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Recent scholarship has suggested that evaluation is becoming increasingly institutionalized and entrenched in problematic discourses, leading to a narrowing of possibilities for evaluators to contribute to meaningful social change. At the same time, evaluation approaches which are grounded in values of social justice and equity are receiving greater attention within the field. Given these two seemingly contradictory trends, this research was conducted to better understand how we might engage in evaluation practice which is cognizant of and resistant to dominant social discourses while at the same time working actively to promote a more free, just, and equitable society. This dissertation comprises three interconnected studies of how critical theory has been and might in the future be applied to enhance evaluation theory and practice. The first study is a review of evaluation literature which finds that while sparse, critical theories have been used to advance critiques of evaluation's entanglement in ideology and discourse; to advance forms of feminist, decolonizing, and culturally responsive practices; and to elaborate a participatory and educative form of critical evaluation practice. In the second study, findings based on analysis of interviews with evaluation scholars and practitioners suggest that critically-engaged evaluation practice requires deliberation and dialogue with stakeholders about the ways that programs shape—and are shaped by—systems of power, and that while critical inquiry may not be prioritized within the current evaluation marketplace, opportunities exist to push both localized practice and the field in more critical directions. Finally, the third paper engages in a conceptual analysis of how specific modes of critical practice may be applied toward fundamental issues of evaluation, suggesting ways that

critical theories challenge common notions of social programming, knowledge construction, values, and use within the field.

EXAMINING CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF  
CRITICAL THEORY FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

by

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The idea that evaluation can and should contribute to the public good invites questions that situate the profession within larger conversations about the social sciences and their role in domains such as policy making, governance, and public administration. On the one hand, science has come under attack via political division and discourses of alternative facts, post-truth, and fake news (Patton, 2018). On the other hand, a form of critical self-reflection has been underway within the social sciences for years, as postmodernism and its offshoots problematize science's relationship to social advancement and enlightenment (Stronach, Halsall, & Hustler, 2002). Evaluation practitioners and scholars have taken their own stances within these discussions, offering varying arguments about the nature and utility of evidence (Donaldson et al., 2015), the role of evaluators as advocates for particular ideals (Greene, 1997), the capacity for evaluators to work as social change agents (Mcbride, Casillas, & Lopiccolo, 2020), and the need to act as a critical voice (Schwandt & Gates, 2016). The discussion, however, may never be settled, and evaluators continue to search for their place within and alongside the social sciences in contributing to a better and more just world (Neubauer & Hall, 2020; Schwandt, 2019).

A part of that search—for evaluation's role in society and how to actualize it in practice—involves reflection upon our current situation and, in many cases, a critical view of various aspects of the field. This effort has been taken up recently by scholars who argue that it is time for a “skeptical turn” in evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2019), that we should pursue a “post-normal” evaluation (Schwandt, 2019) and that the aspiration that evaluation can (or does) contribute to social improvement deserves scrutiny (Mathison, 2018; Neubauer & Hall, 2020). Each of these authors describe, in different ways, how we might turn the evaluative gaze inward to interrogate not only how and why we conduct evaluations, but what influence our work has on

individuals, organizations, and systems—and how these systems in turn influence evaluation. They argue for and suggest new ways of thinking about the visible and invisible consequences of evaluation in social, political, and ethical terms, and point to the need for additional critiques to move the field of evaluation forward.

In this study, I use critical theory to engage critically with evaluation, as it provides a framework for examining the relationship between knowledge, knowledge-generating practices (e.g., social sciences and evaluation), and notions of how specific aspects of society and social circumstances might be made better (Morrow & Brown, 1994). In related domains of social science such as education, psychology, sociology, and qualitative research generally, critical theory has contributed significantly to discussions about the relationship between science and concerns for social well-being (Giroux, 2019; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Leonardo, 2004). Critical theory positions knowledge within contexts of history, ideology, and discourse, meaning that the acts of producing and sharing knowledge are never independent from the social environment in which knowledge-generating processes (e.g., science and evaluation) occur (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Critical theory is also explicitly interested in how we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and how our thoughts and actions are influenced by systems, cultures, and institutions, suggesting that individual behaviors are always caught up in relationships of power and historical artifacts (Geuss, 1981; Leonardo, 2004). Importantly, critical theories link individual subjectivity to historical and institutional practices in order to expose these relations of power and uncover possibilities for social change (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory advances critique as a process of change, using multiple means of analysis (e.g., discursive, historical, observational) to better understand the reasoning and logic behind practices that have become normalized, while seeking to destabilize and disrupt such logics as a

way of reorienting systems, structures, and individual actions toward more equitable and democratic ends (Leonardo, 2004).

In the rest of this introduction, I further elaborate the specific problem and purpose which I aim to address through the three papers in this study. Then, I situate myself within the work and provide an overview of the three papers.

### **Problem Statement**

In recent years, the conditions which produce and maintain the normalization of unjust practices and structures of inequity have been brought into stark relief. Through tragedies such as the murder of George Floyd and the nationwide protests that followed, as well as the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-increasing visibility of the effects of climate change, there is new awareness of how inequities are allowed to persist and renewed energy to disrupt these conditions and produce change. At the same time, responses to these events have grown increasingly complex and polarized, as political discourse has spiraled into what Patton (2021) refers to as, “a dramatically escalating infodemic of misinformation, fake news, distortions of facts, outright lies by some policy makers, attacks on and disregard for science, and weakening institutional accountability” (p. 54). Cumulatively, these challenges pose problems for how we move through the world, bringing into focus the entanglement of our personal and professional identities and forcing questions about the intersections of our expertise as evaluators and methodologists with the ethical and moral responsibilities we have as citizens and human beings.

In trying to make sense of evaluation’s role in our contemporary moment, individual evaluators have reflected on their own identities and practices, although these complex challenges also evoke systemic concerns related to what Furubo and Stame (2019) call the “evaluation enterprise.” Like the issues themselves, evaluation warrants discussion not only in

terms of individual actions, but also in terms of broader professional norms and expectations, how such norms are justified, and by whom. While numerous evaluation scholars and practitioners have acknowledged dynamics of power and difference (racial, class, gender) in evaluation and have incorporated these concerns into their methods and approaches for years (e.g., Avent et al., 2024; Chouinard et al., 2017; Frierson et al., 2010; Greene, 2006; Hood et al., 2015; House, 1993) the ethical and normative function of evaluation as a social practice remains an ongoing topic of discussion (Chouinard & Cousins, 2021; Leone, Stame, & Tagle, 2016). In the current moment, salient questions for the evaluation community include asking whose interests evaluation serves and should serve, whose values are articulated in evaluative criteria, and how evaluators' own moral and political leanings inform and shape practice (Hall, Ahn, & Greene, 2012; Hassall, Gullickson, Boyce, & Hannum, 2020).

Such concerns point to the need for new modes of critique and reflection within the field. Critical theory offers one such framework and has been used across social science domains to understand relationships between individuals and institutions, histories and the present, and theory and practice amidst the exercise of power, which permeates and shapes each of these intersections (Morrow & Brown, 1994). As a lens for examining evaluation, critical theory is useful not only for developing new tools or approaches for inquiry, interpretation, and judgment, but also for theorizing the ways in which evaluators are implicated in exercises of power and coercion, which may not always be immediately apparent in localized practice (Mabry, 2010). Critical theory can thus be used to conceptualize how evaluators themselves are implicated within problematic discourses, histories, and ideologies, and how, given this influence, they might work differently given that understanding (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1990).

The aim of this study is to examine evaluation as a social and political practice, using the concepts and language of critical theory to suggest ways that ongoing and reflexive critique may be more thoroughly integrated into evaluation theory and practice. Critical theory provides a set of concepts which enable a form of critique missing from evaluation. If evaluation is moving toward a “skeptical turn” (Dahler-Larsen, 2019) and plays a role in responding to the most urgent social, political, and cultural issues of the time, the field needs a way of reflecting on its current practices and generating ideas for moving forward. My perspective in this study is intended to be neither comprehensive nor objective but is instead oriented in search of an evaluation practice which takes scientific expertise and rigor seriously, while functioning as a critical voice in planning, implementing, and reflecting upon the consequences of social interventions (Schwandt & Gates, 2016).

The three papers in this study are distinct but interconnected. They address the need and challenges of integrating concepts from critical theory into evaluation, developing a conceptual framework for how integration may occur. They also consider more practical aspects and the dynamic practice of evaluation in specific contexts.

### **Positionality**

In this study, I sought to better understand evaluation as a social practice, asking how it may be analyzed and enhanced through the application of critical theoretical concepts. My previous work in evaluation occurred during my graduate studies and was therefore often based in an academic setting. The projects I worked on primarily involved K-12 schools, higher education, and mental health outreach and service, and I am aware that my initial observations and interactions with evaluation scholars and practitioners in this study were filtered through those past experiences. In those moments, I sought to be alert to what Peshkin (1988) refers to as

“subjective I’s” which include the “persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one’s class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one’s object of investigation” (p. 17). In this process, I acknowledge that my identity is not static or categorical and shifted and developed in new ways throughout this project, yet there are certain lenses which I know I carry and want to attend to and recognize at the outset.

One element I brought to this research is a critical perspective on the field of evaluation. I sought to embed the data I collected in social and historical conditions of power and ideology, aiming to be self-reflexive in how I interacted with and was implicated within the data. I acknowledge that this research is practically and politically oriented, enabling and advocating—in subtle and not-so-subtle ways—for a new or different vision of society (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Specific to evaluation, I realize that in my own work as an evaluator, I have been both drawn in by scientific rationality and statistical reasoning as a logical form of sense-making, but also troubled by the ways evaluation can reduce, universalize, and differentiate people in order to make comparisons relative to constructed and often taken-for-granted definitions of “normal” (Lindblad, Pettersson, & Popkewitz, 2018). I sought to be aware of how this critical perspective influenced my interview questions and interpretation of interviewees’ perspectives, voice, and experiences. My aim was not to draw out the stories and perceptions of evaluators only to critique them. Through reflection and an open explanation of my research aims, this study emerged as an intersubjective experience for both me and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

Through this process, I was aware that my identity as a researcher, a graduate student, and a cisgender white man all influenced the way that this study unfolded—from the ways that I defined and sought to explain critical theory and its connections to evaluation, to the selection of

interviewees and my interactions with them. During my interviews with other evaluators and scholars, I sought to be aware of the ways I tried to ingratiate myself. Was I insecure of my own knowledge and expertise? Did I become uncertain of my own critical positions? And at the same time, did this uncertainty lead me to shy away from certain questions with certain participants and be bolder with those I feel more comfortable around—perhaps those who share my white, male, or American background? I monitored and reflected on these questions throughout my research.

In this work, I also draw from Foucault (1982), who argues that “there are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (p. 781). From these notions of subject, I understand the process of knowledge production as circular and interactive; neither subject nor object are ever fully fixed and formed but are instead engaged in a back and forth of knowing and making known. My power in the context of the interviews I conducted in some ways resided in my ethnicity, gender and familial background and privilege, but was also present in my position as a researcher, through which I in turn represented the experiences I interpreted as objects of study (Levinson, 1998). In this study, reflexivity was an ongoing process of looking for, as Peshkin (1988) writes, “the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid, and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs” (p. 18).

### **Overview of the three papers**

The three papers in this dissertation examined what critical theory can offer in the field of evaluation, investigating a form of productive critique that is underdeveloped in existing



evaluation literature and practice. Table 1 provides a brief overview of each paper, including the purpose, research questions and methodological approach used.

**Table 1. Overview of Three Papers**

	Purpose	Research Questions	Methods
Paper 1	Review instances of critical theory in the evaluation literature	How and why have critical theory and critical social science been used or applied in evaluation theory and practice?  What are themes of critique in evaluation, and what aspects of evaluation warrant further critical investigation?	Literature review
Paper 2	Examine the application of criticism and critical theory in evaluation practice through interviews with evaluation scholars and practitioners	How do evaluators use concepts, methods, or other aspects of critical research in practice? What do critical evaluators consider to be the essential elements of their practice?  What are the contexts and conditions in which critical evaluation is conducted?	Interview study
Paper 3	Examining how concepts from critical	What are the implications of critical theory for key aspects of evaluation—	Conceptual discussion

theory may contribute	engaging in valuing, producing and	and
to new/deeper	justifying knowledge, and supporting	extension of
understanding of	social problem solving?	the use of
evaluation theory and		critical
practice		theory in
		evaluation

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The first paper is a literature review which examines how critical theory and related concepts (e.g., critical inquiry, critical social science, critical social theory) are currently understood and applied in evaluation theory and practice. Providing a foundation for the papers that follow, the first paper introduces key critical theoretical concepts and identifies existing evaluation literature which utilizes these concepts in critical studies of evaluation as well as the development of critical approaches to evaluation. Findings from the review suggest that critical theoretical concepts have been applied in evaluation literature in varying ways, including extending participatory practices using critical theories of education; analyzing evaluation and enhancing practice through critical race, decolonizing, and feminist perspectives; and in criticisms of the ways that evaluation is shaped by modern ideologies and has developed as an institutionalized practice. Together, these findings suggest that although direct references to critical theory within evaluation literature are limited, evaluation scholars have identified ways to incorporate critical theoretical ideas to enhance both evaluation theory and practice.

The second paper shifts more directly to the practical domain, including interviews with practicing evaluators, conducted in order to better understand how the concepts, ideas, and methods of critical theory highlighted in the first paper are applied in the actual conduct of

evaluations. Together, the first two papers suggest ways that notions of critique, criticism, and critical research overlap with evaluation practice and are already present in the work of evaluators. Findings from the second paper suggest that evaluation practitioners have used critical theories productively to facilitate deliberation and dialogue with stakeholders around issues power, justice, and equity. At the same time, the types of inquiry that critical theories require—oriented toward action and intervention which resists the status quo and concerned with the exercise of power both locally and in broader ideologies and discourses—presents challenges to existing evaluation markets. Demands for specific forms of evaluation—objective, extractive, and detached—remain strong, forcing evaluators to identify gaps and opportunities for using critical theories within evaluative situations that are constrained by time and resources.

Finally, the third paper builds on findings from the first two, working toward a fuller conceptualization of a critically-engaged evaluation practice. The question posed in the third paper is about how to acknowledge and extend the criticisms raised about evaluation in the first two papers—e.g., evaluation as shaped by and a continuous part of historical, ideological, and discursive exercises of power—while responding to the necessity to engage with specific, local problems and decision-making through evaluation practice. Specifically, this paper draws from Kuntz's (2015) notion of responsible methodology and Schwandt's (2002) view of a moral-political practice to think through the role and responsibilities of evaluators through a critical lens. These ideas are situated alongside foundational issues in evaluation related to social programming, knowledge construction, values, use, and practice (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Analyzing critical notions of evaluators' responsibilities and role alongside essential evaluation questions points to ways in which evaluation approaches are already moving toward more critical practices—particularly through indigenous and culturally responsive work—while

illuminating ways in which continued work in evaluation may produce new ways of thinking and acting as evaluators—ways that are more continuous with the types of people we hope to be and the type of society in which we hope to live.

## CHAPTER II: LOCATING CRITIQUE IN EVALUATION

### **Introduction**

The field of evaluation has grown rapidly since its emergence in the US in the 1960s, a rise reflected in the growth of professional organizations and the demand for evaluation services across social sectors and in governments globally (J.E. Furubo & Stame, 2019). Accompanying this growth, evaluators have made advancements in theory and practice, including the adoption of new methods and approaches, as well as new ways of thinking about values, use, and their role as evaluators in advancing social justice (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). At the same time, however, there has been limited critical reflection on the ways in which the practice has expanded and what conditions have made such rapid growth possible (Furubo & Stame, 2019). Compared to the development of new methods and tools for practice, far less effort and attention have been given to critiques of evaluation more broadly as a social, cultural, institutional, and political practice, and to questions about the conditions in which evaluation has emerged and flourished (Dahler-Larsen, 2012); Furubo & Stame, 2019).

The dearth of this kind of criticism in evaluation became even more apparent amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as the field faced considerable challenges. Normal practices were upended in the organizations and institutions within which evaluators typically work, with evaluators adapting their methods, approaches, and criteria in response to the uncertainty of rapidly shifting circumstances (Patton, 2021a). As plans for implementation, project outcomes, and service mandates shifted in unpredictable ways, evaluators were forced to reflect on their own capacities to respond to uncertainties and adjust in ways which address the most urgent needs of programs and participants (Ofir, 2020). Out of this crisis, there were calls to re-think common evaluation practices, and to reimagine the role of evaluation within a global society facing increasingly

complex and interconnected challenges (Chapagain & Pande, 2021; Patton, 2021b, 2021a; Picciotto, 2021). The demand for evaluation did not subside in the pandemic, but evaluators' methods, approaches, and criteria changed alongside dynamic, shifting contexts. Such re-imagining entailed not only the development of new techniques and methods, but a critical reflection of how evaluation functions within society and its relation to socio-political aims and strategies (Patton, 2020).

In this study, my approach to engaging critically with evaluation is through the lens of critical theory. Although it is a broad term that is inclusive of multiple schools of thought and traditions, critical theory provides a framework for examining what evaluation *is* and what it *does*, not in the sense of descriptive accounting but in terms of constructed relations between systems and individuals, knowledge and power, and facts and values (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory begins from a skepticism of the status quo, including—in evaluation—the methods, tools, and language evaluators take for granted as part of their everyday work. It raises questions about the ways in which evaluators define and pursue aims of social betterment, and the potential influences of such pursuits.

This literature review investigates the use of critical theories in evaluation, including how evaluation scholars and practitioners have interpreted critical theoretical concepts in analyses of the field of evaluation and studies of evaluation practice. The following questions guide my analysis:

1. How and why have critical theory and critical social science been used or applied in evaluation theory and practice?
2. What are themes of critique in evaluation, and what aspects of evaluation warrant further critical investigation?

I begin by introducing key critical theoretical concepts to provide a structure for the review. Subsequent sections include methods, findings, and a discussion of criticism and critical theory in evaluation.

### **Critical theoretical concepts**

As Kincheloe and McLaren (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011) describe, critical social theory is a framework for understanding the social world that is “concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (p. 288). Critical theorists interrogate the ways in which these categories are activated and leveraged as forms of power, locating and scrutinizing power and its implications, as well as how it is exercised to construct injustices and inequities in society. A primary aim of critical theory is to advance the transformational capacity of knowledge by engaging in critical analysis of existing social institutions and systems, the ways in which they foster and perpetuate oppression, and the histories of their production (Leonardo, 2004).

Critical theorizing is also a hopeful and imaginative practice, always connected to a political project, and as Kuntz (Kuntz, 2015) explains, by “a dedication to move beyond description to intervention” (p. 122). Critical inquiry thus encompasses both theory and action, pursuing a hopeful vision of society by continuously interrogating those aspects of social life in which power and authority are exercised and injustices and inequities are produced. In contrast to traditional theories which often aim to isolate social phenomena and explain their occurrences within controlled contexts and from a detached perspective, critical theorists instead seek to construct practical knowledge of the social world by relating social activity—including the

actions and perspectives of the researcher—to its history and its structural conditions (Calhoun, 1995).

The concepts introduced next—ideology, discourse, culture, and context—serve as both units of critical analysis as well as theoretical building blocks for engaging in studies of power, systems, and justice. Critical inquiry entails both a project of understanding ideologies and discourses—how they emerge and what forms of knowledge and power are privileged within them—as well as analysis of localized practices and how they are situated within specific cultures and contexts and in relation to broader ideologies and discourses. As such, these terms provide one possible foundation for thinking about evaluation through a critical lens.

## **Ideology**

Ideology can be understood as a coherent set of beliefs, typically political, which are shared by a community of individuals (Gerring, 1997; N. L. Smith, 2007). In critical theory, ideology often refers to illusory beliefs or dominant worldviews which can conceal real conditions and even convince individuals and groups that oppressive conditions are normal or right (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Evaluation has been linked to ideologies labelled as modernity, neoliberalism, and positivist ideals of instrumental rationality. Schwandt (Schwandt, 2019), for instance, describes “normal” evaluation as connected to “scientific rationality, social progress, effectiveness and efficiency in social programming, and the broad ideology of modernization” (p. 321). Critical analyses of evaluation’s ideological influences situate the field within social systems, raising questions about the consequences of evaluation—e.g., the extent to which it reifies and perpetuates certain ideals and/or how it maintains existing systems which produce inequality.



## **Discourse**

Discourse is often conflated with ideology, although it is more closely associated with linguistic forms, even while going beyond merely language to connote norms and conventions which are tied to social activity (Dean, 1994). Discourse, as language, text, or other semiotic forms, sets the conditions for what is true about some object of knowledge, enabling it to become a topic of analysis and for institutions and apparatuses of governance to form responses to it (Foucault, 1978). Histories, as well as policies, reports, research, and speech about evaluation all constitute the discourse of evaluation. Evaluative discourse includes assumptions about accountability and learning as well as the language of outcomes and indicators, logic models and theories of change, and it gives meaning to words such as “improvement,” “results,” and “evidence” (Eyben et al., 2015). In critical theory, discourse is analyzed to understand how relationships of power are established and maintained. For instance, Eyben and colleagues (2015) link evaluative discourse to logic models, performance measurement indicators, and randomized control trials, and a belief in social return on investment, which they refer to as “techniques of power,” influencing how social interventions are constructed and evaluated (p. 20).

## **Culture**

The term culture can be used to describe numerous aspects of social life and society and is a complex term to define (Chouinard & Cram, 2020). In this study, I understand culture as relational and ecological, meaning that culture is inclusive of a shared sense of beliefs, values, and norms and linked to some sense of community which may be historically, geographically, or otherwise constructed. In a research context, culture includes established ways of knowing and being, tensions and distributed forms of power, and constructed identities with individual and

group meanings (Chouinard & Cram, 2020). Altogether, culture comprises what (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009) call an “interconnected social system” (p. 460) which evolves over time. Culture has played an important role in the development of prominent evaluation approaches, such as culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2015), encouraging evaluators to approach inquiry in ways that foreground the values, needs, and ways of knowing of those who have the most at stake in the program being evaluated (Hood et al., 2015). Critical theorists study culture in various ways, including critical explorations of differences within and between cultures as well as investigations of ways that cultural productions—tv, social media, etc.—function in processes of making meaning, both at individual and systemic levels (S. Hall, 2018; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

### **Context**

Greene (2004) defines context through the lens of evaluation, stating that, “context refers to the setting within which the evaluand (the program, policy, or product being evaluated) and thus the evaluation are situated. Context is the site, location, environment, or milieu for a given evaluand” (p. 83). Context is important for making sense of the conditions and setting in which evaluations are conducted but also gives direction and meaning to investigations of the situatedness of evaluation as a social practice within a broader environment. Critical theoretical applications of context are varied, but often serve to ground emancipatory projects within specific political, cultural, and social spaces (Calhoun, 1995). A critical theoretical perspective situates evaluators as part of the culture and context of all evaluation, as evaluators bring their own experiences, beliefs and expectations into all aspects of the evaluation (J. N. Hall et al., 2012).

To summarize, these terms—ideology, discourse, culture, and context—provide a useful starting point for thinking critically, asking how local and applied practices such as evaluation may be scrutinized in relation to their histories and broader social ideals and norms. These terms served as a starting as I sought to identify existing evaluation literature with critical influences. The specifics of that search are discussed next.

### **Method**

According to Boote and Beile (2007), a literature review is more than a comprehensive summary of prior research, as a substantive, relevant, and thoughtful review is a precondition for research which aspires to the same qualities. A literature review involves a synthesis of relevant research and scholarship as well as an analysis and perspective of what the research says, what is missing, and what questions can be raised based on the contents of the review (Boote & Beile, 2007). This study was conducted toward an aim of deeper engagement with both program evaluation and critical theory rather than being simply a comprehensive description of the scholarship (Lather, 1999).

My own perspective is informed by my graduate studies and experiences conducting evaluations, primarily in educational settings, that strive to be participatory and culturally responsive. My views of evaluation are also informed by a critical epistemology, as I understand the knowledge shared in the articles reviewed for this study—and this study itself—as constructed in relation to disciplinary as well as sociopolitical discourse of a given time. I sought to be reflexive in how I interacted with and was implicated within the data.

I recognize that in my own work as an evaluator, I have been both drawn in by scientific rationality and statistical reasoning as a logical form of sense-making. This “seduction of quantification” (Merry, 2016) intersects with my experiences as a cis-gendered, middle-class,

white man, informing my interpretations and analyses—what I am drawn to and surprised by in reading these studies. At the same time, I am also troubled by the ways evaluation can reduce, universalize, and differentiate people in order to make comparisons relative to constructed and often taken-for-granted definitions of “normal” (Lindblad et al., 2018). This critical perspective motivated my interest in conducting this study and influenced my choice of research questions as well as my methods for interpretation and analysis. This research is practically and politically oriented, enabling and advocating—in subtle and not-so-subtle ways—a critical view of evaluation and the institutional landscape in which it is conducted (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

The intent of this review was to investigate critical theory ideas, concepts, and applications within the field of program evaluation. In my literature search, I looked for articles and books that applied a critical approach to evaluation, with a focus on those concepts identified above. I included articles and books which explicitly cited “critique,” “criticism,” “critical inquiry,” or “critical theorizing” as their approach to conducting evaluation or which used critical theoretical concepts to analyze some aspect of evaluation theory or practice. The conceptualization of evaluation as a social practice that reflects and (re)produces forms of power was an important criterion for inclusion in this review. Articles that did not offer a theory of the political, social, and/or cultural context in which evaluation functions were not included. In this way, the terms described above were useful for making inclusion and exclusion decisions—although they were not used as search terms, every article in the review did offer criticism which used these terms to advance their analysis or argument.

General uses of critique or criticism were not included, nor were articles or studies that stated a critical aim but did not apply or define a specific critical framework or concept(s). For this reason, I excluded many articles which fall into what Mertens and Wilson (Mertens &

Wilson, 2018) term the social justice branch of evaluation theories. While there has been extensive scholarship which offers practical guidance for working with and among diverse communities and incorporating social justice values into that work, many of these articles stop short of applying critical methodologies or theorizing evaluation within ideological, discursive, or otherwise power-laden contexts.

To focus the study on evaluation, I limited my search to a set of nine prominent evaluation journals: the *American Journal of Evaluation*, *Evaluation*, *New Directions for Evaluation*, *Evaluation Review*, the *African Evaluation Journal*, the *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, *Evaluation and Program Planning*, and the *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*. I conducted a search of these journals over the last 30 years (from 1994-2023) and used a combination of the terms: critique, critical theory, and critical social science. This initial search returned 1,457 articles. After a more thorough review of article titles and abstracts, I reduced that list to 224, and again to 124 with a further review of abstracts. Further reductions during the full review process and additions based on reference lists and reverse citation searches using Google Scholar generated a final total of 67 sources. The majority of the articles reviewed for this study were conceptual in nature (84%), including proposed frameworks for applying critical ideas in evaluation and descriptions of critical approaches to evaluation. Only 16% were empirical studies, including studies which used critical methodologies and frameworks to conduct evaluations or research on evaluation.

The first phase of analysis involved descriptive coding to categorize, sort and reduce the literature based on each text's references to critical theory and related concepts. My initial categorizations closely resembled those presented in the findings below. Extending my analysis, I next coded texts within these broad categories for similarities, omissions, patterns, and themes

(LeCompte, 2000). The codes I generated included aspects of evaluation that were being critiqued, definitions or descriptions of critique/criticism, challenges or successes implementing critical approaches, and implications or consequences of evaluative critique. Coding and analysis were informed by my pre-existing knowledge and perspective. In this way, the findings from this review emerged out of a kind of internal conversation, as I sought to make sense of what I read in the evaluation literature and its relation to my evolving understanding of critique and critical theory.

### **Findings**

Findings include three themes identified within the evaluation literature: participation and pedagogy, identity and recognition, and modernity and post-modernism. Analysis of each theme reveals commonalities, differences, and dimensionalities of criticism within evaluation, providing insight about how critical theory is used and applied in the field, as well as where there may be room for further critical investigation. Table 1 below provides key connections of each theme to evaluation.

**Table 2. Thematic Findings Locating Critical Theory in Evaluation Literature**

Theme	Intersections of evaluation and critical theory
Participation and pedagogy	Critical scholars extend notions of transformative participatory practice, suggesting that evaluators engage stakeholders in analyses of existing problems in relation to ideological, historical, and institutional frameworks. This lens positions evaluators as educators and learners in a dialogic, problem-solving approach to evaluation.
Identity and recognition	Critical theory interrogates the roots of power and inequity through studies of race, class, gender, and the intersection of identities in

evaluation. Through this lens, the role of the evaluator is to raise questions about identity and power and to center cultural- and community-based knowledge practices in evaluation.

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Critical theories suggest evaluators analyze the demand for and use of evaluation in relation to ideological and political movements, arguing that expectations for evaluation—accountability, indicators, quantification—are linked to broader political ideals about governance and institutional control. From this perspective, the role of the evaluator is to acknowledge and reveal uncertainties and opaqueness in evaluation, suggesting how interpretations and uses of evaluation may be used to further political and ideological agendas.

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### **Participation and pedagogy**

One strand of evaluation literature integrates critical theory with evaluation in pedagogical terms. These evaluators conceptualize critical evaluation as a participatory practice which seeks to engage participants and stakeholders in analysis of their circumstances and the varied ways in which social inequities are constructed and maintained (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Freeman (Freeman, 2010) articulates the central concern of critical pedagogy, stating that, ...systems like capitalism produce knowledge in such a way as to obscure their oppressive consequences. Unjust practices reflecting economic, cultural, and political systems, therefore, do not manifest themselves in straightforward ways but become distorted and hidden over time within contextually and culturally embedded practices. People position themselves in practices according to ways they have “learned” to see their rightful position. (p. 2)

Recognizing these systems and the unjust practices embedded within them, critical evaluation is positioned as a tool for uncovering and disrupting oppressive forces and the inequitable conditions they produce (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010).

Freire's (Freire, 1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is often cited as a foundational reference point in critical pedagogy and in evaluation, most notably as the subject of a 2017 volume of *New Directions for Evaluation*. Freire (1970) argued against what he called the "banking concept of education" (p. 45) in which knowledge is conceived as a *deposit*: a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from the knowledgeable to one without knowledge. Freire—and the evaluators who draw from his work—critique the banking model of education as a form of oppression, subjugating learners' capacity to question established teachings and to contribute to the educative process. Freire instead proposes a problem-solving approach to education, encouraging a dialogic, collaborative engagement between students and teachers toward a more equitable and liberatory existence. As Gadotti (Gadotti, 2017) explains, in Freirean pedagogy, knowledge is not merely acquired or assimilated, but rather, "it is always the subject who constructs categories of thought through her or his experiences with another person, in a given context, at a given moment" (p. 24). Drawing from Freirean ideas, Everitt (Everitt, 1996) offers a conceptualization of critical evaluation in which evaluators and stakeholders engage in reflective dialogue to deepen their understanding of the meaning of their experiences. Specifically, critical evaluation "becomes a process of puncturing established frameworks of meaning," to better understand how experiences are "shaped through discourses" (p. 183). According to Everitt, understanding experience in turn enables resistance and change.

For Freire, knowledge is born out of moments of "epistemological curiosity" (Freire, 1997, as cited in Gadotti, 2017, p. 165), when interests and curiosity about the source and



subjectivity of information (e.g., where did this information come from and why was it deemed important to know?) drive the knowledge-building process. Similar ideas are reflected in Cousins and Whitmore's (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998b) description of "transformative participatory evaluation" (T-PE) (p. 7) as a model of evaluation which urges questions about who controls knowledge production, requiring critical reflection between evaluators and stakeholders about social factors, biases, and assumptions. T-PE and other critical evaluation approaches provide frameworks for evaluation rooted in participatory action research traditions that emerged "as a reaction to positivist models of inquiry that were seen as exploitive and detached from urgent social and economic problems" (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998, p. 8). Within these frameworks, evaluators are positioned as both educators and learners, engaged in processes of building evaluation capacity while also reflecting on the role, limitations, and consequences of evaluation through dialogue with various stakeholder groups (Mertens, 2009).

In multiple instances, evaluators have used critical pedagogical concepts to argue for orienting evaluative practice toward social justice values (Archibald et al., 2018; Patton, 2017). These authors analyze how such values ought to be integrated into reflective practice in evaluation training and education, in actions and interactions throughout an evaluation, and in "meta-reflection" which "has to do with thinking about how one can 'think like an evaluator'" (Archibald et al., 2018), p. 117). A critical pedagogical stance in evaluation thus serves as a proactive approach to articulating social justice values and working collectively to educate and transform social conditions.

### **Identity and recognition**

There are certain critical theories which take steps to locate and deconstruct specific forms of power and the ways that power functions through and in relation to social groups and

identities. While many of these theories share the aims of critical pedagogy—advancing social justice values and working toward empowerment and equity—they focus more explicitly on constructed categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality as units of analysis. They argue that identities are always social constructions yet retain material significance in the way individuals understand themselves and others, informing actions and interactions at all levels of society (Calhoun, 1995; Fraser, 2001). In this section, I share findings from evaluation literature which integrate feminist, critical race, and Indigenous/decolonizing theories into evaluation scholarship and practice.

### ***Feminist***

Pillow (Pillow, 2002) describes feminist inquiry as a project concerned with “identifying, exposing, challenging, and deconstructing patriarchy while at the same time furthering understandings of women’s experiences, histories, and knowledge” (p. 18). As both epistemology and methodology, feminist critique provides a lens for inquiry and a knowledge base for analyzing the distribution and exercise of power through constructions of gender and its intersection with race, class, and sexuality (Hay, 2014).

Threads and variations of feminist theory have evolved over time and extend across disciplines and discourses. Editors of a 2002 *New Directions for Evaluation* issue pointed to a need for additional analysis of feminist theories and practices in evaluation, stating that, “the values and assumptions that drive our programs—and the policies that are implemented through them—determine how girls and women will be educated, receive healthcare, raise their families, experience the world, and grow into old age” (Sielbeck-Bowen, Brisolara, Seigart, Tischler, & Whitmore, 2002). Sielbeck-Bowen and colleagues (2002) introduced a set of ideas which they

argued are “central to our collective conception of feminist evaluation” (p. 3). These ideas include:

- Feminist evaluation has as a central focus the gender inequities that lead to social injustice.
- Discrimination or inequality based on gender is systemic and structural.
- Evaluation is a political activity; the contexts in which evaluation operates are politicized; and the personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics evaluators bring to evaluations (and with which we interact) lead to a particular political stance.
- Knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose. Knowledge should be a resource of and for the people who create, hold, and share it. Consequently, the evaluation or research process can lead to significant negative or positive effects on the people involved in the evaluation/research.
- Knowledge and values are culturally, socially, and temporally contingent. Knowledge is also filtered through the knower.
- There are multiple ways of knowing; some ways are privileged over others.

Evaluation scholars also highlight challenges of enacting feminist critique through evaluation. As Hay (2014) explains, critical feminist evaluation involves a “healthy discomfort... that comes with trying to negotiate and insert feminist principles into a time-bound, resource-bound, judgment-oriented exercise” (p. 208). Hay describes challenges particular to an international development context in which the production of gender inequity is often reproduced within “mainstream development discourse” (p. 208) as value-laden policy and program designs as well as indicators of success are implicitly disguised as neutral and unproblematic. She argues that the role of the feminist evaluator is to raise questions about how and by whom development discourse is constructed, asking how “what works” is defined and developing evaluation questions that seek to identify gaps in program theories around gender inequities.

Mulder and Amariles (Mulder & Amariles, 2014) emphasize participatory methodologies as an opportunity for feminist practice in evaluation as they critique traditional forms of stakeholder engagement as often “only a quick interaction with community representatives,

usually male, and a selected group of the most accessible—and thus typically most privileged—beneficiaries” (p. 229). While advocating more inclusive participatory strategies throughout stages of the evaluation, Mulder and Amariles (2014) also point to the need to develop skills for navigating relational spaces—not only to manage relationships but also to engage stakeholders in critical dialogue around issues of power, discourse, and systemic injustices.

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Like gender, race functions as a “master category” (Omi & Winant, 2015) which pervades social life and the interventions constructed social conditions. In critical approaches to research and evaluation, race is taken up as a lens through which the distribution and production of power, justice, and oppression can be understood, analyzed, and resisted, notably in frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), but also through LatCrit theories, post-colonial theories, and intersectional queer, feminist, and decolonizing theories (Omi & Winant, 2015).

In a paper that traces the roots of culturally responsive evaluation, Hopson (Hopson, 2012) describes CRT through three principles: “(a) the ingrained nature of race and racism, (b) the importance of narrative and counternarrative perspectives told by people of color, and (c) the centrality of interest convergence.” (p. 15). Interest convergence is a concept which suggests that “significant change in the social circumstances of people of color (i.e., racial equality) will only come about if and when such change is also in the interest of Whites (Noblit & Jay, 2010), p. 73). Together, these principles produce a framework which foregrounds persistent race-based injustices extending across social domains, including research and evaluation. For evaluators, CRT provides a basis for asking and interrogating questions of racism, power, and privilege within social interventions and embedded in the institution of evaluation itself.

In practice, CRT and related theoretical frameworks are more often cited as influences than used explicitly to guide evaluation. One exception is Noblit and Jay (2010), who apply the concept of interest convergence, along with “whiteness as property” (p. 73) to critically evaluate a model of school reform used in predominantly Black schools, constructing a counternarrative to “white school reform” (p. 74). These concepts help theorize fundamental injustices in the way school reform is constructed in policies and programs—privileging whiteness and subjugating Black interests. Through a CRT framework, the authors reimagine the task of evaluation—what is being evaluated, why certain value criteria have been chosen, and what the aim of evaluating *effectiveness* entails.

A CRT approach to evaluation requires knowledge of both the dominant narrative within a given context and the concepts necessary to construct a counternarrative. Noblit and Jay (2010) argue—and this point has grown increasingly stark in the 10 years since their study was published—that,

although we would argue that every aspect of American life is marked by race, it is clearly true that not all share this view and even if they do they may feel this assertion itself creates too much controversy. Thus we believe CRT will likely be limited to evaluation of programs that are racially marked in rather definitive ways (p. 79).

These authors point to the challenges of using CRT concepts, stating that they did not use CRT terminology with clients, as they anticipated it might be controversial or perceived as misaligned with funder’s hopes of measuring effectiveness.

Critical theories are also used to problematize aspects of the profession and practice of evaluation, or to suggest alternative ways of conducting evaluation. A prominent example is Stanfield’s (Stanfield, 1999) theorization of the links between race, power, and evaluation

through the concepts of racialism and racial categorization. These concepts bring awareness to the exercise of power and authority and enable a deeper understanding of how evaluative methodologies and methods are implicated in broader ideologies and societal norms. The construction of racial categories is used to justify “power, control, and economic exploitation” (p. 420). These practices function within institutions and across society, and are not solely carried out by individuals, but perpetuated through ideologies which are normalized and routinized over time.

### ***Indigenous/decolonizing theories***

Indigenous and decolonizing theoretical frameworks involve the deconstruction of dominant forms of knowledge production—i.e., Western, modernist, colonial, imperialist scientific practices—in order to illuminate the ways power is exercised and, as Smith (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021) explains, leveraged to “deny the validity of indigenous peoples’ claims to existence, to land and territories, to the right of self-determination, to the survival of our language and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living within our environments” (p. 1, as cited by Hopson, (Hopson, 2012) on p. 10). Alongside this deconstruction, however, is an important assertion to create spaces of resistance and hope, prioritizing indigenous communities’ control over research activities and reclaiming cultural languages, practices, and methodologies.

Evaluation scholars have been influenced by decolonizing theories such those described in Smith’s (L. T. Smith, 2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* and applied critical concepts toward aims of indigenous self-determination (Cram et al., 2018). In an introduction to a *New Directions for Evaluation* volume, Cram and colleagues (2018) define Indigenous evaluation (IE) as “practiced *by, for, and with* Indigenous peoples” (p. 11).

The critical nature of IE is evident in the authors' emphasis on Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies, in contrast to Western ways of knowing which have "continued marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the resources of society" (p. 9). Wehipeihana (2019) argues that in IE, there "is no assumed role for non-Indigenous people, unless by invitation" (p. 370). Control over the evaluation process by Indigenous people is described as essential for the reassertion of Indigenous ways of knowing and evaluation conduct which aligns with Indigenous values and beliefs.

Additionally, Bowman (Bowman, 2020; Waapalaneexkweew & Dodge-Francis, 2018) has traced histories of tribal sovereignty in the United States as a way to introduce and advocate for a Tribal Critical Systems Theory for evaluation. Through this work, she articulates fundamental assumptions to guide critical indigenous evaluation, including how tribal sovereignty functions as the driver of inquiry, that "the political power of public governments was achieved and is sustained through illegal, unjust, and unethical means" (Waapalaneexkweew, 2019), p. 350) and "the concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on a new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (p. 350). This critical work also contains a message of resistance and action, explained through the concept of "oppositional consciousness" which asserts "pushback to the socio-political and economic systems and policies of injustices endured through demonstrations, marches, or boycotts" (Bowman, 2020, p. 103).

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### ***Institutionalization***

Dahler-Larsen (Dahler-Larsen, 2019) argues that evaluation is becoming increasingly institutionalized as efforts are made to strengthen "both the cultural and structural underpinnings of evaluation" (p. 59). He uses the term institutionalization to describe the way that evaluation is

systematically integrated into oversight and managerial practices across public and private sectors as well as the way that the actual conduct of evaluation grows more routine, stable, and standardized. Other shifts toward the institutionalization of evaluation include the codification of evaluation practice into manuals, guidelines, and checklists and the proliferation of evaluation policies, organizational evaluation capacity building, and the mainstream integration of evaluation into organizational theories (Dahler-Larsen, 2019; J.E. Furubo & Stame, 2019). Scholars link the institutionalization of evaluation to ideologies and discourses, suggesting that evaluation's spread across the globe and throughout public institutions is "associated with the diffusion of specific notions about politics, implementation, societal development, policy development, public administration and so on" (Furubo & Stame, 2019, p. 4). Critical scholars seek to identify and investigate the implications of these associations between evaluation and broader social, political, and cultural shifts.

One of the most common lines of criticism centers around evaluation's connection to New Public Management (NPM), which emerged in the 1980s as a belief about how to improve public services, organizations, and institutions, emphasizing measurable outcomes, performance management, decentralization, competition, and market-driven practices (Norris & Kushner, 2007). Reflecting these beliefs, scholars document a rise in what has been called "managerial" (Everitt, 1996) or "bureaucratic" (Macdonald, 1976) approaches to evaluation. Scholars argue that the spread of managerial evaluation is supportive of bureaucratic structures through which broad policies are translated into localized outcomes, leading to stress on mid-level managers to reach performance goals while increasing competition within and between organizations to reach desired outcomes faster and more efficiently. In this system, evaluation serves as a mechanism of accountability, providing measures of control over local actors via simplified indicators which



can be rolled up at each bureaucratic level to make claims about institutional or policy effectiveness (MacDonald, 1976).

(Norris & Kushner, 2007) suggest that within NPM and neoliberal ideologies, “the call for effectiveness, efficiency and accountability create an almost inexhaustible demand for evaluation or evaluative mechanisms” (p. 9). Over time, they argue, evaluation itself becomes bureaucratic and routinized. Dahler-Larsen (2012) adds that the repeated and routinized approach to evaluating and reporting solidifies outcomes so that “they become part of what must be taken as reality” (p. 81). Critics argue that within the NPM ideology, evaluation functions not as a driver of social change and innovation but rather as a political tool for maintaining a status quo within organizations by focusing attention on efficiency and effectiveness while discouraging macro analysis of the form and function of organizations, policies, and institutions. Evaluation under the influence of NPM spurs market competition by constructing rankings and league tables, by transforming identities into essentialist categories, and by gauging success across almost every human domain in terms of productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness (Dahler-Larsen, 2012).

Even before NPM was fully entrenched in public sectors across Western societies, (Apple, 1974) argued that typical evaluation practices were “epistemologically and politically conservative” (p. 9), reflecting social interests in “stability, human predictability, and ultimately social control” (p. 6). Like Apple, Cronbach and colleagues (Cronbach et al., 1980), House (House, 1993) and Popkewitz (Popkewitz, 1984) described evaluation as a technology which could be wielded as a tool for surveillance and control when used within bureaucratic structures whose concerns are defined as technical and administrative. For Apple (1974), evaluators “run the risk of substituting the search for a smoothly running factory for the critically important

debate over the purposes and means of the institution” (p. 21). Notably, the institutionalization of evaluation is, on the one hand, evidence of the growth and development of the field, as policies and standardized practices enable its spread (Dahler-Larsen, 2019). On the other hand, however, these same characteristics can entrench evaluation within the status quo of organizations and institutions of which it purportedly aims to scrutinize and improve. Apple (1974) poses a question which summarizes this critical stance toward institutionalized evaluation, asking, “can one study the real outcomes and processes of educational programs when one’s research uses categories and data derived from and serving the institution itself, without at the same time giving support to the bureaucratic apparatus these categories and data serve?” (p. 18).

The institutionalization of evaluation also affects the way information is processed and presented. If a social intervention must be evaluated, the information that the intervention generates must be made evaluable. Numerous scholars observe this trend through the outsized role of indicators, objectives, and quantification in modern evaluation (Chouinard, 2013; Lindblad et al., 2018; Merry, 2016). Dahler-Larsen (2019) uses the example of research institutions, explaining that,

where research evaluations become more widespread, more frequent and more used in managerial decision-making, there is a need to develop alternatives to time-consuming, in-depth peer reviews. Bibliometric measures seem to help solve this problem by offering objective and fast ways to evaluate and compare the quantity and quality of research production across research groups. However, counting publications instead of reading them is a dramatic epistemological change (pp. 68-69).

At the heart of these criticisms is an advocacy for greater reflexivity, premised upon the notion that the consequences of evaluation extend beyond instrumental and rational uses and into

the realm of how we make sense of societal norms and values. They advocate for a more self-reflexive practice—one which begins with acknowledging evaluation as a social and institutional practice which constructs and is constructed by socio-cultural norms, values, and beliefs.

### ***Post-structural/post-modern***

Another category of critical influences identified in the evaluation literature include what Harklau and Norwood (Harklau & Norwood, 2005) refer to as “postmodernisms,” referencing the plurality of perspectives included within postmodern and poststructuralist paradigms. Mabry (Mabry, 2010), for instance, distinguishes between “extreme” and “affirmative” (p. 87) postmodernist—the former characterized by a state of “disillusion and cynicism” (p. 87) and a refusal to participate in social science given its historical misuse by oppressive systems, institutions, and individuals. The affirmative postmodernist embraces the political project and interventionist approach of critical theory while “bringing with them a humility and self-reflectiveness suggested by the postmodern insight. For them... retreat would be socially and personally irresponsible” (p. 87). This version of postmodernist thinking resembles what Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) refer to as “oppositional,” “critical,” or “resistance” postmodernisms (p. 304). They explain this paradigm of inquiry as one in which, “critical theory provides the postmodern critique with a normative foundation (i.e., a basis for distinguishing between oppressive and liberatory social relations). Without such a foundation the post-modern critique is ever vulnerable to nihilism and inaction” (p. 304).

The move toward a more critical postmodernism does not suggest, however, that a postmodern view of evaluation does not entail a radical departure from typical practices. Postmodernism involves doubt—if not outright rejection—about the ability for texts to convey truth about any pre-existing or existential condition (M. Greene, 1994; Schwandt, 1997). Text is

used here in the broadest sense to include all forms of speech, images, and symbols, as well as categories of individual representation such as gender, race, or sexuality. All forms of representation—including evaluation findings, reports, or even data—are suspect from a postmodern perspective, as they have been and will continue to be used to exercise power and perpetuate false assumptions (M. Greene, 1994; Mabry, 1997).

A central question raised by evaluation scholars is what to do with this doubt and uncertainty. As Abma (Abma, 2002) writes, a postmodern reading of evaluation invites scholars and practitioners to consider making no promises to stakeholders about “certainty, clarity, and reduced variation” (p. 106) and instead ask what evaluation might look like without judgment, conclusions, and summaries. Abma (2002) adds, “how then do we navigate between our own postmodern sensibilities embracing conflict and the impossibility of fixing meaning and stakeholders' expectations conditioned by the hegemony of privileged scientific knowledge?” (p. 285). She points to a conflict between the uncertainties embraced by postmodernism and the clarity desired by those who commission, direct, and conduct most forms of evaluation.

Postmodern readings of evaluation also offer more pointed critiques of the role of the evaluator, re-imagining the representations of evaluator as educator, facilitator, or impartial observer, suggesting instead that evaluators occupy subjectivities that are dynamic and never fully known. Harklau and Norwood (2005) say that from a postmodernist perspective, evaluator roles are always positions from which power is exercised (regardless of the extent of participatory or transformative methodologies employed) but that “individuals are never fully self-aware about their own subjectivities and how they are shaped by societal discourses and therefore never fully able to declare or take responsibility for them” (p. 282). Rather than roles to be played, these subject positions become moments for critical reflection about how the

evaluator sees themselves and how they are perceived by others and what kind of relationship has emerged at different points in the process. Stronach and colleagues (Stronach, Halsall, & Hustler, 2002) take this critique further, arguing that certain evaluating subjectivities often remain hidden or omitted from typical analyses of evaluator roles. They describe “bidding” and “reporting selves” as moments of “performance,” full of “silences and omissions” (p. 179). These moments are difficult to study given their confidentiality, and they are often left out of evaluation models and theories, despite being instances in which the evaluator is most likely to align themselves with the ideals and interests of funders and program directors. Mabry (2010) argues that the critical evaluator’s regard for power and authority is double-sided. While the assertion of social justice values stands in opposition to a traditional role of evaluator-as-technician, all social values bring their own “ideological edges” (Mabry, p. 93). For this reason, Mabry argues that the critical theoretical evaluator’s challenge is to both look skeptically at the claims of objectivity and truth asserted by evaluator technicians and methods experts but also to be wary of their own assertions of authority. Freeman (2010) further elaborates this point, stating that evaluation itself is “implicated in discussions about which societal and cultural values and principles of justice will prevail and which ones will get subverted or ignored altogether” (p. 1).

### **Discussion**

Critical theory fundamentally concerns issues of power and ideology, including the ways that they are concentrated and exercised in social systems and institutions. The literature reviewed for this study demonstrates that evaluation is intertwined in such systems and institutions, at times perpetuating unjust constructions of power while also maintaining the potential to disrupt and counteract inequities. Critical studies of evaluation suggest that the practice has served as a tool in conserving power structures by reflecting and upholding modern,

organizational, and bureaucratic structures and codifying methods of measurement that support them. At the same time, applications of critical theory in evaluation practice suggest that evaluators can produce counter-narratives and promote more equitable and just programs and policies. This section expands on the findings of this review, offering reflections and implications for evaluation.

### **Participatory and culturally responsive evaluation through a critical lens**

Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) argue that from a critical perspective, without engaging stakeholders, evaluators cannot understand “how a social system has become enmeshed in a particular context and practice, nor can they know what forms of oppression or injustices are present” (p. 8). Findings from this review suggest that the critical lens offers something which resembles and extends approaches to evaluation which fall under the “transformative-participatory” family of approaches (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998a), focusing inquiry on the intersection of experiential and theoretical knowledge. These two forms of knowledge do not always align easily, however, and through this exploration, the evaluator is positioned as a facilitator which, as Everitt (1996) explains, “is assigned a moral responsibility—namely, to be critical of the status quo, facilitating groups not only where there is observable conflict but where a consensus can mask dimensions of power and powerlessness” (p. 179). A critical lens regards neither evaluator nor stakeholder perspectives as wholly truthful, but rather views all perspectives skeptically, analyzing moments of seeming contradiction to raise questions and deepen understanding. Participatory evaluation from a critical lens should encourage pointed questions about how *what works* is defined, and, if a program works, who does it benefit? These participatory practices require mutual engagement in criticism of the systems and circumstances

which produce inequities and injustice, as evaluators and stakeholders examine the source and subjectivity of varied forms of knowledge.

Findings from this review also suggest concepts and methodologies for conducting evaluations which interrogate subjectivity and identity, providing insight for how evaluators might enhance culturally responsive practice with these concepts in mind. For instance, (Stanfield, 1999) details the effects of racialism in academia and social science, critiquing concepts, instruments and the role research plays in constructing race “as an ideological justification for power, control, and economic exploitation” (p. 420). Further, Indigenous scholars draw from decolonizing methodologies, using concepts such as self-determination and legal and historical frameworks to investigate how evaluation is implicated in colonizing practices and to advocate for alternative pathways (Cram et al., 2018; Waapalaneexkweew & Dodge-Francis, 2018). These notions push evaluative thinking beyond quantified indicators of diversity, equity, and inclusion, guarding against the threat of buzzwords and corporatized techniques standing in for critical analysis (Alejandro Leal, 2007). They suggest a way of shifting how we practice evaluation, how we think about evaluation and its purpose, and what our roles are as evaluators.

### **Integrating theory and practice**

Critical theory does not fit easily alongside traditional conceptualizations of evaluation approaches. In evaluation, “theory” is often used interchangeably with “approach” or “model” (Alkin & Christie, 2013), and each of these terms has been used to refer to guides to evaluation practice as well as stances on the purpose and design of evaluation (Alkin & Christie, 2013). Critical theory, however, entails a dynamic interaction between theory and practice, applying

theories about power, ideology, gender, class, and race in the service of transformational change (Freeman, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). As Freeman (2010) explains,

what differentiates a critical social theory from other theories guiding social science is skepticism that theory and practice serve each other well when kept separate, that is, when one is seen as the explanation for the other. How people view the world, make sense of it, and act on it, are effects of theory and practice, historical and local, and need to be examined in ways that uncover the historical and local conditions for current practices in order to improve them (p. 3).

Examples from this study of blending theory and practice include Noblit and Jay's (2010) use of counter-narratives to analyze and support school reform, Harklau and Norwood's (2005) analysis of subject roles in their evaluation of a summer program, and Cram and colleagues' (2018) application of decolonizing methodologies in the articulation of how and by whom Indigenous Evaluation is conducted. These studies provide examples of applying critical theory in evaluation practice. This critical reframing of evaluation practice calls into question the concepts we take for granted as evaluators (e.g., values, methods, use, knowledge construction), disrupting traditional conceptions of how we understand ourselves, our role as evaluators, and the intersections between inquiry practices and how we live and understand our everyday realities (Schwandt, 2002).

### **Further exploration of critical concepts**

Findings from this study reveal various conceptual and practical applications of critical theories in program evaluation, yet certain aspects of critical theory receive very limited attention in the evaluation literature. For instance, critical theory methodologies are rarely discussed, including approaches to inquiry such as critical discourse analysis, histories and genealogies,



critical ethnographies, and critical case studies. As some of the studies in this review described, the history of evaluation is closely linked with management systems, educational measurement, and quantitative rankings, suggesting that those who commission evaluations for programs and policies may not expect or request more critical approaches. Additionally, while evaluative studies which analyze questions of equity and justice are becoming more common (Symonette et al., 2020), it may still take time for critical methods and analytical strategies to emerge in evaluation training and practice. Lastly, critical theory may open new possibilities for research on evaluation, which has been a long-standing concern in the field ((N. L. Smith & Brandon, 2008). Critical theoretical concepts, such as discourse, ideology, and power, have received limited attention in the field (Mabry, 2010), but present new ways of interrogating the influence and impact of evaluation, as well as the history of the field and its emergence as a professional practice.

### **Conclusion**

As attention and political capital shifts away from the remnants of a global pandemic and while deep political division becomes more entrenched within the United States, programs and policies face new challenges (e.g., discourses of “post-truth” and authoritarian regimes) which require evaluators to adapt their methodologies and methods to new demands and contexts. Within this landscape, critical theory is not a cure-all, but it does offer a lens for problematizing and confronting issues that are salient in the field (e.g., evaluation marketplaces, bureaucratization, accountability demands, and the focus on social justice and equity as evaluative aims). Critical theory provides methodological strategies for demonstrating the effects of market-based thinking and managerial styles of evaluation through discursive and ideological analysis. At the same time, critical theory is centrally focused on transforming unjust conditions

through deep interrogations of the status quo—asking why and how normalized forms of oppression have come to be accepted and the reasoning and rationale that allows them to continue. Critical theories have received limited application in evaluation but may provide a framework for evaluative practice that extends existing participatory and culturally responsive approaches epistemologically, ontologically and methodologically.

## CHAPTER III: APPLYING CRITICAL INQUIRY IN EVALUATION PRACTICE:

### EXPERIENCES OF SCHOLAR/PRACTITIONERS

#### **Introduction**

As a practice which aims to inform judgements and improve social policies and practices, evaluation is implicated in discussions of cultural and societal values—playing a role in which values are deemed salient and which are secondary in a given context. At the same time, evaluators have historically aspired to ideals of neutrality and objectivity, seeking the role of unbiased arbiter in political discussions. Over time, what scholars have referred to as “bureaucratic evaluation” (Macdonald, 1976), “managerial evaluation” (Everitt, 1996), or “establishment-oriented evaluation” (Silver, 2021) have proliferated in response to these multiple demands and expectations, characterized by a boundedness to pre-determined criteria which enables evaluation to produce knowledge limited to “the frames of the status quo” (Silver, 2021, p. 383).

Scholars drawing from critical theory and other social philosophies have critiqued these moves toward neutrality and objectivity, on the one hand providing evidence that facts and values exist on a continuum rather than in mutually exclusive categories, while on the other hand advocating that evaluation can and should play a role in democratic societies and the furtherance of social justice (House & Howe, 2000; House, 1993; Mertens & Wilson, 2018). As a means of advancing evaluation’s capacity to support emancipatory and social justice aims while remaining diligently skeptical of the status quo in the evaluation marketplace, critical theory contains an extensive body of scholarship which lends new ways of thinking and acting for evaluators seeking to position their work in relation to moral and political ends (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1990).

Critical theory reveals the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and discourses embedded in programs and policies, providing a framework for evaluation which challenges traditional concepts in the field. Critical research and analysis provide a route to action and social change, envisioning knowledge as embedded in historical discourses but also potentially transformative (Leonardo, 2004). As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) explain, “research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label political and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness.” (p. 300).

Using interviews with evaluators, this research investigates how and why critical theory and related concepts are applied in evaluation practice, the challenges those applications present, and the opportunities for learning and action that they generate. Building on earlier studies, this analysis of practitioner perceptions seeks to understand how evaluators interpret critical practice and apply it in their own work. The questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do evaluators use concepts, methods, or other aspects of critical research in practice? What do critical evaluators consider to be the essential elements of their practice?
2. What are the contexts and conditions in which critical evaluation is conducted?

### **Critical theory**

Given its extensive history and varied, continuously evolving traditions, critical theory can best be understood as a framework for inquiry rather than a specific set of concepts and strategies for conducting social science. As a framework, critical theory orients inquiry toward the exercise of power and social relationships, asking why society is organized the way it is, and how it came to be that way (Levinson et al., 2016). In contrast to theories within a field or domain (e.g., theories of learning or pedagogy; theories of evaluation use and practice), critical theory seeks understanding at a broader scope. Levinson and colleagues (2016) offer a brief definition, suggesting that critical social theories are “those conceptual accounts of the social

world that attempt to understand and explain the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity” (p. 2). While situating critical theory at the societal scale, this definition also points toward more specific aims of critical research.

As Levinson and colleagues’ (2016) definition references, structural domination and questions of power are a central focus for critical theorists. My own understanding of critical inquiry is influenced by post-structural work, specifically drawing on the writing of Michel Foucault. Foucault argues that the analysis of power should occur “on the basis of daily struggles at the grass-roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power” (Rabinow, 1984, p. 58). For critical theorists, the local expression of power—experiences of inequality, injustice, and oppression—provide the starting point and catalyst for critical study. Power analysis does not, however, primarily entail study of the individuals or groups who hold power. Instead, critical theories—and post-structural thinkers in particular—de-center particular subjects and groups, instead situating power within “systems of knowledge that discipline how people participate and act” (Popkewitz, 1997, p. 5). This is not a dismissal of the privilege embedded within social categories but rather a tracing of the struggle for power—in the case of Popkewitz’s (1997) investigation of schools and schooling—to how “norms are embodied in the categories, distinctions, differentiations, and divisions by which teachers come to ‘see’ and act toward children” (p. 6). The critical aspect here is recognizing how norms are constructed to include some and exclude others, and how those rules of inclusion and exclusion constrain or prohibit access, participation, and action.

Critical theory is motivated by a goal of “advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 11). As such, critical studies often aim to identify problems within common systems and institutions and explore possibilities for transformation. Critical

studies have investigated how education systems and schools can both reproduce social inequities and serve as sites of struggle and democratization (Apple, 1974; Giroux, 2014), ways in which categories of identity provide both means of alienation and collective strength (Fraser, 2001; Omi & Winant, 2015; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and how research can flatten experience or reveal new depths and possibilities (Lindblad, Pettersson, & Popkewitz, 2018; Merry, 2016). Emancipation from oppressive conditions is a recurring intention of critical research, as knowledge is leveraged to disrupt existing relations of power. The role of the critical researcher then, is to question ideas, systems, and practices that appear normal and certain, analyzing their historical production and maintenance (Rose, 1999).

Given the orientation toward power and emancipatory action, critical theories seek to describe the world in terms of the relationship between structures and individuals (Levinson et al., 2016). Individual agency is not omitted, but freedom and choice are mediated by histories, cultures, policies, and institutional arrangements. For instance, teachers and students make countless decisions that affect learning, but those decisions are made within frameworks of school, district, state, and national policies, as well as histories of decisions about the purpose of schooling, what should be taught, and how. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) argue, “critical research attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives” (p. 288). Critical research functions as a mode of engagement with these forces, not simply refuting them, but catalyzing deeper analysis.

Lastly, by understanding the social world as constructed and shaped by discursive trends, critical theorists also understand their own work as embedded within, informed by, and potentially influential of contemporary discourse and ideologies. Social theories, in other words, are subject to the same social dynamics they explain and, as Geuss (1981) argues, “critical

theories are always in part about themselves” (p. 55). In practical terms, critical theorists apply scrutiny to their own work in order to understand its effects on the organizations and practices which they investigate (Freeman, 2010). Critical inquiry is also often participatory, engaging various parties in questions about research itself. Lather (1986) argues that critical theorists engage in reciprocity, suggesting that the goal of this kind of work is to “encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the persons being researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge” (p. 266). In this way, critical theorists engage in empirical work to deepen understanding of power with a reciprocal and educative goal of dislodging, repositioning, and transforming those relations of power which enable unjust conditions to persist.

### **Critical theory in evaluation**

A 2010 volume of *New Directions for Evaluation* entitled “Critical Social Theory and Evaluation Practice” provides a notable introduction of critical theoretical concepts into the evaluation literature. In this volume, scholars trace the history of critical social theories from Marx to postmodernism (Mabry, 2010), elaborate a critical theoretical approach to evaluation (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010), and use reflective case narratives to deliberate the possibilities and challenges of implementing such an approach (Freeman, 2010; Hooper, 2010; Noblit & Jay, 2010; Segerholm, 2003; Zeller-Berkman, 2010). Freeman (2010) captures the overarching aim of the volume, to “show the relevance of critical social theory for evaluation as a pedagogical approach that fosters critical dialogue for the purpose of developing more socially just practices” (p. 5). As the NDE title indicates, these authors are primarily focused on the practical implications of applying critical theoretical concepts in the actual conduct of evaluation.

Prior to the 2010 NDE volume, explicit references to critical theory are less prevalent in the evaluation literature. Articles such as those from Sirotnik and Oakes (1990) and Everitt (1996) took a similar approach to the 2010 NDE authors in imagining a critical evaluation practice. Others, such as Mabry (1997), Abma (2002), and Stronach, Halsall, and Hustler (2002) incorporated postmodern critiques of the field, engaging in deconstructions of normalized aspects of evaluation—e.g., the role of the evaluator and reporting evaluation findings. Throughout the history of the field, scholars have also engaged in critiques of the politics of evaluation, including the ways it works as a form of cultural authority within capitalist systems of governance and in service to politicians and administrators. Notable examples of this kind of critique include Apple (1974), Cronbach et al. (1980), and House (1993). Cronbach et al. (1980), exemplified a central premise which animates many of these forms of critique, referring to evaluation as a “social technology” which “reflects a political theory: ideals for evaluation are rooted in ideals for governance” (Cronbach et al., p. 23). These articles critique evaluation as a field, institution, and/or discipline with implications for practice but offering limited explicit guidance for practitioners.

Since 2010, multiple forms of critique persist in evaluation scholarship—e.g., critiques of the politics and institutionalization of the field, critical pedagogical writing—but the field has also grown more acutely aware of and attentive to issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion (Mcbride, Casillas, & Lopiccolo, 2020; Mertens & Wilson, 2018). Alongside this growing awareness, critical theories have been cited as influential in the development of evaluation approaches that attend to culture, race, and gender, and in rationales for modes of evaluation practice that encourage participation and dialogue (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). Scholars have also used these critical lenses to examine the field, interrogating its history and the ways in which



politics of race, gender, class, and colonization have informed its development (Cram, 2018; Hopson, 2012; Neubauer & Hall, 2020; Shanker, 2019; Symonette, Miller, & Barela, 2020).

Critical theory poses challenges to conventional ways of thinking about and conducting evaluation. By posing critical questions about the contemporary cultural, political, historical, and institutional function of evaluation, critical theory demands engagement with what Dahler-Larsen (2019) calls a “skeptical turn” for the field, or a move toward what Schwandt (Schwandt, 2019) calls “post-normal” evaluation. Applying critical theory in evaluation is a project of empirical inquiry about what role evaluation plays in society and what—or whose—interests the practice serves (Everitt, 1996; Schwandt, 2019). Such critical examinations can enable new theories of what the function of evaluation ought to be, and how it should be practiced.

### **Methods**

This paper explores how concepts and ideas from critical theory are applied in evaluation practice. The research is designed as an interview study, using critical theory as a guiding perspective (Roulston, 2010). Interviews were conducted to better understand how and why critical theory is used in evaluation practice while also enabling discussion of the implications of critical theoretical approaches to evaluation practice.

### **Sample and data collection**

For this study, I interviewed 15 evaluators, all with doctorates, and most (12 of the 15) currently in academic positions. Given that critical theory is not a conventional approach to evaluation, participant selection was an important, if somewhat complex, task. The primary challenge involved deciding whether to limit case selection to evaluators who explicitly cite critical theory as an influence in their work, evaluators who self-identify as “critical” evaluators in a more general sense of the word, or to select evaluators whose practices and beliefs align with

a conceptual framework of critical theory, even if they don't explicitly self-identify as taking a "critical" approach. I chose the third option: selecting evaluators whose work fits a broad definition of "critical" in orientation and approach, even if those evaluators do not explicitly cite influences from critical traditions. This decision was based on a review of critical evaluation literature and finding that few evaluators explicitly identified their work in critical theoretical terms. Additionally, critical theory is a broad field with varied influences, and expanding my selection pool allows for the inclusion of those who work within traditions outside of those directly tied to Frankfurt school writers and philosophers (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas), such as critical race, decolonizing, and critical feminist schools of thought.

Participants for the study were selected based on a purposive sampling strategy with the intent of identifying participants which could provide in-depth information relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). My recruitment and selection of participants followed from the findings of a previous study (Paper 1), which shed light on how critical theoretical concepts are applied in evaluation research and practice. That study identified three categories of critical evaluation scholarship: critical pedagogy, critical identities and institutionalization and post-modernism. Participants in this study have published research and conducted evaluations which fall into one or multiple of these categories, and participants were selected to cover the breadth of these critical evaluation studies.

Participant recruitment involved direct emails to evaluation scholars and practitioners, at times facilitated through mutual acquaintances. Each interview was semi-structured, recorded via Zoom video calling software, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative inquiry, analysis is an ongoing process which begins in the early stages of data collection (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, analysis was informed by the conceptualization of critical theory and evaluation articulated in the literature review above. Qualitative coding was conducted based on Deterding and Waters' (Deterding & Waters, 2018) notion of "flexible coding," beginning from the premise that analysis is not exclusively inductive but rather "in dialogue with existing theory and findings from previous studies" (p. 13). Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I wrote analytic and reflective memos to support interpretation of findings and make connections between my pre-existing conceptions and my observations from the data.

Following the approach described by Deterding & Waters (2018), I began analysis by inductively coding and categorizing the data in small chunks (e.g., lines, paragraphs). Even at this stage, however, coding blends with theoretical analysis and my conceptions of critical theory and evaluation practice informed my initial notes and preliminary themes. At this point, most codes aligned with the interview protocol and other broad topics, as well as "aha" moments or surprising quotes (Deterding & Waters, 2018). In the second stage of analysis, I reviewed codes and began organizing, deconstructing, and reorganizing codes to move to a broader level of abstraction. I first identified the general structure of the findings at this point and began thinking about the data in terms of perspectives, practice, and context. In the final stage of analysis, I further reduced the data through a process of analytic coding (Saldaña, 2011). At this stage, I read and re-read coded parts of transcripts, considering alternative interpretations and the consistency of themes and codes. The aim at this stage was to start to develop concepts within larger chunks of data. I developed and elaborated themes in this final stage of analysis.

Through this process, I am aware that my identity as a researcher, a graduate student, and a cisgender white man influenced the formulation of guiding questions, my interactions with interviewees, and my interpretation of data. According to Lincoln and Guba (2005), reflexivity in these instances, “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives” (p. 183). During my interviews with other evaluators and scholars—many of whom received Ph.D.’s in programs like the one I am working to complete—I was attentive to the ways we built rapport through conversation about the dissertation process and graduate school comparisons. At times, I became insecure of my own knowledge and expertise and uncertain of my own critical positions—leading to instances where I deferred to interviewees rather than pushing back on definitions and asking follow-up questions. At the same time, my whiteness influenced how some interviewees responded to me; some raised the importance of white scholars understanding and working alongside evaluators of color and indigenous evaluators, while others acknowledged that their own work was more oriented toward categories of class or gender than race. I reflected on these moments throughout my research using reflective and analytic memos. I sought to be aware of and responsive to the ways that this critical perspective influenced my interview questions and interpretation of interviewee responses.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that all the evaluators interviewed for this study are PhDs and most (12 of the 15) currently hold positions in academia. As such, these evaluators are not representative of the entire field, and in interviews, they discussed certain aspects of their work that were enabled by—or unique to—their background and/or position in academia. Among

them, many interviewees described having the opportunity to choose projects based on interests, alignment with their values and research agendas, and/or learning opportunities for graduate students. In some cases, evaluators said that clients sought them out based on their reputation for conducting critical or culturally responsive evaluation. Academic evaluators were chosen for this study given that their record of critical evaluation research and practice was documented in scholarship and because they would be able to speak to the implementation of critical evaluation practice, even in limited or specific circumstances. Interviewees were cautious, however, about their ability to speak to the broader application of critical approaches in the field. According to one evaluator,

I have the privilege of a day job. And so, I don't have to work with anybody who doesn't want to work with me. That's a real privilege. And that's atypical. Those of us who are in academia... we can be selective, and we're not dependent on [evaluation contracts]. And that's not true for most people who are doing evaluation. So, for most people, they're consultants, they're private contractors, they work within agencies, whether it's government agencies or NGOs, where they don't have that kind of freedom and luxury.

With that in mind, findings from this study should be interpreted as informing the intersection of critical theory and program evaluation rather than as practical guide for implementing critical evaluation. Although evaluators spoke about practical aspects of their work, they spoke more about the lenses they apply in understanding and conducting evaluation work, as well as philosophies of practice more than practical steps for conducting evaluation. As one evaluator explained, “evaluation is a funny field. You have people in academia who are writing about, theorizing about things, and there's a disjuncture with the people who are doing evaluation. And so, how do those ideas meet? It's not really clear.” Given the findings of this

study, there remains extensive room for exploring the context and conditions in which critical evaluation has been and may be applied.

### **Findings**

In interviews, evaluators shared experiences and perceptions from their work and background, providing insight into how they conduct evaluation, the lens they bring to their work as critical scholars, and how they understand the influence of a critical perspective on their decisions and interactions throughout an evaluation. As stated in the introduction, the questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do evaluators use concepts, methods, or other aspects of critical research in practice? What do critical evaluators consider to be the essential elements of their practice?
2. What are the contexts and conditions in which critical evaluation is conducted?

### **Understanding evaluation within social and political frameworks**

Across interviews, evaluators described the terms upon which they understood evaluation, referring to its position within systems and institutional structures. For interviewees, analysis of evaluation in these terms enabled critiques of the cultural and political values and assumptions which often shape practice. For instance, evaluators critiqued bureaucratized, routine ways of conducting evaluation that have proliferated in numerous sectors over the last four decades. They expressed concerns about evaluation conducted in service to managerial oversight, accountability, and institutional standardization, suggesting that these forms of evaluation, “don't allow for taking risks... don't allow for asking really difficult questions.” Evaluators described various experiences with this type of evaluation, often expressing that their questions about a program or policy were seen as outside the bounds of typical evaluation, or that the evaluation they were being asked to conduct focused narrowly on questions of

accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness without further exploration of the social and structural conditions that may be influencing the program being evaluated.

The rise in bureaucratic and managerial forms of evaluation was also often associated with neoliberalism or New Public Management (NPM), ideologies linked to the commodification of practices and ideas, and the spread of market-based thinking and decision-making across public and private institutions. One evaluator described the impact of NPM on evaluation, saying,

evaluation becomes tangled up in these ideas about what's most cost effective and efficient, what minimizes taxpayer dollars, what minimizes government intervention, what takes advantage of private entities... And part of that, in the US, at least in education, has to do with the ways in which, [there has been] a return to post positivism as the only way of thinking about knowledge construction, and evaluation has really fortified things like the What Works Clearinghouse and public-private partnerships... Within neoliberalism, we sell [evaluation] off. We make it just a commodity, just like tires or washing machines.

Concern about the commodification of evaluation was frequently expressed by evaluators in these interviews. The proliferation of fee-for-service evaluation creates incentives for evaluators to respond to the needs of program funders, possibly limiting the opportunity for critical evaluation. As one evaluator explained,

it bothered me to see the self-confidence of evaluation consultants who were selling concepts of evaluation to public authorities and to teachers. And this whole idea that if only we measure things, things will become better.... I think to some extent, evaluation has become a ritual or a myth, or an obsession. And there are totally irrational reasons

why people are obsessed with evaluation—the idea that we can control the world if we measure it, and it will change automatically for the better. And those who have power should have data and those who have data should have power. And there is something there which is really uncomfortable in terms of being irrational to a point.

This viewpoint extends into more specific criticism of evaluation practice. At a local level, a critical perspective is characterized by close analysis of how programs and policies define the problems they are intended to address as well as the potential effects of those problem definitions and their potential resolutions. For instance, one evaluator gave an example that informed their own evaluative perspective, explaining that,

[I was] working in a youth shelter where the same kids kept coming back to the shelter. They said, this is an emergency crisis shelter and we're doing great because people are using the shelter. And I was like, 'What? That doesn't make any sense at all.... I was confused by and frustrated by our focus on projects and programs, and not focusing on broader social issues, or communities... I wasn't sure why the project boundaries were driving evaluation so much.

As the quotation above suggests, a critical lens encourages analysis of program outcomes and criteria, questioning programmatic boundaries and considering the experiences and situations of program participants in relation to broader social contexts.

### **Deliberation, dialogue, and embracing uncertainty**

When asked about how the critical lens influenced their practice, interviewees focused on the intentions, processes, and implications of facilitating deliberative dialogue. As an evaluative practice, deliberative dialogue involves raising critical questions about programs and policies, their value and effects, and about the role and function of evaluation. In these interviews,



evaluators often explained that they drew from participatory evaluation approaches but extended the notion of participation to focus on engagement in deliberate, critical discussions and creating space where diverse stakeholders could share their experiences and perspectives. The deliberate aspect of such conversations refers to how evaluators intentionally acknowledge and address questions of power that surround the program and reflect upon the purpose and implications of evaluation. Interviewees described using deliberate discussions to focus attention on understanding power in a localized context and moving stakeholders toward action.

The intention of deliberative dialogue varies, and evaluators described embracing conflict that can emerge as different viewpoints are raised and considered. These evaluators suggested that even without consensus, dialogue provides a way to analyze the origins of varied ideas and deepen understandings of the knowledge and perspectives that shape the direction of the program and the potential impacts or consequences of the work. As one evaluator described,

there is always a swampy lowland in professional practice, which is of the greatest human concern. But it's a mess. And in that mess, we can learn the most, but it's a different kind of knowledge which is generated in that messy area. There's always what I say an existential and moral residue that cannot be treated with objective techniques. So, the challenge is to endure that messy swampy lowland, uncomfortable, where we are confused, where we are uncertain... But it's hard to be in that area. And professionals always try to go to hard ground where they have certainty. And I myself too, of course, that's a very human desire to, to have certainty, to know who you are and what you are and how you can solve problems. We love to solve problems.

Evaluators suggested that by embracing uncertainty and raising questions about differences in values and perspectives, new knowledge might emerge. While many of these

evaluators stated that they used components of more traditional evaluation approaches and prepared final reports for clients and stakeholders, they emphasized dialogue as their primary tool of evaluation. For these evaluators, co-production of knowledge and evaluative judgment was essential to how they understood critical evaluation practice. One evaluator provided an example:

I remember our colleague... she wanted to use theories of change and I think everybody was really excited about it because it seems eminently doable. They're like at the end, we're going to have this neat one-paper thing.... And then it took us three weeks, and we never got anywhere. Because every time somebody would say, this is a mechanism, the other person would say, 'no, that's context.' And I was having great time on the sidelines, because I was like, 'right, this is cool, this disagreement.' They did not think it was cool at all. They thought it was a huge problem that needed to be resolved. But all I could see was finally people grappling with the fact that they were living in a single world that they actually fundamentally didn't agree about.

Through dialogue, evaluators sought to bring together people who, as one evaluator said, have “differential access to information and resources” and “people who don't ordinarily talk to one another.” Another evaluator described their approach as thinking about, “how can we conceptualize evaluation in another way, much more horizontal, engaging people in dialogue and creating a communicative space where people could talk about what the value of the practice was.” This component of deliberative dialogue—bringing diverse perspectives together in conversation—was also described as a sometimes difficult or complex task. Some evaluators explained that they approached dialogue in phases, first bringing together smaller groups of stakeholders (e.g., program participants, staff, or leadership) before facilitating dialogue in

groups where power differentials and perspectives may generate more uncertainty or conflict. Others noted that they adjusted practices based on constraints of the evaluation or the politics of a given program.

The evaluator is also a part of the dialogic space, and acknowledging how and why an evaluation is being conducted can be an essential component of discussions with stakeholders. As one evaluator explained, “as a researcher, you're also a part of that space.... You decide what questions come there, who you are asking to talk to, who do we bring together, and how do you write about it?” The critical evaluator plays an active role, raising questions about the evaluator and evaluation in dialogue with stakeholders. In some circumstances, it becomes possible to address notions of power directly, using critical concepts to give language to certain expressions of power or inequality. The knowledge and language of critical theory offers metaphors to catalyze further critical analysis. As one evaluator stated,

I can also bring in concepts like silencing and epistemic injustice to give it a name.... that's where critical theory can come in to reframe problems in a new way.... helping the hermeneutic process—the interpretive process—with new tropes, with new vocabulary for people to redefine their situation. But it's grounded in their experience. So, it never starts with those concepts; they come along in working with people.

### **Identifying and shifting the “movable parts of the institutional framework”**

Part of a critical approach to evaluation is an orientation toward action. The previous section described ways that dialogue and rhetoric serve as tools toward generating ideas and catalyzing change. Evaluators, however, also emphasized the importance of understanding the context of a given policy or program and identifying what one interviewee described as the “movable parts of the institutional framework,” suggesting that critical evaluation involves a

systemic view of policies and practices while at the same time understanding that such systems are not transformed easily or all at once. Critical evaluation entails identification of the limits and possibilities for change within structural conditions. As one evaluator explained,

If I can gently move them away from something that they are obsessed with, to open the space for another kind of—for less evaluation, or better evaluation, or other kinds of values in their work or the practices—that's what I still do. And we can't move them there unless there is a space for it. I need to create a little space for the movable part of the institutional framework, because otherwise they can't move it. It's not all rhetoric, it's also very much finding the movable part of an institutional framework so that we can change that part, and then see how far we can come with that.

In critical theoretical terms, the institutional framework consists of practices as well as beliefs, ideologies, and/or discourses that have become ingrained within organizations, groups, or sectors of public or private life. Understanding these institutional factors—and how they influence and shape individual thoughts and actions—becomes part of the evaluation project, as does finding and creating space to facilitate change. Evaluators described varying degrees of institutional change as within their scope. As one interviewee said, “we work within a mission that's given, but... that is our role, to at least put the question to them, is this the right mission, given what we're learning about the issue?” According to another evaluator,

Ultimately, you have been asked or tasked to do something within certain parameters. I don't think that when you're asked to do something, there is never any room to push back, I think it is that core competence of finding out and judging just how much you can push back, or how you can kind of steer things, which includes making clients aware of alternative values or alternative formulations of values.

For these evaluators, shifting the institutional framework involves a critical knowledge of the policy or practical landscape, rhetorical skill to identify opportunities for change and facilitate that change, and judgement of the limits of what is possible. Knowledge of the program and substantive domain (e.g., healthcare, education, etc.) being evaluated was cited as important for identifying entry points into the program or policy space, where opportunities for change or transformation may come to light. While many evaluators identified themselves as generalists (i.e., working across multiple substantive domains), they also noted ways of building domain knowledge, including research and conversations ahead of an evaluation or relying on others within an evaluative team when possible. Additionally, the ability to facilitate and engage stakeholders in critical discussions was deemed an essential skill for engaging stakeholders, identifying opportunities for change, and surfacing tensions within a group in order to move past them. One evaluator described their work teaching evaluation classes, noting the importance of facilitation,

And there is an openness to having students who are generalists, but still nevertheless, have a number of parameters that they're unwilling to [compromise]... so the critical ones remain critical no matter what—it's just that they can modulate, they can turn the volume up or down, depending on what is needed. And then the second skill, I think, is, is being able to negotiate or translate or make explicit those tensions in work with others, because it's often collaborative, even if it's just collaboration between the evaluator and the client, in terms of determining parameters of the project.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study suggest that critical evaluators bring a lens to their work which situates their practice within social and institutional frameworks, orienting their

aspirations to aims of emancipation and social justice which extend beyond programmatic objectives. Through this lens, evaluators engage in collaborative practices with stakeholders to facilitate deliberate discussions about the program, the values and beliefs embedded in the program and evaluation, and the role of evaluation in moving toward social change. A critical lens and dialogic practices were described as essential for the evaluators I interviewed, although they acknowledged that their realization in practice can be complicated and made difficult within the context and conditions in which evaluation is typically conducted. In response to such conditions, they advocated identifying movable parts within programs and policies, suggesting that critical shifts can occur through surfacing uncertainties, questioning assumed logic, and raising points of tension that often remain implicit within programs and policies.

### **Integrating social theory into evaluation practice**

From a critical perspective, evaluation does not operate in isolation but rather is part of a political, social, and institutional landscape. An essential component of critical theory involves analysis of specific and localized practices (e.g., evaluations and the programs and policies being evaluated) to scrutinize their connections to broader assumptions, beliefs, and institutionalized norms. It is through these multi-level analyses that critical theorists argue power becomes visible and change becomes possible—locating the roots of inequity and oppression not in individuals but in discourses and systems that propagate explanations, techniques, and ways of thinking that attempt to steer individual thoughts and behaviors in specific ways (Rose, 1999). In these interviews, evaluators shared how bringing a critical lens to their work allowed them to see their own role and evaluation practices within a broader landscape and influenced their ability to engage stakeholders in conversations which expanded the boundaries of programs and policies, envisioning them in relation to social, cultural, and political assumptions and forms of power.

The specific perspective evaluators bring to understanding social structures, ideologies, and discourses varies across critical frameworks (e.g., feminist, post-structural, critical race theory), but a foundational component of applying critical theory in evaluation is viewing the practice itself as embedded in these broader landscapes. In interviews, evaluators described influences from outside the field, noting that their perspective of evaluation was informed by studies of history, sociology, and philosophy. These influences extend evaluators' thinking beyond traditional evaluation approaches, generating questions about how and why evaluation is conducted, whose interests it serves, and the effects of evaluation. This perspective reflects the systemic thinking and skepticism that critical evaluators bring to their practice.

A critical perspective also entails a continuous questioning and re-examining of critical frameworks, interrogating them as they are applied. In interviews, evaluators often followed descriptions of their approaches to the work with explanations of the faults and areas for improvement in those same approaches. As Freeman (2010) argues, critical theory requires that “social science practices themselves cannot simply be regarded as the means to an end but must themselves be openly scrutinized to understand better their effects on the structures and practices under investigation” (p. 3). Consistent reappraisal of the adequacy and relevance of critical frameworks was a common description of a critical perspective that framed how these evaluators approached their work.

### **Deliberative dialogue as a means toward emancipatory ends**

For evaluators who apply critical theory in their evaluation practice, deliberative dialogue serves as a means for surfacing different value perspectives, clarifying and addressing power relations within a programmatic context, and discussing the implications of programmatic actions for a diverse group of stakeholders. The emphasis found in this study on deliberative

dialogue aligns with previous conceptualizations of critical theory in evaluation, such as from Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010), who describe critical theory as a “participatory approach that engages constituents or stakeholders in a reflective and critical reassessment of the relationship between overarching social, economic, or political systems, such as capitalism or accountabilism, and everyday practices” (p. 8). Findings from this study suggest that application of critical theory in evaluation should center deliberative dialogue among stakeholders and evaluators throughout the evaluation process.

More than encouraging dialogue as methodology, however, critical theory suggests areas and directions for discussion. As an example, critical theories often situate problems, rather than answers, at the center of inquiry. As (Leonardo, 2004) explains, critical theory “does not always offer a blueprint solution to a given problem, like racism (how does one “end” racism?), but rather to pose it as a problem, to ask questions about common answers rather than to answer questions” (p. 13). For evaluation, this kind of inquiry raises questions such as, why this policy and why now? Whose interests are served? What ideologies and discourses are proliferated? What is made visible and what is excluded in these policies? (Pillow, 2015). In interviews, dialogue was cited as the primary means of raising such questions.

House and Howe (2000) describe dialogue as a process of discovering “real” vs. “perceived” interests, saying that “choice alone is not necessarily determinative of real interests. It must be choice exercised under the right conditions” (p. 7). These authors point to the significance of context and conditions in facilitating dialogue. More than a discussion of values and beliefs, House and Howe, as well as interviewees in this study, frame dialogue as a means of uncovering truths below the surface, revealing contradictions and sometimes discomfiting knowledge of the different viewpoints and ideas held across stakeholder groups. Facilitating



dialogue is a rich and complex task in evaluation. Critical theory provides guidance for how such facilitation might become a more common practice in the field.

In some instances, evaluators suggested that they had developed a reputation as critical practitioners and were asked to evaluate programs or policies by people who knew the lens they would bring to their work. As previously noted, many of these evaluators work primarily in academia and have had the flexibility over their careers to choose projects and partners that are well-aligned with their values and aspirations as professionals. Others, however, indicated that deliberative dialogue and extensive collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders often does not fit easily within the marketplace of evaluation and demands for accountability, checklists, and objectified indicators of “what works.”

### **Leveraging critical theory toward deeper understandings of power**

Previous research has called attention to the absence of power as a concept in evaluation scholarship and practice. As Gregory (Gregory, 2000) argues, “power is really the great unmentionable in evaluation theory” (p. 194). While attention to power has grown through the elaboration of transformative-participatory, indigenous, and culturally responsive approaches to evaluation, critical examinations of power remain scarce in evaluation (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard, 2019). As shown through the interviews conducted for this study, power is a central focus of critical theory, and further integration of critical ideas may offer an avenue toward deeper investigation of how power is exercised through evaluation and the programs and policies being evaluated. Findings point to critical evaluators using deliberative dialogue to engage stakeholders in discussions of power, navigating and pushing on the boundaries of the institutional structures by which power differentials are maintained.

In addition to surfacing power and authority through dialogue, critical theory also offers explanations and ways of understanding power that have received limited attention in evaluation. Notably, critical theorists often frame power as a force for oppression as well as resistance and change. As Foucault (Foucault, 1982) argues, “every power relationship implies, at least *in potential*, a strategy of struggle... It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape” (p. 794). Interviewees expressed similar understandings, although in less direct terms. For instance, numerous evaluators interviewed for this study were critical of evaluation’s connections to neoliberal and bureaucratic ideologies, conceiving of evaluation as a practice which maintains the status quo and ongoing oppressive conditions. At the same time, these evaluators expressed hope in the potential for evaluation to play a role in emancipatory and transformative change, arguing that a critical lens can illuminate unjust circumstances, build and share knowledge based on diverse experiences, and support impactful programs and policies.

The critical lens in evaluation is useful for raising questions about who participates in evaluation, what current discourses and ideas guide practice, how certain approaches and techniques became commonplace, and what consequences result from evaluation when it is conducted in certain ways under certain circumstances (Giroux, 2019; Stickl Haugen & Chouinard, 2019). The use of critical theory in evaluation can draw out specific questions that engage stakeholders and evaluators in discussions about evaluation, its role and authority, and its potential to catalyze positive change. Critical engagement in evaluation practice involves close analysis of evaluation practices themselves, their histories, the location of power within them, and their ethical and moral stances in relation to the social activities they are employed to study. Critical theory serves as a lens and catalyst for scrutinizing evaluation as both a local and

institutionalized practice, suggesting that in the aim of contributing to a more just, free, and equitable world through evaluation, the field must give careful consideration to how evaluation is commissioned and used, and the ways in which evaluative knowledge is leveraged within relations of power and authority.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, evaluation scholars and practitioners were identified based on their use of critical concepts and ideas in their research and practice. In interviews, these critical evaluators surfaced a variety of ways in which critical philosophies and practices can deepen analyses of theory and practice in evaluation while advancing thinking about how evaluators can support programs and policies to reach emancipatory and social justice aims. Critical theory provides a lens for engaging with programs and policies that are products of culturally and politically complex webs of power, knowledge, and values. This lens suggests concepts and language which not only aid evaluators in understanding the terms of their work within a broader social landscape but support the facilitate of dialogue about evaluation and social practices with those who are invested in the work.

When considering next steps in the integration of critical theoretical ideas into program evaluation, it seems reasonable to begin to map these two seemingly disparate practices onto one another. In this study, we began with notions of critical theory—asking about its essential components and ideas, then looking for their applications within evaluation. If we instead use evaluation as a reference point—and evaluation theory seems an apt place to start—how might critical theory sit within the framework of questions that guide evaluators’ work (e.g., questions of use, value, knowledge construction, and practice) (Shadish et al., 1991)? Mapping critical theory onto a framework for evaluation theory could provide an additional and beneficial

resource to support evaluators in thinking about their own work and the policies and practices they evaluate through a critical lens, engaging more deeply with political and social questions, and collaborating with those impacted by such practices to take deliberate action toward improving their lives.

## CHAPTER IV: APPLYING CRITICAL THEORY: TOWARD A SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY ENGAGED EVALUATION PRACTICE

### **Introduction**

Critical theory has been applied sparingly in evaluation, but such cases have suggested implications for research on evaluation as well as evaluation practice. Critical theory is a social theory which provides a lens and set of assumptions for thinking about the relationship between inquiry practices, including the intersections of local practices and broader institutions and discourses, and the ways in which we might work toward practices and relations which are more just, equitable, and free (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Some scholars have demonstrated that criticism is useful in the conceptual analysis of evaluation as a historical, social, and institutionalized practice (Dahler-Larsen, 2012; J.E. Furubo & Stame, 2019; Mabry, 1997). Others have suggested that evaluation practice may be enhanced through the development of a critical approach (Everitt, 1996; Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010; Sirotnik & Oakes, 1990). Rarely, however, are these two applications of critical theory integrated into a unified argument. My primary interest in this article is asking, how can we take seriously evaluation critique and at the same time use it productively to inform a critical evaluation practice?

As an example of a critique of evaluation practice and its entanglement in histories, discourses, and institutions, Norris and Kushner (2007) situate evaluation within the ideological framework of neoliberalism, contextualizing the proliferation and institutionalization of evaluation within an increasingly market-driven social landscape. They critique evaluation's function within a neoliberal movement which is hyper-rational and individualized, bringing larger swaths of public life in line with "business values, micro-economics and market

mechanisms” (p. 3). Evaluation is both produced by and furthers the reach of neoliberalism, as demands for performance indicators and managerial oversight increase and are met and refined through evaluative practices within bureaucratized systems of governance and accountability.

Others (e.g., Furubo & Stame, 2019; Mathison, 2018) have similarly scrutinized evaluation’s alignment and evolution alongside political ideologies and discourses. Critical studies of evaluation offer new metaphors which expand how we might think about the function of evaluation—understanding it as a social technology (Kemmis, 1993), a machine (Dahler-Larsen, 2012), or a discursive practice (Picciotto, 2017). These terms are useful for understanding evaluation within a power-laden and institutionalized society, suggesting that the methods, activities, and norms that comprise evaluation are defined and evolve alongside shifting political ideals. These terms encourage evaluation scholars to recognize the practice not as an inherent good employed along the pathway to a better society, but rather as a social practice which is deeply entangled in specific relations of power, history, and complex narratives about what a better society looks like and how to work towards it. Picciotto (2017) argues that as a discursive practice, evaluation,

facilitates surveillance, induces conformity, regulates action, sets boundaries, and defines rules of conduct. On the other hand, when unshackled and autonomous, it can fulfil its public interest remit (determining the merit, worth and value of things) as a tool of resistance to the hegemonic discourse of vested interests, by exposing its contradictions, and offering alternative narratives grounded in experience rather than dogma (p. 313).

These metaphors for evaluation enable historical analysis of the field and practice which orient it toward political and social aims—scrutinizing evaluation’s role in producing,

maintaining, or disrupting dominant narratives and encouraging evaluators to intervene and act to advance more free and democratic societies.

At the same time, critical theoretical concepts have been used in evaluation practice more directly. A 2010 volume of *New Directions for Evaluation* articulates a range of practical implications emerging from critical theoretical analysis. For instance, Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) use critical theory to expand existing evaluative approaches, stating that, “critical theory is the label for a group of participatory, pedagogical, and action-oriented theories that advocate for a certain kind of evaluation or inquiry approach.” (p. 8). This framing localizes critical theory, confronting evaluators with specific practical questions and challenges. Multiple scholars have advocated a version of this critical approach, suggesting modes of participation, roles for evaluators, and strategies for engaging in deliberate dialogue in ways that align with varied schools of critical inquiry (Bowman, 2020; Everitt, 1996; Prado, 2011; Sirotnik & Oakes, 1990).

The aim of this paper is to extend these ideas as a way to explore the question of what critical theory can offer the field of evaluation, asking how critical social theories can co-exist with, inform, and guide or shape evaluation practice. I pose the question, how can we use the criticism of evaluation’s entanglement in socio-political discourses to inform our evaluation practice? My argument is that critical theory is most insightful for evaluation when its theoretical and practical applications are integrated as a critically engaged practice—a way for evaluators to think about themselves within a broader context of social change while working within (and challenging) the time and resource-constrained spaces in which evaluators currently operate. The aim here is not to revisit theory-practice debates but rather to advocate a simultaneous theoretical engagement in practice and practical advancement of theory that is informed by critical theoretical traditions. By doing so, evaluators may be better equipped to understand ways in

which inquiry is co-opted and coerced into maintenance of the status quo while at the same time identifying active ways to resist and catalyze change in material conditions.

### **Study Overview**

Making this argument requires two initial steps. First, I rely on two ideas—Kuntz’s (2015) notion of “the responsible methodologist” and Schwandt’s (2002) “moral-practical evaluation”—to introduce the type of critical inquiry I am interested in. Together, these two conceptions of critically- and ethically-engaged practice present an in-depth study of how critical theory—and in particular the post-structural work of Michel Foucault—is useful in applied methodological work in contexts such as education. Their arguments present a vision of practice that is relational and active in working toward a more just and free society. At the same, this view of practice is also philosophical and theoretical—both scholars argue that critical work is intertwined in discourses which must be unpacked in order to be resisted.

The second step requires an understanding of what evaluation is and has been—a set of ideas and questions against which we can imagine different ways of thinking and acting through critical inquiry. To establish this understanding, I draw from fundamental issues of evaluation presented by Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991). While these authors present a framework of evaluation in order to analyze “good” evaluation theory, the questions they pose are fundamental for thinking about what we do when we practice evaluation. Their questions allow us to think about the decisions we make and why we do what we do throughout the evaluation process. As such, their framework is well situated for thinking about how critical theories might reframe, alter, or potentially disorient typical evaluation work.

A brief note about my decision to use work from Kuntz and Schwandt is important. The work of Schwandt and Kuntz is far from the only possibility for analyzing and proposing new



forms of critical evaluation practice. I found that these two authors and the critical lenses from which they work fit well alongside each other, foregrounding ethics of disengagement and *logics of extraction* rooted in long-standing discourses of neoliberalism and technocratic approaches to social science. These ideas resonate with me as I pursue a career in educational research and program evaluation and look for ways to resist work that replicates and further embeds the individualized, economic, and alienating social discourses which have become the status quo in education. Readers may rightly point to alternative frameworks with similarly critical and disruptive potentialities—critical race theory, critical feminism, and decolonization have all been applied to varying degrees in evaluation literature, providing critical analyses of evaluation’s history, relation to networks of power, and practical means of intervening and disrupting the status quo in the field (e.g., (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Cram, 2018; Hay, 2014; Hopson, 2012)—and I allude to some of this work throughout this paper. I hope that this critical study and the use of work from Kuntz and Schwandt offers a starting point and encourages further writing and practice related to the application of critical inquiry in evaluation.

### **Critical inquiry and methodological responsibility**

Kuntz (2015) draws from Foucault’s work (Foucault, 1982, 1994b, 1994a) on ethics and responsibility to scrutinize the ways in which methodology—and I would add evaluation—are entangled in discourses which privilege inquiry that extracts data (e.g., quantifiable markers of identity or health indicators; qualitative data representing voice, experience and perspective) from lived reality and operates from a distance, where the inquirer applies procedural forms of meaning-making (e.g., analyses of cause and effect; processes of transcribing, coding, and synthesizing interviews). Kuntz (2015) refers to these forms of inquiry as guided by *logics of extraction* which encourage the commodification of social phenomena and situate methodology

as “part and parcel with the political rationality that is neoliberalism” (p. 43). Through critical analysis, he links the contemporary methodologist to neoliberalism in terms of identity (similar to a middle-manager in the business world), responsibility (to legitimize and give authority to the procedures of knowledge production), and practice (extracting data—‘experiences’, metrics, etc.—to produce “a commodity packaged for the interpretive market” (p. 48)). Ultimately, he finds that “assuming extractivist logics situates the methodologist on a narrowed path toward reductive, simplistic findings that have little hope for producing progressive social change” (p. 63). For Kuntz, this finding necessitates a reimagining of methodological responsibility—one which encourages engagement and intervention in the world rather than acting from a distance.

Kuntz’s vision for a new methodological responsibility is materialist and relational. He describes materialism as an approach to inquiry which aims to reduce the distance between the inquirer and the object of inquiry, arguing that, “materialist methodologies begin with the assumption that engaging in inquiry practices always affects the phenomena of interest—we can never *not* impact that which we study” (p. 64). The lack of distance between subject and object is clarified through analyses of discourse and ideology—the normalization of technocratic methodological practices cannot be viewed separately from the dominant values and rationalities of neoliberalism; the methodological focus on extracting data from its material context cannot be viewed independently from globalizing desires to compare individuals and groups at larger and larger scales. The materialist view brings notions such as discourse and ideology into view, as daily practices are given meaning through dominant rationalities and values, making them common-sensical and granting them legitimacy, while the continuation of those same practices further cements dominant ideals as the status quo.

Once we recognize these links between broad social patterns and methodology, it follows that our methodological practices are also relationally entangled with other aspects of daily life.

This is one of Kuntz's central arguments:

There is not much distance at all between how we live, who we claim to be, and how we come to know.... Changing how we think about and enact inquiry necessarily involves changing how we interpret and act within the world; therein lies the possibility for productive social change... Our times require engaged researchers who can openly articulate the link between the work they do, the methodologies to which they subscribe, and the type of social change they envision. (pp. 13-14)

As an example, Kuntz points to the way that the U.S. education system promotes individualistic ideals, such as aspirations for social and economic mobility and the belief that through educational success, one can exceed one's current economic status. A relational view reveals the contradiction in this belief: valuing mobility only makes sense at the individual level.

As Willis (1977) explains,

to the individual working class person mobility in this society may mean something.

Some working class individuals do 'make it' and any particular individual may hope to be one of them. To the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all. The only true mobility at this level would be the destruction of the whole class society. (p. 128)

Through educational systems—and systemic methodological practices—neoliberal values and rationalities become normalized and taken for granted as common-sensical. These values pervade our everyday life.

What does this mean for the methodologist and evaluator? For one, it implies a shift in the scale of inquiry—from the individual to the discursive and institutional, analyzing how individual practices are informed by broader assumptions and rationalities, and how such practices grant legitimacy and visibility to institutionalized logics and values. Moreso, the methodologist is implicated in such recognitions, as traditional inquiry practices themselves focus on the individual, identifying “best practices” and “success stories” which seemingly transcend context and conditions. From a relational perspective, the inquirer is implicated in this process and thus has the responsibility to intervene—to problematize individualistic values and assumptions, asking how we might think and act differently.

Kuntz emphasizes the methodological responsibility to *intervene*, to “refuse the status of methodologist-as-technocrat” (p. 19) and to “serve as a productive irritant” (p. 67). These arguments follow from the closed distance between methodological work and daily living, and from the relational view of the no-longer-distinct subject and object of research. Given awareness of these links, the methodologist (and evaluator) have a responsibility to identify them in their work, analyzing and revealing how *inquiry events* (e.g., the observation, interview) are caught up in histories of places and things, in policies which inform and regulate practices, and in ongoing processes of meaning-making—about oneself and the surrounding world. As Kuntz argues, with this awareness of methodological entanglement with macro-level discourses and ideologies,

we might be said to, at the same time, become responsible for their resolution... we now have a newfound responsibility to construct methodologies that attend to relational formations of knowing and being... consequently, relational thinking might be seen to

activate and enable social justice work, asking that we work for social change even as we, ourselves, are open to being changed by such work (p. 75).

How do we, as evaluators, go about the practice of evaluation in a responsible and moral way? If we take Kuntz's ideas of methodological responsibility seriously and seek to engage in critical inquiry, how should we begin? To think through these questions, I turn to scholars who have studied and (re)interpreted professional practice through a critical lens. Elaborating this form of relationally and materially oriented critical practice, I move to evaluation scholarship which has examined the shifting discourse of professional practice and sought to develop a more critically oriented engagement in evaluative spaces.

### **Moral-practical evaluation**

Schwandt (2002) begins his discussion of evaluation practice from a position similar to Kuntz's discussion of methodology, suggesting that evaluation should function as an activity of teaching and learning, oriented toward action and self-understanding, becoming "more continuous with the way we live in the world" (p. 47). This aspiration to bring evaluation more in line with daily living leads to an argument for centering moral and ethical considerations about who we are as individuals and what kind of society we can envision and hope to contribute to. Schwandt (2002) suggests an evaluation practice that requires practical reasoning alongside technical ability to explore political and moral meanings of unfolding and uncertain programs, policies, and practices. This kind of practice is more interested in developing self-understanding than standing from a distance to explain an external world and it focuses on the concrete rather than seeking abstraction, concerning itself more "with probing than with proving" (Schwandt, 2002, p. 36).

Schwandt's (2002) argument for reconsidering evaluation practice resides in an effort to "resist the assimilation of evaluation practice to technique" (p. 55). Similar to Kuntz, he identifies a "discourse of disengagement" (p. 43) in which evaluators are incentivized to objectify, bring order, and "manage the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life" (p. 14). He argues that even inclusive, participatory, and empowerment approaches are susceptible to such discourses, to the extent that these efforts advocate evaluation as a means for finding consensus, reducing disorder, and promoting instrumental reasoning as a pathway toward social progress.

To contrast the discourse of disengagement, Schwandt (2002) argues for a shift toward moral and practical evaluation, advocating the infusion of practical philosophy into evaluative work. This is a move away from strictly theoretical or empirical knowledge and toward *phronesis*, a term he takes from Aristotle to refer to "practical-moral knowledge" or practical reason. He explains that "*phronesis* is intimately concerned with the timely, the local, the particular and the contingent (e.g. what should I do now, in this situation, given these circumstances, facing this particular person, at this time)" (p. 229). This type of reasoning emerges through application and is inextricable from our being and becoming as practitioners. In other words, *phronesis* becomes visible in action—in conducting evaluation and making decisions throughout the evaluation process—rather than in reflection or explanation of how or why some action or decision worked or didn't. As such, practical knowledge is characterized not in terms of its validity, method, or capacity to objectify but rather through ethics, deliberation, poetics, and rhetoric (Schwandt, 2002). For the evaluator, this implies a need for situated understanding and thoughtful judgement about what is good and right within a given

circumstance as well as the creative capacity to facilitate deliberation about specific and concrete problems and to persuade others based on that deliberation.

By shifting the frame of reference away from the technical and toward the practical, Schwandt (2002) envisions a role for evaluators that emphasizes teaching and learning through dialogue. This work encourages engagement in dialogue with others, with histories of ourselves and our practices, and with other approaches to knowing and being. To be more specific, Schwandt (Schwandt, 2001) cites Karlsson's (Karlsson, 2001) evaluation of after-school centers in which he summarizes viewpoints of various stakeholder groups through metaphors, engaging stakeholders in both "scrutinizing their own views and in grasping the views of others" (p. 233). From these metaphors, the evaluator invites stakeholders "to engage in a conversation (an interpretation, a dialogue) with several kinds of performances of key issues, relationships and understandings" (p. 233). While this kind of evaluation does not foreclose empirical study or theoretical abstraction, Schwandt (2002) argues that,

in this alternative discourse, the practice of evaluation itself becomes more contiguous with the practices it aims to assist. Those who call themselves evaluators would be principally concerned with helping practitioners of various kinds (teachers, managers, social workers, and so forth) become better practitioners... to help practitioners acquire the ability to deliberate well—to assist them in developing their own wise practice. (p. 57)

This approach resembles Kuntz's encouragement of inquiry as intervention, and Schwandt argues that evaluation should function more as an art than a science. At the same time, he warns that this approach can go too far in focusing on the specifics of a given situation and

that inquiry as applied and intervening work must be seen as intertwined with dominant institutional and discursive frameworks. Schwandt (2002) suggests that this means,

attending to a classical understanding of the symbiotic relationship between ethics and politics: We cannot rightly understand professional ethics (habits, obligations, and modes of thought that shape and define ‘good’ evaluation practice) without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities, and the kinds of human community that form the necessary conditions for the good life. (p. 4)

Finally, both Schwandt and Kuntz point to self-understanding as central to the kind of inquiry they envision. Engaging in critical work entails an ongoing analysis of the ways in which we as methodologists, evaluators, and researchers are caught up in powerful narratives about what kinds of knowledge are valued and useful, how to produce such knowledge, and how we as individuals and societies come to know and make sense of the world around us. The relational and practical modes of inquiry that Kuntz and Schwandt describe situate the work as centrally concerned with intervening in opposition to those dominant discourses, doing so through active engagement in concrete problems with material histories, politics, and personal stakes. This work requires us to think about our own role in relation to both the local and discursive context while facilitating dialogue that encourages others to do the same. For both, social progress begins at the level of self-understanding, thinking about evaluation practice as in process and ongoing, and the evaluand not as a “thing” to be studied but as a complex set of relations among individuals and within a society. The aim of evaluation from this perspective is not to resolve differences between various parties, but to engage in dialogue by which shifts in self-understanding might become possible (Schwandt, 2002).



## **Implications of critical theory for evaluating social interventions**

Next, I revisit Shadish, Cook, and Leviton's (1991) framework of evaluation theory through a critical lens, aiming to further elaborate a critically-engaged evaluation practice. At the time it was first presented, Shadish and colleagues sought to reveal similarities, differences, and gaps in evaluation theories, and to provide a set of questions and probes through which practitioners could reflect on their own work to make the implicit assumptions of evaluation practice more explicit. They suggest five "fundamental issues" which good evaluation theories should address: social programming, knowledge construction, valuing, knowledge use, and evaluation practice. Through these five issues, they pose questions and present central elements to which evaluators should attend in their work.

These five issues remain salient to evaluators 30 years after their publication, as questions about how programs contribute to social change, by what value criteria programs should be judged, and how evaluators should conduct their practice are still consistently raised in evaluation literature. At the same time, evaluation theory and practice have evolved significantly since Shadish and colleagues published their framework, and variations of critically engaged inquiry may present challenges and meaningful avenues for alternative formulations that were not considered at the time. Thus, the remainder of this article is a critical reflection on each of these fundamental issues, asking how the moral-relational practice described by Kuntz and Schwandt is reflected within, challenged by, and presents problems for evaluation.

### ***Social Programming***

**Table 3. Social Programming**

Key Questions	Elements of Social Programming
What are the important problems this program could address?	How programs are structured internally, what functions they fulfill, and how they operate  How the external context shapes and constrains the program
Can the program be improved? Is it worth doing so? If not, what is worth doing?	How social change occurs, how programs change, and how program change contributes to social change

For Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991), social programming entails the “ways that social programs and policies develop, improve, and change, especially in regard to social problems” (p. 32). They draw our attention to two central concerns: 1) the internal and external structures and influencing factors that shape how programs are organized and how they operate, and 2) the role of programs in society and how they are expected to contribute to social change. For evaluators, this issue has implications for how we understand the program we are evaluating, how we characterize it, and how we situate it within broader efforts to confront and resolve social concerns. A critical perspective also requires us to ask about evaluation’s role in social programming—as an increasingly institutionalized practice, evaluation *for* or *of* a program cannot be understood as distinct from the program’s structure, purpose, or operation. In other words, evaluating a program also involves questions about how and with what consequences the program has solicited, conducted, and considered evaluation.

Additionally, critical scholarship encourages a shift in our attention from focusing on the internal structure and function of a program (e.g., resources, staff, activities, and outcomes) to a wider lens of how programs are connected to and expected to address social change within local and global contexts. Criticism of evaluation has pointed to the ways in which evaluation has spent more effort on these internal questions—and somewhat more attention to external factors (e.g., stakeholders, cultural responsiveness, economic and resource constraints) while questions about how programs contribute to social change remain obscured. As Mathison (Mathison, 2018) explains,

most evaluators think in a micro context, a legacy of evaluation practice that serves other disciplines, decision-makers, policy-makers, funding agencies, and beneficiaries.

Evaluation practice is local (even when the context is geographically vast) and mostly responsive to particular concerns about programmatic effectiveness.... While it is entirely appropriate for evaluation practitioners to work in this way, it blunts our attention to big questions about why this intervention, why this strategy, why these people and not others (p. 117).

The neoliberal view that Kuntz (2015) critiques privileges evaluations of an organization's internal consistency, adherence to predetermined outcomes, and efficiency in achieving those outcomes. A critical viewpoint will turn our focus to questions of how such outcomes came to be priorities, how a given program was deemed appropriate and logical, and how the problems intended to be addressed were defined and determined to be problematic. A material and relational framing of social programming may work first to refuse or disrupt the notion of a "program" as an isolated entity with capacity to generate social change. This is not to say that "program" evaluation is unnecessary or fruitless, but rather that its foundation should be

in understanding salient social problems, asking how we—evaluators, stakeholders, funders, etc.—may be able to intervene, and working toward a deeper understanding of such problems and possible interventions, given the material constraints of time, resources, and people interested in participating in change efforts. This move away from the program as an entity is essential, given the role that self-understanding plays in critical theories of social change.

As an example of what a more critical engagement with social programming might look like, Dahler-Larsen (2012) offers a thorough critique of organizational models and their emergence and development within socio-historical contexts. Using organizational theory, he maps how “rational” and “learning” models of organizations have gained traction within an evolving modernity. Although there is not space here to comprehensively summarize his analysis, Dahler-Larsen (2012) argues that these organizational models have flourished within bureaucratic systems, where the operation and function of programs and organizations can be charted along rational pathways, whether in terms of technical advancement toward solutions of standardized, objective problems or through iterative loops in which feedback and learning produce incremental but steady progress. Ultimately, however, Dahler-Larsen (2012) argues that the predominant form in contemporary society is the institutional organization which overwhelms both rational and learning forms of organizational improvement, instead instilling “rituals and myths” which appear logical but are primarily concerned with maintaining the status quo. Institutionalized organizations have the appearance of autonomy while simultaneously further entrenching the neoliberal and globalized discourses that Kuntz and Schwandt critique.

In practical terms, this model of the institutional organization provides a starting point for moving toward a more critical engagement with evaluation practice. Internal programmatic structures can now be seen in relation to institutionalization, and we can ask how evaluation

practice might disrupt or intervene in this model and work toward a different mode of programmatic thinking and acting.

*Constructing and justifying knowledge*

**Table 4. Constructing and Justifying Knowledge**

Key Questions	Elements of Knowledge Construction and Justification
How do I know all this?	Ontology, the study of the ultimate nature of reality
What counts as a confident answer?	Epistemology, the study of the nature, origins, and limits of knowledge
What causes that confidence?	Methodology, the study of techniques for constructing knowledge

Evaluation’s history makes clear that assumptions about ontology, epistemology and methodology have evolved over time within the field. As shown through Shadish and colleagues’ (1991) discussion of evaluation theory, the field was initially dominated by post-positivist thinking, including assumptions about the separation of subjects and objects of research and appeals to objectivity and internal consistency as markers of valid inquiry. Many of these views are still implicit in the evaluation work currently conducted, but the field has opened to alternative paradigms such as constructivist, pragmatist, transformative, and, to a lesser extent, critical and postmodernisms (Lincoln et al., 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2018). The emergence of new paradigms and assumptions about being and knowing have created opportunities for

thinking differently about the aims of evaluation, how it might contribute to social change, and how evaluators engage with those invested in the objects of evaluation.

Critically engaged practice suggests that we develop knowledge through *doing*. Schwandt (2002) cites *phronesis* or practical reasoning, and both Schwandt and Kuntz emphasize the importance of self-understanding as a process in coming to know. This process occurs through dialogue with others; with the histories of programs, policies, and discourse of social problems; and through tangential interactions and encounters. Putting this belief in practical knowledge and self-understanding into practice requires an evaluator to take an educative stance, offering reasoned ideas and judgments about how to address specific problems, but also opening oneself to change. Calhoun (1995) uses the example of an anthropologist and informant to illustrate the entanglement and knowing, doing, and being, but his point is similarly applicable for evaluators and stakeholders,

it involves dialogue, not just one-way communication. Both the anthropologist and the informant are changed by it. They achieve the understanding precisely because they change into people who can understand each other, not because one translates the static, fully formed knowledge of the other into a form which he or she can appropriate without becoming a significantly different person. Since knowing is an activity constitutive of the person, not a mechanical storing up of data, gaining in knowledge always means changing somewhat (p. 82).

The refusal of epistemological distance and embrace of dialogue and self-understanding as ways of knowing and being also require different ways of thinking about the *justification* of knowledge. When social change and intervention are situated as the aim of social inquiry, Schwandt (2002) argues that the language of knowledge discourse shifts from validity, methods

and objectivity to ethics, deliberation, poetics, and rhetoric. These terms push us to scrutinize inquiry practices in terms of their relationship to what we believe is good and right, their potential to facilitate reasoned and productive deliberation, and their poetic and rhetorical capacity to incite new ways of thinking and acting.

Schwandt's reference to ethics also draws attention to axiological dimensions of inquiry which are missing from Shadish, Cook, and Leviton's (1991) framework. This point has been made before, and perhaps most stringently by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 2005) who argue that values are a "major point of departure between positivist, conventional modes of inquiry and interpretive forms of inquiry" (p. 169). For those working from a critical perspective, values influence every aspect of inquiry and become visible when we interrogate questions of who initiates the studies we conduct and who determines what questions are important to ask. Who determines how participants are represented and what data should be collected? The choices we make in response to each of these questions implies a value stance, whether or not it is made explicit.

Critical inquiry always begins from a point of confronting injustice, seeking to understand how it emerged and enabling new and alternative types of practices (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Kuntz (2015) connects this ethical responsibility to the idea of *truth-telling*, arguing that the era of relativism, "post-truth" and "multiple truths" has produced a dissociative relationship to the term—that ethical inquiry requires a re-engagement with *truth* in terms of what is ethical and in response to current political conditions. He argues that in the present moment,

it is the multiple and contradictory truths that must be interrogated, particularly as they make manifest collective affective states, often resulting in our docility as political

subjects. Pushing further, it is the *telling* of such truths—not simply the produced truths themselves—that warrant our critical analysis. Who gets to speak such truths, to make them visible? What does one need to do to be in a position to truth-tell? What is risked, or made more secure, in the telling? (p. 97)

These approaches to ethical and relational truth-telling represent new possibilities for evaluators to consider questions of knowledge construction and justification, shifting evaluative discourse from detached objectification to material engagement.

### *Engaging in valuing*

**Table 5. Valuing**

Key Questions	Elements of valuing
Is this a good program?	Metatheory, the study of the nature of and justification for valuing
By which notion of good?	Prescriptive theory, theories that advocate the primacy of particular values
What justifies the conclusion?	Descriptive theory, theories that describe values without claiming one value is best

Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (Shadish et al., 1991) reference Michael Scriven (Scriven, 1991, 1995) as providing the only available metatheory of evaluation at the time they published their framework. Scriven (1991) argues that evaluative claims are justified based on what he refers to as the *logic of evaluation*, which flows from the selection of criteria of value (and development of evaluation questions), to setting standards of performance for each criteria (what should constitute good/bad, better/worse), to gathering data about performance, and ultimately



synthesizing results across criteria to make an informed judgment. Importantly, Scriven’s model refuses the post-positivist distinction between fact and value, suggesting that inferences about value can be justified and substantiated based upon available evidence and the anticipation of rebuttals (Schwandt & Gates, 2021). Critical inquiry shares some of these ideals—such as the assumption that fact and value cannot be interpreted distinctly, and that practical reasoning can and should guide judgments in material situations—while also providing ways of extending considerations of value in evaluation.

The type of inquiry that Schwandt and Kuntz describe provides an avenue toward a different way of thinking about the nature and justification for valuing. Primarily, their thinking about critically-engaged practice shifts evaluative concerns from an assessment of whether a program is good or bad to a more action-oriented question of, “what should we do?” (Schwandt, 2002). This reframing of evaluation changes the focus of the work from systematic evidence gathering and assessment based on specific values or criteria to a deliberative, dialogic engagement with the circumstances program stakeholders and evaluators find themselves in. From this perspective, the object of evaluation is no longer a “thing”—product, policy, or program—but rather an ongoing deliberation about current circumstances and how to proceed. Schwandt (2002; 2021) does not preclude systematic assessment from possible (and appropriate) forms of evaluation—these kinds of evaluation will continue as part of our everyday judgment in situations such as deciding which car to buy and at which restaurants to eat—but this relational and dialogic view of evaluation presents a significant shift in orientation.

Critical deliberation and dialogue may also be used in part to engage stakeholders in considerations of the value and worth of their program. Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) might refer to this as a descriptive theory of valuing, but the intent from a critical perspective is to do

much more than describe stakeholders values, set criteria based on them, and come to an evaluative judgement based on measures of performance against those criteria. Instead, Schwandt and Gates (2021) offer two primary concerns for dialogue with stakeholders, asking, “(1) how different stakeholders in a project or intervention view and frame problems, strategies, solutions, and outcomes and (2) how these different perspectives can engage one another in a meaningful way” (Schwandt & Gates, 2021, p. 124). Through this line of dialogue, potentially different, contradictory, and conflicting values emerge among individuals and groups of stakeholders. Rather than seeking consensus, Schwandt (2001) explains that,

this mutual consideration of different self-understandings will inevitably be an open-ended event.... I do not mean that participants in this evaluation never reach a place on which to stand in judging the ‘goodness’ of [a program], but that they recognize that the interpretations they reach (the self-understandings they develop) are always situated, corrigible and subject to re-interpretation... This is because the participants’ dialogues are not simply about the subject matter in question... but about the very identity of the participants themselves. It is through dialogue (reflection and conversation)of this kind that the participants may reach mutual understanding and realize their ‘interests’ as parents, politicians, professionals, and so on. (pp. 231-232)

Other critical scholars have also cited the ways that power is embedded in discourses and becomes visible in how evaluators identify and consider relevant values. Recognition of discourse and evaluative histories and socio-political contexts brings attention to the ways that the values we surface through evaluation can and should be disruptive to existing assumptions about what constitutes “good” (e.g., efficient, optimal, and effective) program work. For example, (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021) describe an indigenous paradigm of inquiry which responds

to the ways that Western (i.e., individualized, procedural) ways of thinking and conducting evaluation have become the status quo in development and international aid contexts. They argue that the cultural values of development organizations reflect a belief in technical practices (e.g., fluency with big data, artificial intelligence and advanced statistics) as pathways to transformative change while at the same time offering “very little reflection of the values and culture of those whose knowledge systems have been excluded from the evaluation discourse” (p. 244). What does this mean for the evaluator and how to address values? As (Hay, 2017) explains, “if the fundamental purpose of evaluation is valuing—part of the role of the evaluator is to ask questions of ‘whose values?’ and ‘what is being valued?’ and to transparently bring more inclusive values, including equity, into those discussions using whatever tools and openings are appropriate” (Hay, 2017)p. 83)

***Facilitating Use***

**Table 6. Evaluation Use**

Key Questions	Elements of facilitating use
How can I make sure my results get used quickly to help this program?	A description of possible kinds of use
Do I want to do so?	A depiction of the time frames in which use occurs
If not, can my evaluation be useful in other ways?	An explanation of what the evaluator can do to facilitate use under different circumstances

Use is among the most frequently studied concepts in evaluation, and the questions posed by Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) in this section are among the most contested and

discussed topics in evaluation literature (Alkin & King, 2016). Shadish and colleagues (1991) suggest that theories of evaluation should seek to describe possible uses of evaluation, when use should occur, and how such use might be facilitated by the evaluator. Through research on evaluation, a broad typology of use has emerged, and from that typology, evaluators have advocated ways in which evaluations should be oriented to support use and facilitate processes so that use may occur (King & Alkin, 2018). Much of the research on evaluation use has sought to understand how and why evaluations are used (or not used) by program stakeholders, and aimed to provide practical ways that we might make evaluation more useful for program stakeholders (King & Alkin, 2018).

Questions about the use and utility of evaluation are complicated by the types of inquiry described by Kuntz and Schwandt. Notably, the relational assumptions of critical inquiry imply that research and evaluation are never fully detached from the “object” about which they inquire, suggesting that even when evaluation is *not* “used” in any clear way, the act of evaluating always has consequences—for the program or policy being evaluated, for those invested in the program, for evaluators themselves, and for the reification and/or disruption of social discourse which inform and shape both inquiry and programs and policies themselves (Dahler-Larsen, 2012; Kuntz, 2015).

Existing critical evaluative scholarship provides a conceptualization of this way of thinking about use and utility differently. Specifically, Dahler-Larsen (2012) suggests that through the standardization and spread of evaluation across institutions in society, current evaluation practices might be best understood as *evaluation machines*—that is, “mandatory procedures for automated and detailed surveillance that give an overview of organizational activities by means of documentation and intense data concentration” (p. 176). This metaphor

extends Kuntz's critique of methodological extraction under neoliberalism, suggesting that when evaluation becomes routine, standardized, and oriented toward regular monitoring, it may function as a type of surveillance technology itself, reifying values of neoliberal society in terms of standardized indicators, metrics, and data which extend across social sectors (e.g., making health data, economic status, and identity all interpretable within models and indices for comparison, ranking, and improvement). The notion of evaluative machines is relevant to discussions of utilization because traditional studies of evaluation use do not account for the myriad ways that evaluation contributes, as Dahler-Larsen (2012) explains, to the "subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which evaluation machines steer certain values, orientations, interpretations, and practices in the direction of a particular construction of social reality" (p. 199). Dahler-Larsen refers to these kinds of consequences as "constitutive effects" (p. 176), which include the ways that decisions about what to evaluate, how to evaluate, and who or what is evaluated are influential in ways that inquiry is structured, organizations are designed, and individuals within institutions think and act. As Dahler-Larsen (2012) explains, "a new reality emerges out of the indicator because of the reactive behavior it triggers" (p. 204).

Within this framework, it becomes problematic to think about "use" as something to plan for or anticipate in the design of evaluation—constitutive effects occur in the unfolding of evaluation and in alignment and/or against existing norms for how we understand social organizations, programs, and institutions. Questions of use shift to the kind of problem illustrated in a quote from Michel Foucault, "people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). These terms—constitutive effects and evaluation machines—make clear that the consequences of evaluation may never be fully knowable, yet at the same time they offer a way of thinking about

the implications of evaluation and offer a framework of evaluation against which we might intervene and seek to disrupt.

This approach accepts the reality that evaluation will be consequential, regardless of designs for use or utility, and argues that, given such a reality, the appropriate response is to work to disrupt problematic discourses through dialogue which links these broad discourses to the specifics of the individuals—their identity, experiences, and actions—and asks how they might change.

*Evaluation practice*

**Table 7. Evaluation Practice**

Key Questions	Elements of evaluation practice
Given my limited skills, time, and resources, and given the seemingly unlimited possibilities, how can I narrow my options to do a feasible evaluation?	When an evaluation should be done  What the purpose of the evaluation should be
What is my role—educator, methodological expert, judge of program—worth?	What roles the evaluator ought to play
What questions should I ask, and what methods should I use?	What types of questions should be asked  What design will be used  What activities will be carried out to facilitate use?

One of the distinguishing factors of evaluation, compared to related forms of social science, is its dependence upon clients, funders, and scopes of work or terms of reference. For Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) these characteristics suggest that a good theory of evaluation should address questions about how evaluators should make decisions within given constraints of time, resources, and client demands or interests. In some ways, these constraints are governed by the same discourses and values that Kuntz and Schwandt critique in their detailing of methodological responsibility and evaluation practice. That is, neoliberalism and globalization shape the marketplace of evaluation, producing a desire for objective indicators of performance and measures with which programs and organizations can position themselves within broader systems of ranking and comparison. As Kuntz (2015) argues, neoliberalism constructs an environment in which *logics of extraction* and detached, technocratic methodologies are not only seen as logical but also preferable to more relational and dialogic forms of inquiry. At the same time, there is no key to unlocking an alternative marketplace for evaluation and critical inquiry. As an applied social practice, evaluation will continue to function within the pressures and expectations of funders, clients and market-driven discourses. The challenge, then, is to identify openings for shifting thinking within these marketplaces, constructing roles which reveal alternative forms of practice, and engaging in practice which is always conscious of the historicized, discursive, and contextual spaces in which we work—aiming to disrupt unjust and oppressive conditions while building relationships with others so they might do the same.

One critically-oriented response to these constraints is to re-examine notions of the evaluator's role. Traditionally, empirical and theoretical research on evaluator roles has been oriented toward characterizing roles in terms of stable traits, including how evaluators interact with stakeholders and participants (e.g., detached observer, educator, facilitator, internal/external

evaluator) or are positioned in relation to broader aims and efforts (e.g., social justice advocate, transformative evaluator, collaborative partner) (King & Stevahn, 2002; Skolits et al., 2009). The characterization of roles as stable and recognizable can be contrasted with critical theories of identity and self as unstable and indeterminate (Stronach et al., 2002). Whereas traditional theories of evaluator role are aspirational in the sense that they are based on an assumption that evaluation functions as a catalyst for social change and a force for democracy, alternative views of identity understand the world as less structured and certain (Schwandt, 2002; Stronach et al., 2002). For example, Harklau and Norwood (2005) suggest that we understand our roles as “subject positions” which are “inherently unstable and highly dynamic” (p. 280). In their own evaluation work, these authors found themselves taking up positions which they described as the “lurker, nonpartisan lab-coated clinician, program benefactor, ornamental researcher, colleague or coworker, confidante, and teacher's aide” (p. 280). While these labels are not always as flattering to the professional evaluator, they signify a critical reflection about the evaluator’s position as they navigate macro and micro-level expectations of evaluation as well as the sometimes-unanticipated ways evaluators are thrust into programmatic contexts, activities, and events.

Another aspect of evaluation practice not explicitly included in Shadish and colleagues’ framework is the importance of relationships. Given the focus in critical theories on dialogue and deliberation as a means of coming to know oneself and working toward social change, it follows that building and maintaining relationships—with those with whom we work and those who are most directly affected by the work we do—is an essential aspect of the role of the evaluator. Indigenous evaluators and scholars are leading the field in this direction, and all forms of critical inquiry may benefit from their guidance. As Cram (2018) explains,



the Indigenous world is a relationship world that includes Indigenous peoples' relationships with other peoples, with the environment, and with the spiritual realm (Hart, 2007)... Whether the evaluator is Indigenous or non-Indigenous, it is important that they know and can articulate their cultural position or standpoint. Relationships start from this beginning and the connections that are made when people share who they are and where they are from... This is also a place of learning, where evaluators and communities enter into a relationship where all learn from their journey together.

While the aim of a critically-engaged evaluation practice may be to develop self-understanding and move collectively toward practical problem solving, Cram (2018) importantly centers this work in relationships. As we seek to imagine the role evaluators should play, trust, community-building, and strong relationships will be essential to developing this kind of inquiry in evaluation.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have sought to describe and elaborate ideas about what a critically engaged practice in evaluation might look like. Importantly, this kind of work begins with critical analysis of the way evaluation is shaped by and contributes to broader social discourses—e.g., neoliberalism and globalization—and suggests that such analysis is directly linked to the practical activities of evaluation, including how we can and should conduct critically-engaged evaluative inquiry. Concepts from Schwandt (2002) and Kuntz (2015) provide insight into the responsibilities and practice of an ethical, relational, and material practice, and Shadish, Cook, and Leviton's (1991) framework of evaluation serves as a useful guide for applying these concepts toward fundamental issues of evaluation. While this critical analysis and discussion provides one step toward addressing how and why critical theories might contribute

more to evaluation, the pathway is not linear and there remains room for further exploration. As noted at the outset of this paper, critical theories linked to feminism, decolonization, and critical race theory may align with, extend, or contradict this analysis in varied and productive ways.

This work is grounded in my own interests and perspective, as I work to develop my own understanding of the power and discourse which shapes my own thinking and practice.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how critical theoretical concepts and ideas are currently used within evaluation theory and practice, and to apply a critique of evaluation in analysis of fundamental issues in evaluation practice. This work is situated within contemporary conditions which necessitate a reimagining of evaluation toward more critical and socially-engaged inquiry, including the COVID-19 pandemic; continued paralysis in the face of climate change; stark reminders of the ongoing injustices perpetuated based on race, gender, and class; as well as growing political divisiveness and discourses of post-truth and misinformation.

The three inter-related papers in this study each contribute toward addressing these aims, asking how critical theory is useful for problematizing existing norms and taken-for-granted assumptions about evaluative work, while suggesting ways in which criticism presents alternative roles for evaluation and evaluators as well as different relationships to programs, policies, and the individuals with vested interests in them. Throughout these three papers, specific criticisms of evaluation were raised, including evaluation's relationship to neoliberalism and globalization and its persistent commitment to stances of objectivity and detached inquiry. While such criticisms are far from exhaustive, they offer ways of engaging in deeper analyses of power in and through evaluation, suggesting avenues for evaluators to work toward dislodging, repositioning, and transforming those relations of power which enable unjust conditions to persist.

In the remainder of this conclusion, I summarize key findings from the three papers, suggest implications for evaluation practice which emerged from this work, and offer directions for future research related to critical evaluation research and practice.

## Summary of key findings

The first paper begins with broad questions about the existing relationship between critical theory and program evaluation, identifying the scarcity of explicit references to critical theory within evaluation scholarship while at the same time pointing to ways in which critical concepts and ideas have emerged in participatory, feminist, culturally responsive, and indigenous writing about evaluative discourse, history, and practice. The first paper also starts from a broad conceptualization of critical theory, acknowledging its varied traditions and schools of thought, offering four concepts—ideology, discourse, culture, and context—with which to begin looking for linkages between critical theory and evaluation. Key findings from this literature review include the location of a variety of critical concepts and inquiry approaches within existing evaluation literature. These findings illustrate the breadth of critical theoretical possibilities within the field, including the use of critical concepts toward educative and empowering dialogue with stakeholders, decolonizing methodologies which scrutinize the historical roots of evaluation’s reliance on dominant narratives and forms of inquiry, and critiques of evaluation’s institutionalization and modernist tendencies.

The second paper shifts toward specific practical concerns, asking how evaluators engage with critical theoretical ideas to inform their practice, including how critical theories shape their decisions about stakeholder involvement, methods, and framing the purpose of evaluation. In interviews with evaluation scholars, evidence of how critical theory informs practice emerges, including shaping dialogue, framing evaluation in relation to broader political discourses, and finding ways to disrupt normalized ways of thinking and acting in relation to social programs and policies. Through these interviews, challenges to critical theoretical practices also become

clearer, including entrenched demands for specific forms of evaluation and limited time and resource constraints for practicing evaluators.

In the third paper, I move toward an argument for a critically-engaged evaluation practice which acknowledges evaluation's historical and discursive entanglements while at the same time working within—and seeking points of intervention against—contemporary constraints of the field. This paper takes the possibilities and challenges raised in the first two papers and asks a more specific question about what a critical theoretical stance asks us to do as evaluators in practical circumstances. The fundamental issues of evaluation presented by Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) ask us to engage with questions that evaluators confront in their everyday practice—about social programming, values, knowledge construction and justification, use, and practice—and I address each through a critical perspective. Specifically, the third paper draws from Kuntz (2015) and Schwandt (2002), who provide conceptualizations of critical practice and methodological responsibility which challenge traditional notions of evaluation. Findings from this paper suggest that the application of critical theory in evaluation presents much more than a different set of evaluative questions or a lens through which to view program implementation and outcomes differently. Instead, critical scholarship requires a relational and materialist engagement with inquiry, shifting our practice to be more in line with our daily living, including the development of self-understanding, ethical and moral engagement with others, and working to construct the kind of society in which we aspire to live (Schwandt, 2002).

### **Implications for evaluation practice**

This study provides three key implications for evaluation practice. The first is related to discursive and ideological analysis, which offers a lens through which to connect evaluative practices to systems of power and social change. This study has provided both conceptual and

practical examples of the ways that evaluation is entangled in discourses, suggesting that as we seek to understand why specific evaluation practices are used most often, whose values are reflected in those choices, and which interests are served by evaluative findings, answers may be traced not only to the context and circumstances of a specific program, but to social discourses through which power operates. It is my view—based on the analysis and findings from this study—that critical theories can contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which everyday practices of evaluation are bound within discourses and constructed over time. Critical theory—like much culturally responsive, feminist, and indigenous approaches to evaluation—is oriented toward social change. As evaluation scholars and practitioners continue to develop forms of evaluation which advocate change, critical theories which clarify links between the local and the institutional will be beneficial for understanding systems of power and enabling practices to disrupt it.

A second implication from this study is that critical theories remain useful even in circumstances and contexts in which more traditional forms of inquiry are expected or required. In the second study, critical evaluation practitioners and scholars cited the challenges of engaging in critical work in the current evaluation marketplace. Limited by time, resource constraints, and clients' preferences for data that fits easily within the rational decision-making practices of bureaucratized organizations, these evaluators still found ways to shift the “movable parts of the institutional framework.” Insights from evaluators suggest that critical practices remain feasible within such situations, particularly in discussions with stakeholders about evaluation itself. Interviewees noted that raising possible alternatives to traditional evaluation approaches could open the door to even small shifts in thinking about what evaluation's role should be and what might be possible through more critical forms of practice. Evaluators

described conversations in which they expressed their own skepticism about evaluation and sometimes sought to draw out uncertainties from stakeholders. If we hope to move toward more critically-engaged evaluation practices, findings from this study suggests that we open ourselves up to skepticism of our own work and find opportunities to present alternative pathways to those with vested interests in evaluation.

Lastly, findings from this study have implications for how we might better prepare evaluators to engage in critical and relational forms of inquiry. In addition to exposure to the discourse and ideological analyses mentioned in the first implication, evaluation training may also benefit from a shift toward greater emphasis on rhetoric, dialogue, and practical reasoning, with less attention on the technical mastery of research methods. In a contemporary moment where facts, truth, and legitimate knowledge are contested ideas, evaluators cannot allow data to “speak for itself.” Findings from this study suggest that critical theories reframe notions of knowledge construction and justification to focus on issues such as ethics, deliberation, poetry, and rhetoric (Schwandt, 2002). These concepts stray from traditional emphases in evaluation training programs on the mastery of methods and understanding of how to achieve objectivity and validity (and even qualitative notions of trustworthiness). A move toward more critically engaged work implies a different kind of preparation to become an evaluator—one that is centered in ethical decision-making and practical reasoning about how to develop what Schwandt refers to as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.

#### **Future research directions: Where do we go from here?**

These studies also raise questions which warrant further research. For instance, there is a need for additional research which utilizes discursive and ideological analyses to examine both the histories of evaluation and contemporary markets of evaluation. Critical theories emphasize

connections between past and present, suggesting that discourses evolve over time and in response to challenges to the status quo and dominant systems of power. What is the history of this in evaluation, and how are contemporary demands and incentives for evaluation shaped by such discursive trends? Exploring these questions may allow evaluators to better understand the effects of our epistemological and methodological frameworks, locating the assumptions we make about social programs and salient values and indicators within larger social patterns. Historical and discursive analyses allow us to better understand how critical work might lead the field of evaluation in different directions. These notions help us better understand where we might identify shifts in programs, communities or organizations, asking whether we have added to a more just and humane world?

Additionally, more studies illustrating the practice of evaluation are needed. In this study, I conducted interviews with evaluators who have both conducted research on evaluation through a critical lens and practiced evaluation which aimed to apply critical concepts as a part of their inquiry. The richness of these interviews provided context and meaning to the concepts revealed in my first and third papers—suggesting how practical reasoning unfolds and what dialogue looks like when an evaluators' frame of reference is oriented toward broad systems of injustice and oppression while aiming to disrupt such conditions in specific, material ways. At the same time, these interviews only provide snapshots and summaries of the specific contexts in which these evaluations were conducted. New research which links evaluators' critical perspectives to their specific actions and decisions in concrete evaluative circumstances would provide further evidence of how this kind of work might proliferate within the current evaluation landscape. Case studies exemplifying both critical practice and the limits of traditional forms of inquiry could each provide insight, addressing questions about how evaluators confront and are



confronted by dominant norms and ideals in everyday practice, and how they respond to such confrontations.

### **Final Note**

This dissertation has explored how critical theories have and could be applied in evaluation research and practice. Together, these three papers provide insights about how evaluators have conducted research on evaluation through a critical lens as well as the practical uses of critical theories in evaluative inquiry. This study has also led to an evolution in my own thinking about the relationship between critical theory and program evaluation. For instance, in paper one, context, culture, ideology, and discourse were positioned as things to think with. By paper three, these ideas were less objective and definable—they become embedded in my discussion and analysis, less distinct and at the same time more specific in the ways that they named exercises of power and made their effects visible. Beyond this study, I anticipate that my thinking will continue to shift, and I look forward to the ways in which critical theories can inform my own thinking and practice as I grow in the field.

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