SESSION

What Are the Sociopolitical and Community Contexts of the Program?

Another part of "understanding the program" is understanding its setting. This means understanding as much as you can about the program to be evaluated, as well as all that influences its design, implementation, and, of course, evaluation. You might be thinking, "Well, that's very broad," and you're right. The program exists within a broad context, not a vacuum, and they are not compartmentalized. To do good work, the evaluator must consider the ways in which the program setting might influence both the implementation and evaluation of the program.

There are several features of a program's setting that are critical for the evaluator to understand well. A program is embedded within an *organization*. An organization is part of a *community*. A community exists in a broad historical context and current social and political conditions, often referred to collectively as the *sociopolitical* context. This is the sociopolitical setting for your program. Successfully considering and addressing the influence and impact of the complex program setting system on the evaluation is perhaps one of the most critical and challenging responsibilities for the evaluator. We discuss the program setting in two parts: In this session, we first take up a discussion of the sociopolitical and community context; in Session J, we consider the organizational context.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

When we say that the evaluator needs to understand, address, and attend to the sociopolitical context of a program, to what are we referring? In short, we are concerned with the social and political factors—both historical and contemporary—that impact the program and its evaluation. The United States, alongside many other countries, has an enduring history of colonization, systematic discrimination, oppression, racism, and economic inequality that has been reinforced, strengthened, and protected by prevailing public policies and practices. These policies have had a profound impact on the social conditions in the United States today, in particular on Black and Indigenous people, people of color (BIPOC), immigrant communities, those with (dis)abilities, LGBTQ+-identified persons, and other systematically marginalized groups. To be sure, *the past is present* in our consideration of the sociopolitical context for the evaluations of so many programs, especially those that are designed to address disparities in health, social issues, behavior, child welfare, and education.

A very important point we need to highlight early in this discussion of the program setting is that evaluation is a *social process* that takes place within a *social context,* and which has *political implications,* both at policy and local levels. It is critical that we recognize and accept evaluation as a political activity. Because an evaluation has the potential to contribute to the understanding of a program's value and worth, we should also be aware of the power of our evaluation studies because they can greatly influence "who gets what." In this way, the evaluation *itself* is a sociopolitical act.

Many of the public programs developed over the past decades (since FDR's New Deal in 1933) intended to address some of the deleterious and detrimental impacts of the very policies and practices that fostered systematic injustice and oppressed BIPOC and other marginalized communities. Often, the decision to evaluate a program comes from the legislation or policy that created it, not the program itself. In some cases, the policy may also include the architecture for the evaluation, outlining the outcomes to be measured and the kinds of study designs, methods, and instruments to be used. These evaluations are then, by design, aligned with the values of the dominant culture, in part because they have been legislated by elected officials who all too often do not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the local program, or share the historical lived experience of those who are connected to it, or appreciate nondominant cultural wealth and assets. Is it not surprising, then, that this often diminishes the likelihood that the evaluation will uncover priorities, values, beliefs, and explanations about a

program's success, failure, utility, or appropriateness that challenge the sociopolitical structure.

When the evaluation objectives are dictated by policy or legislation—that is, are highly oriented to sociopolitical influences—it is critical that the evaluator also focus the evaluation on local-level issues, too, using processes and methods that are aligned with the values and beliefs of the local-level context. The evaluator must look to "re-norm" the evaluation to the program setting rather than expect those close to the program to assimilate to the worldviews held by the dominant culture. Keep in mind that if the evaluation does not reflect the values of the primary users, it is very unlikely it will be used by them.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Now let's consider the community context. In evaluation, community context often refers to both the physical location and the social/cultural community connected to and invested in the program and its evaluation. Thus, you will want to understand not just the features of the geography of the neighborhood and various indicators of well-being, such as public health, child welfare, and education data, but also the social frameworks of the community. Understanding a community's history will also provide you with a unique perspective about how it took shape, and, more importantly, why it exists in the form that you will come to encounter and know it through your evaluative work. You will also want to understand those aspects of a community that give it its distinct identity and "feel"—that is, its ethnic and cultural traditions and other shared and distinctive customs and practices. It may seem obvious, but it should be said that the contours of any community have also been shaped in no small part by sociopolitical context.

Let's consider again for a moment an after-school tutoring program being implemented throughout a very large and diverse state. *How do we understand such a program situated in a culturally diverse rural community where the majority of children live in homes in which English is not the primary language spoken? And from where children are bused long distances to school? And public transportation and other community resources are not well funded by the local tax base?* Compare this with implementing the program in a more urban, upper-income metropolitan area with the tutoring program supported with state funds, access to a reliable public transit system, and enough staff to offer the program several days a week. It wouldn't be unusual for the same program to be offered in these two very different settings, but the challenges at each would be very, very different. Thus, the evaluator needs to anticipate potential

variations in the ways in which the program can be implemented, who can be served by the program, and how it can (or can't) be accessed per community differences.

To do this, the evaluator must understand the sociopolitical complexities, both current and historical, that have shaped each community. They also need to identify and consider the different resources and assets of each community, which include political, environmental, public and private service infrastructure; governing structures; public tax dollars and other monetary funds; social, cultural, and linguistic capital; familial capital and networks; and the ease with which existing community resources can be navigated and accessed. *What are the shared aspirations of community members? How might the geographic location and boundaries of the community shape program implementation?* The evaluator must articulate and explore these community features and the ways in which differences in communities might explain any adaptation in program processes and changes in outcomes.

THE EVALUATOR IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE SOCIOPOLITICAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

As we discuss the program setting more, it becomes clear that evaluation is a relational, interpersonal activity. As such, all of those who participate in the evaluation enter the process with their own personal ancestry, lived history, beliefs, values, ideas, and opinions that will, at least to some extent, be brought into the evaluation with or without intention. You might ask, then, *How do the evaluators themselves—and their positionalities—impact the evaluation?*

First, we see it as essential for evaluators to examine their positionalities and be transparent about their own worldviews and values in relationship to the sociopolitical context of the program, as well as to the community. *How familiar are you with the sociopolitical factors that impact members of this community? How might your lived experience help you understand this sociopolitical context? How well do you know the community? Have you lived in the community? In what ways is your lived experience like those who will participate in the program? What are community members' views of your professional affiliation, like your employer or your role?*

This is a good point at which we turn to discuss the role of the evaluator in locating issues of justice and inequality in the evaluation. As we see it, evaluators are stewards of the public good. We believe that evaluators should have an orientation toward social justice, a commitment to transform inequity in the program's settings, and design evalu-

ation studies that empower program users to exercise their agency in the context of structural oppressions so as to achieve the desired program outcomes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. **Do your homework.** Develop a deep understanding of the sociopolitical context. *Have there been changes in the economic structure of the community? Have racist real estate policies such as redlining impacted the community? Is there a history of civil unrest in this community? If so, when and among whom? What are the patterns of immigrants, and have demographics of the context shifted over time? Who are or have been important leaders, and when and for whom have they been significant? What is the economic health of the community? What kind of housing exists? How many languages are spoken, and what are they?* Much of this information can be acquired from available community-level descriptive analytics, but that is only a start.

What about the community's geographic location and boundaries? One easy way to start gaining a sense of what a certain community is like is by using Google Maps. The "street view" feature of this web-based resource allows you to "walk" down a street in most neighborhoods. You can see where schools, parks, libraries, restaurants, and grocery stores are located within different communities. Take a look at the social media sites of local organizations and schools. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

2. **Learn what issues are of importance to the community and why.** You can begin developing an understanding of the contemporary and historical sociopolitical issues of concern to the community by first identifying issues that are making local, regional, and national headlines. Visiting social media sites or reading local papers might give you perspective on what issues are being discussed, by whom, and how. Look for counterpoints to what you are learning. Listen to proceedings or recordings of town hall, city council, and school board meetings. They are often publicly accessible on city or school district websites.

3. **Learn who is influential in the community and why.** Identify community leaders, both in formal and informal positions of power. Identify who else is influential, to whom, and why. Consider how contemporary political and social issues might impact the community leaders, influencers, and others.

4. **Visit the community.** Remember, you must develop a sense of the community's essence. Attend a weekend community event. Walk

the neighborhoods. *What kind of restaurants are in the community? Who seems to be frequenting them? Who is out and gathering together, for what purposes, and where?*

5. **Talk with community members.** Communities are comprised of people. Our message for evaluators: Learn about the people who reside within the communities that are part of the program setting. *What does their typical day look like? What are their hopes and dreams for their children? How involved are elders in the life of the community? What issues do people care about and why?*

6. **Talk to people about the program.** *Are community members aware of and familiar with the program?* Many in the community may not be aware of the program, but for those who are, it's invaluable to find out what their feelings about it are. Find out who is weighing in about the program in the community and what they have to say. Various individuals might be impacted by the program in one way or another. For some, the *continuance* of the program might be viewed as beneficial. For others, the *dis*continuance of the program might be applauded. Aspects of the program might be viewed as controversial. You should ask: *Are less powerful constituencies having their voice heard? Are issues of justice and social change being centered, and if so, by whom?* You, as the evaluator, should gain an understanding of these sentiments.

In addition, investigate who might have views (both proponents and opponents) about the evaluation being conducted. Program opponents, while possibly wanting an evaluation, will certainly have views about what they would consider to be desired results. Strong community advocates of the program might be hesitant about an evaluation because they don't want to see the program changed. Alternatively, they might want an evaluation to validate their position.

Cast a wide net and ask as many broad questions as possible about those in the community with whom you ought to talk with to get a better understanding of the diversity of views about the program. You can never know too much. And the more you know, the better you are able to conduct a thorough evaluation of the program.

IMPACT ON THE EVALUATION

We have discussed the macro- and mid-program settings because they are important aspects of the evaluation context (i.e., the social, political, and community settings in which the evaluation occurs). Having a deep understanding of the historical and current sociopolitical context

and the community in which the program is implemented—its history, location, geography, cultures, climates (social, political, and environmental), challenges, assets, current issues, and leaders—adds significantly to your understanding of the program. This will also help you to make sense of the information you gather and identify the values and beliefs that will help to inform the extent to which the program's processes and outcomes are thought to be contributing to positive changes.

LET'S REVIEW WHAT YOU LEARNED IN THIS DISCUSSION SESSION

Synthesizing Sociopolitical and Community Influences on Program Evaluation

- Sociopolitical Context
  - *The past is present* sociopolitically
  - BIPOC and other systematically marginalized groups have been harmed and the impacts of this should be understood
  - Evaluation can reinforce and disrupt power structures
  - Politics will impact the evaluation
- Community Context
  - Understand the community's history
  - Learn about the issues of concern for the community
  - Learn about the community's assets, culture, and climate
  - Go into the community; talk to people
- Impact on the Evaluation
  - Understand the historical role of the program and the broader goals the program intends to achieve
  - Understand the relationships people in the program have with groups in the community and the broader program setting
  - Gain clarity about community perceptions of evaluation experiences with evaluation

FURTHER DISCUSSION

We hope you now have a clearer understanding of the ways in which sociopolitical context should be considered in the evaluation. This conversation is not over yet as we consider the organizational context of the program in Session

J. Before doing so, let me suggest that you look over one of the following readings for necessary "context" for diving deeper into the complexity of issues of the macro- and mid-program settings.

Maryudi, A., Devkota, R. R., Schusser, C., Yufanyi, C., Salla, M., Aurenhammer, H., et al. (2012). Back to basics: Considerations in evaluating the outcomes of community forestry. *Forest Policy and Economics, 14*(1), 1–5. ***With an understanding of influential internal and external stakeholders, this paper seeks to empower significant but underserved communities.***

Vo, A. T., & Christie, C. A. (2015). Advancing research on evaluation through the study of context. *New Directions for Evaluation, 148,* 43–55. ***A framework for understanding the various dimensions of context and how it can be used to systematically study context is outlined in this paper.***

Weiss, C. H. (1993). Politics and evaluation: A reprise with mellower overtones. *American Journal of Evaluation, 14*(1), 107–109. ***Weiss offers a critical analysis of how and where politics enters and affects the conduct of the evaluation. Much of what Carol notes in this paper still rings true. The article is a classic.***

Application of New Learning: Evaluation of RUPAS

In thinking about the historical, sociopolitical context for the RUPAS program, consider why the Family Matters (FM) organization was established in this particular community. *What is the community's history with evaluation and evaluations conducted of FM programs? What are the broader social and political issues that are impacting the community at this time? What do you know about the community and how might it impact the program and the evaluation? What are broader politics that are impacting the community, and how might they impact engagement in an evaluation?*

Additional References

Frierson, H. I., Hood, S., Hughes, G. B., & Thomas, V. G. (2010). A guide to conducting culturally responsive evaluations. In J. Frechtling (Ed.), *The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation* (pp. 75–96). National Science Foundation. ***This chapter examines the significance of using a culturally responsive approach when evaluating projects that serve populations in cultural contexts external to the project evaluator.***

Hood, S., Hopson, R. K., & Kirkhart, K. E. (2015). Culturally responsive evaluation. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 281–317). Wiley. ***This chapter is a foundational resource for critical responsive evaluation's history, theory, and practice.***

House, E. R. (2019). Evaluation with a focus on justice. In M. Alkin & C. A. Christie. (Eds.), *Special Issue: Theorists' Models in Action: A Second Look, New Directions in Evaluation, 163,* 61–72. ***This paper focuses on evaluations conducted with a social justice lens in mind.***

LaFrance, J., Nichols, R., & Kirkhart, K. E. (2012). Culture writes the script: On the centrality of context in Indigenous evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation, 135,* 59–74. ***This paper outlines and explains essential parts of the Indigenous evaluation framework epistemology and methods, as well as various instances of evaluation in American Indian communities.***

Additional Resource

Google Maps. www.maps.google.com. ***As I mentioned, the "street view" feature here is quite useful and can be activated by going to the website listed here, entering the address of interest in the search bar, double-clicking the flag that marks the point of interest, and clicking the "street view" link.***