use of findings for transformation
Identify contextual factors			

Fig. 1. Transformative cyclical mixed methods design (Adapted from Mertens, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Evaluators from Mali were part of the World Bank’s Education Resilience Approach program to enhance capacity of local people to contribute to social justice. The Mali case study focused on internally displaced persons (IDP) and their host communities (Reyes & Kelcey, 2014). Their work provides an example of a cyclical mixed methods design. A team was developed very early in the process of planning the evaluation that consisted of local evaluators and Mali Ministry of Education staff who were supported by the Education Resilience Approach team. They implemented the RES-360, a rapid mixed methods assessment methodology focused on resilience as follows:

A rapid mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) assessment and purposeful sampling were used to capture the main features of the latest crisis in Mali impacting IDPs and their host communities in the south. Following a sequential mixed-methods approach, a first qualitative phase conducted interviews and focus groups with central Ministry and community level participants (students, parents, teachers and principals). Within the Ministry of Education, ten professionals actively engaged in policy making and national level programs were interviewed. At the local level, the qualitative sampling strategy and focus groups sought to capture the perceptions and experiences of two education communities located in representative communities hosting IDP families from the north . . . Surveyed communities represented critical cases of heightened vulnerability, based on a variety of socioeconomic indicators. They also offered a balance between urban and rural contexts. The purposeful selection ensured the inclusion of individuals and communities in the sample, whose lived experiences of displacement and support for IDPs could provide the rich insights needed for policy makers, displaced students, teachers and host communities. Mali education resilience assessment conducted various focus groups and applied a perception survey to 270 students, 50 parents, 43 teachers, and ‘10 school administrators across 5 communities in the south that were hosting displaced communities from the north.

The transformative, resilience methodological elements illustrated in the Mali case study include the establishment of an evaluation team and advisory board, collection of qualitative data as a means to understand the local experiences and relevant contextual factors that influence both risks and assets at multiple levels, and use of the qualitative data to develop a quantitative

survey instrument that is reflective of the local cultural and political realities. The sampling design insured representation of diverse stakeholder voices. The study findings were reported to policy makers in Mali as well as internationally through publications that illustrate the variables that support resilience in conflict situations. Important elements included flexibility in schooling (inclusion of non-formal education settings), coordination of human support services with schools (e.g., nutritional support for students), and development of crisis response plan locally and nationally.

## 6. Discussion

Thus far, the assumptions of the transformative paradigm have provided a framework for understanding and raising questions about the relationship between philosophical assumptions and the evaluator's role in making visible assumptions about the nature of problems and solutions held by diverse stakeholders and appropriate methodologies. This framing of evaluation is designed to lead to more culturally responsive interventions and evaluations. The examples that are discussed exemplify principles that are useful to consider when evaluators are called upon to work on wicked problems that are complex, require multiple systems to move toward progress, and do not have obvious solutions. Evaluators need to be aware of their own assumptions and those of the program stakeholders in order to bring to visibility the assumptions that are made by diverse stakeholders with regard to the nature of the problem, potential solutions, and evaluation approaches. Fig. 2 provides a summary of the transformative philosophical assumptions and the importance of each assumption in guiding decisions about how to frame and conduct an evaluation.

The work cited in this article provides hope that evaluators can contribute to the solution of wicked problems. Yet, a great deal of uncertainty continues to exist around how to understand the nature of wicked problems in ways that lead to effective solutions. Such wicked problems include armed conflict and other forms of violence (rape, other forms of sexual violence, gang activity), climate change and environmental destruction, lack of access to appropriate and safe education, health issues such as HIV/AIDS, starvation, inadequate prenatal care, and substance abuse, political

unrest and corruption, and economic problems related to poverty and oppression. These wicked problems need to be examined through a lens of diversity in order to address inequities on the basis of gender, disability, deafness, race/ethnicity, religion, and the many other dimensions that are used as a basis for discrimination and oppression. In the remainder of this article, the wicked problems of climate change and environmental destruction and sexual violence are used to demonstrate good practices in evaluation that can support challenging dominant assumptions, as well as to raise issues that require additional contemplation and action by the evaluation community in this regard.

## 7. Climate change and environmental destruction

The example of climate change and environmental destruction provides a window through which to examine the detrimental effects of climate change in the context of the exclusion of marginalized populations from the benefits of economic and technological advances (Mertens, 2014). In the search for solutions such as alternative energy sources that reduce waste and pollution, the challenges are tremendous. Assumptions are myriad about the nature of the problem and potential solutions. Transformative evaluators would begin their work by trying to make these assumptions visible and by including the voices of members of marginalized communities in a conscious and culturally respectful way. They might ask such questions as: What methodologies enhance our ability to bring to visibility those who benefit from and those are hurt by current policies and practices related to the environment and sustainable living? How can evaluators challenge beliefs, assumptions, and practices that serve as barriers to achieving the desired goal of healthy living environments?

A cultural analysis in Korea was conducted in the context of climate change and environmental destruction that revealed a cultural endorsement of harmony and balance that is displayed in the symbol used in their country's flag, as well as in the religions that are dominant in Korea (Mertens, 2014). Harmony and balance provide a strong foundation in terms of Korean values that are commensurate with the transformative axiological assumption related to social justice and human rights. However, evaluators also need to be aware of barriers and points of tension that impede progress towards achieving these goals, and the assumptions that are operating to sustain an oppressive status quo. For example, economic development can be viewed as a positive value, but it can also be challenged when it occurs to further profits for the privileged at the expense of individuals' rights to a healthy life space that is impeded by the effects of global climate change and environmental pollution that decreases health and quality of life. In many parts of the world, these negative consequences are more strongly associated with those in poorer classes and other marginalized groups. If values such as greed and personal enhancement are supporting oppressive practices, then these need to be made visible and challenged. Therefore, evaluators need to ask themselves, what is the place of human rights and social justice in a context of industrial/economic growth and technological advances in a world that is committed to a healthier and socially just agenda? How can evaluators contribute to the advancement of that agenda?

Chomitz (2014) highlights the importance of making assumptions about the nature of the climate change problem visible and the important role evaluators can play in providing evidence that challenges assumptions about the problem and solutions.

It is not as if there were a pre-existing, clear, roadmap for economic development and poverty reduction. Now the way forward is further obscured by the need for pervasive changes in the way that we produce energy, grow food, use water, and prepare for droughts, floods, and storms. There are lots of good ideas, but

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

Fig. 2. Transformative assumptions and their importance.

not all of them will pan out as expected. What's needed, at every level from the community to the planet, is the acuity to recognize both dead ends and promising pathways as rapidly as possible . . . Demonstration and pilot projects – which prove technical feasibility, work out regulatory issues, and reduce perceived investment risks – can have far-reaching impacts, but are successful only when they specify what is being demonstrated to whom, why, and how. The CIF [Climate Investment Funds] evaluation found that some would-be transformative energy interventions were likely to be stymied by unfavorable national energy policies.

With wicked problems such as climate change, evaluators have an important role to play to collect data related to the assumptions held about the nature of the problem, the absence of marginalized voices from the inquiry process, and the nature of the solutions. No simple solutions exist. The same can be true for a second wicked problem discussed in the next section: sexual violence.

### 7.1. Sexual violence

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control's Division of Violence Prevention (DVP) recognizes sexual violence as a major public health problem in the U.S. as well as throughout the world (DeGue, Simon, Basile, Yee, Lang, & Spivak, 2012). The goal of the DVP's Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) Program is to provide information on the nature of the problem and its prevention, before the violence occurs, to health departments and communities who work in this area. Given the breadth of the CDC's influence and the influence of how problems are defined and solutions derived, it is essential that an evaluation framework is brought to this initiative that allows for critical examination of the programmatic stakeholders' assumptions. DeGue et al. report on an evaluation of a decade of the RPE's work that included using evaluation methods that were inclusive of document reviews, data gathered by grantees, information about funding history, interviews with service providers, and a review panel of researchers, advocates, and state public health officials. This study revealed the importance of a shift in assumption that sexual violence was a criminal justice issue to one that viewed it as a threat to public health. This shift opened the door for considering public health strategies as interventions. Another shift in assumptions occurred when the focus broadened from victimization prevention to primary first-time perpetration prevention in the form of addressing social norms that allow sexual violence to flourish.

CDC, through the RPE program, provided funding for an evaluation of a primary prevention program in Kentucky that was developed based on previous studies that supported the use of a social ecological model that addressed needs at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels (Cook-Craig et al., 2014). A partnership was developed with representatives at the state level and local communities and constituencies such as rape crisis center directors, educators, schools, and the community prevention team members; later representatives from CDC and RPE joined the evaluation team. Their initial focus was on identifying local needs and selection of a strategy for developing, implementing, and evaluating a prevention program. The evaluation was based on principles that align with the transformative paradigm: continuous improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability (Wandersman & Snell-Johns, 2005). In Cook-Craig et al.'s description of the evaluation, there is no mention of how culture and power differences were addressed. However, in the CDC RPE guide for evaluators (Townsend, 2009), evaluators are encouraged to grapple with “connections between sexual violence and other forms of oppression. There are many alliances that can be

established or strengthened in order to do collaborative work. For example, alliances can be built with other violence prevention programs, associations of ethnic/racial minorities, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender associations, disabilities groups, organizations that promote economic opportunities, and civil liberties and human rights groups (p. 12).” Evaluators who integrate this guidance might find themselves being able to offer insights into assumptions that are made that impede addressing the needs of diverse stakeholders, especially those who experience marginalization, discrimination and oppression.

## 8. Conclusions

Members of the evaluation community have taken a courageous step to establish a transformative agenda in the context of furthering healthy and safe lifestyles and associated societal changes in nature, social, and technological eco-systems while furthering issues of social justice, cultural diversity, gender, and ethics. Such a bold agenda needs to be informed by evidence that is reflective of the complexity and the compelling need for action. The transformative paradigm offers one framework for examining the assumptions that are used to guide evaluators with the intent of addressing these challenges. The application of transformative mixed methods depends on the will of the evaluation community to be part of this change process. Evaluators who are accustomed to working with only quantitative or only qualitative methods will need to consider strategies for how to combine their efforts. Teamwork is a solution that has been used to address differences in evaluators' skills and worldviews. Teamwork is not always easy, but conversations about assumptions can clarify the origins of differences in evaluation approaches. A mixed methods approach has the potential to provide a fuller picture of the complexities of problems, as well as the design, implementation, and determination of the effectiveness of solutions.

Teams can involve not only formally trained evaluators; they can also be inclusive of community-based groups that are affected by problems in the status quo and the proposed solutions. Professional organizations in the United States have undertaken comprehensive initiatives to train community-based evaluators who are reflective of diverse cultural groups (Collins & Hopson, 2014). EvalPartners support capacity building initiatives in less developed countries to broaden representation on the evaluation team (<http://www.mymande.org/evalpartners>).

Challenges are many. Yet, the questions raised by the integration of the transformative paradigm assumptions with Nkwake's (2013) work on diagnostic, prescriptive, and causal assumptions provide groundwork for examining strategies that evaluators can use to uncover assumptions about the nature of problems, possible solutions, and appropriate evaluation methodologies. The use of a social justice lens highlights the need for careful contextual analysis as the starting point for evaluations that are focused on social transformation designed to improve human rights. The challenges before us are of concern to the survival of the entire world. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt noted so long ago, such problems will not be solved by one person, one nation, or one country. It will take all of us working together.

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