EMANCIPATORY POLITICS, CRITICAL EVALUATION AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

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Abstract: The aspirations of emancipatory or empowerment-based social interventions, such as those inscribed in Health Canada’s and the World Health Organization’s Ottawa Charter, require a significant reconstruction of traditional evaluation practices. The prevailing response to this need has been the inclusion of “empowering” research techniques in the evaluation activity. The author argues that empowering research techniques cannot, in and of themselves, effectively inform and support the political aspirations of emancipatory intervention; such aspirations instead demand a dramatic shift in the institutional role of evaluation research and the focus of the evaluative gaze. Drawing from elements of Habermas’s theory of communicative action, the author outlines the dimensions of a critical approach to evaluation that is more consistent with the principles underscoring emancipatory intervention. The Treasury Board’s guide to program evaluation is used as illustration, to demonstrate the implications of such an approach for conventional evaluation questions.

Résumé: Les objectifs des interventions sociales de type émancipateur ou habilitateur, telles que décrites dans la Charte d’Ottawa établie par Santé Canada et l’Organisation mondiale de la santé, exigent une restructuration significative des techniques d’évaluation traditionnelles. La façon habituelle de répondre à ce besoin est d’inclure des techniques de prise de pouvoir dans l’activité d’évaluation. Dans le présent article, l’auteur soutient que ces techniques de prise de pouvoir ne peuvent en elles-mêmes éclairer ou appuyer d’une façon efficace les objectifs politiques de l’intervention émancipatrice. Au contraire, ces objectifs exigent un changement radical dans le rôle institutionnel de la recherche d’évaluation et dans l’approche évaluative. À l’aide d’éléments tirés de la théorie de Habermas sur l’action communicative, les dimensions d’une approche critique à l’évaluation qui respecte mieux les principes de l’intervention émancipatrice sont décrites. Le guide du Conseil
Since the 1980s the language of empowerment has had a powerful influence on the development of interventionary strategies in the health, education, and social welfare sectors. Health Canada has been particularly committed to this philosophy, and has since 1986 based its programming strategies on the Ottawa Charter, an approach to health promotion that emphasizes increased public participation, network/coalition building, and community development.

The evaluation industry has generally recognized that the aspirations of this genre of intervention require a significant reconstruction of traditional evaluation practices. The pioneering work of Scriven (1973), Stake (1975), and Guba and Lincoln (1989) has provided much needed inspiration and the basis for considerable innovation. Fischer (1985), Kemmis (1993), Everitt (1996), and Fettersen, Kaftarian, and Wandersman (1996), to name but a few, have made important contributions to the concept of “empowering” evaluation strategies.

Although I applaud the gains made by these endeavors, I would argue that we still have a long way to go in developing an approach to evaluation research that truly informs and supports empowerment-oriented aspirations. To date, most of the attention has focused on program participants and “empowering” methodologies. What is missing is the recognition that social change emerges from the interplay between human agency and systemic structures. Evaluation practices guided by an emancipatory ethic must develop the capacity to address this dynamic. I would argue that such aspirations necessitate a dramatic shift in the institutional role of evaluation research and in the focus of the evaluative gaze.

This article provides a basis for rethinking the evaluation function given the demands of interventions governed by an emancipatory ethic. In doing so, I draw on Jürgen Habermas’s concept of communicative action to provide a theoretical grounding for the shift in perspective.1

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas’s work is particularly useful for thinking critically about evaluation research because it offers a political location and context
within which to examine the practice of social intervention and evaluation. Habermas’s primary concern is the relationship between human agency and systemic structures. In his construction of modern society, he distinguishes two forms of “systemic” oppression, that is, oppression supported by the political, economic, and normative structures of the state’s administrative apparatus. First, there is the oppression that results from the unequal distribution of and access to resources. This is what traditional approaches to intervention attempt to compensate for or ameliorate. The second form of systemic oppression derives from the over-reliance on scientific discourse and technocratic rationalization as the basis for instrumental decision making. This privileging of “scientism” not only justifies material and social disparities but also discursively disarms political challenges to the status quo. It is this form of oppression that interventions informed by emancipatory politics are intended to address.

Habermas (1971) alerts us to the relationship between actions and the interests that govern actions. Communicative actions, which are directed at achieving a sense of mutual understanding and collective will, are actions we pursue to satisfy our interest in social harmony, integration, and solidarity. Instrumental actions are those emerging from our technical interest in controlling nature and our environment. In the liberal model of capitalist society communicative actions are primarily pursued in the realm of everyday life — the “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1984, p. 70) — and technical interests have become systemically structured and formalized in economic institutions, state bureaucracies, and professional agencies — “the system.” For Habermas, the differentiation between systemic and lifeworld interests is not problematic in and of itself, as long as the direction and content of systemic interests and instrumental capacities are grounded in everyday experience and guided by collective interests. As such, the only legitimate rationale for systemic action is one that is “communicatively secured” through public discussion and agreement.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas (1984, 1987) argues that the reverse is occurring. Social and political issues emerging from everyday life are increasingly being recast as technical concerns subject to systemic intervention and the application of scientific and technocratic imperatives. Issues related to how we want to live together and to what end are framed and legitimated by systemic logistics and priorities rather than determined discursively within the public arena. Consequently, “public will,” or collective agency, is being politically subverted by systemic discourses and
institutional arrangements. Our capacity to engage in the production of social change is, thus, gradually undermined by the growing inability to collectively explore and debate the nature and direction of that change. For Habermas this constitutes one of the most fundamental threats to democracy in the modern world.

From Habermas’s perspective, traditional approaches to social programming thus serve as a systemic tool for control and manipulation of the lifeworld. On the one hand, they offset serious political challenges to the status quo by providing compensation or ameliorative services to those dispossessed by the economic contradictions inherent in capitalism. On the other hand, they provide a means for penetrating the lifeworld and exposing the dimensions of everyday life to technocratic scrutiny, rationalization, and control. Within this context the social interventionary process may be seen as a means by which “the system,” as opposed to “the collective,” organizes and manages issues related to collective living and social integration. Social problems are increasingly the domain of the “professional,” who dictates the understanding of discontent, the appropriate level of intervention, and the skills required to overcome the condition. The assumption is that “social change” is a process that requires the upgrading of the instrumental capacity of the dispossessed and that this ability is linked to the acquisition of specific skills.

Habermas asks us to think again about this approach. He points out that we need a wider structural analysis so that the acquisition of such skills makes experiential as well as systemic sense. He challenges us to recognize the need to harness the technocratic efficiency and scientific capacity of the modern state to communicatively secured interests, thereby ensuring that the actions of systemic agents are firmly grounded in the needs emerging from everyday life.

EMPOWERMENT-ORIENTED INTERVENTION AND EVALUATION

The critical imperative identified by Habermas is recognized, in varying degrees, in the rhetoric of empowerment-oriented intervention. Where previously the discourse of intervention had been strongly oriented to the positivistic elements in the social sciences, now the practice of social programming is increasingly influenced by the emancipatory language of critical adult educators (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Collins, 1991; Fay, 1987; Freire, 1970; Giroux 1988, 1991) feminist pedagogical theorists (Hart, 1990; Lather, 1991; Weiler, 1991) and social action researchers (Hall, 1981; Maguire, 1987; Reason &
Rowan, 1981). Having rejected the conventional individualistic and behavioristic approach to intervention, these social activists attempt instead to develop strategies that will enhance the collective ability of the disempowered to affect social change on their own behalf. This discourse is characterized by a perspective that acknowledges the constraints imposed by our embeddedness in history, social structures, and personal biographies while at the same time recognizing the potential to change both ourselves and society. Perhaps what distinguishes the discourse of empowerment most clearly from its predecessors is its acknowledgement and deep respect for people’s capacity to create knowledge about, and solutions to, their own experiences. Within this discourse, the valid knowledge base from which to initiate social change originates in the collective everyday understandings and experiences of participants rather than in the annals of the social scientific community.

In adhering to an emancipatory ethic social programmers shift their focus from increasing the instrumental abilities (skills) of program users to increasing their communicative capacities (political voice/agency) to inform instrumental actions. The key concern is with the agency of the political citizen, not the self-sufficiency of the client of state resources. What this means in practical terms is that program objectives are not framed in terms of helping participants to increase their knowledge and skills using available resources, within existing institutional arrangements. Instead, the focus is program intervention, as the creation of a communicative space, that affords participants the opportunity to collectively identify the skills, resources, and institutional organization they require to meet the needs emerging from their lifeworld locations (VanderPlaat, 1995b).

Emancipatory approaches move beyond conventional approaches to social programming. They envision a system/lifeworld relationship whereby the instrumental capacity of the former is directed by the communicatively secured needs and interests of the latter. Ideally, an emancipatory approach to social programming should provide systemic agents — academics, professionals, and bureaucrats — with the opportunity and knowledge to organize their resources and research efforts to better meet the demands of experiential need.

Evaluation, of course, plays an integral role in the development and subsequent formulation of social programs, including those guided by emancipatory interests. The desire to demonstrate effectiveness and the demand for accountability affect how a program is defined
and the standards by which its “success” is judged. The discourse of evaluation research shapes what is publicly “known” or communicated about a social program. Program developers’ awareness of the need to evaluate often affects how a program is documented. Program descriptions are limited not only by the discursive concepts available but also by the “credibility” of the discourse in which these concepts are embedded. What a program does and what it is or has the potential to be must “fit” within the discursive capacity and legitimating claims of systemic structures.

Empowerment-oriented interventions, therefore, require evaluation strategies that can reconcile the need to demonstrate effectiveness with the principles underscoring an emancipatory ethic. The initial reaction to this challenge was to incorporate more interpretive-oriented, qualitative methods into existing evaluation models (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Later, and as is exemplified by the work of Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman (1996), qualitative data collection techniques were combined with “participatory” approaches in an effort to make the evaluation process more consistent with the principles of empowerment-oriented social programming.

Notwithstanding the importance of these contributions, I would argue that they are limited in their capacity to inform emancipatory interests. The ineffectuality stems from two interrelated factors. First, we have yet to seriously address the notion of relational power. The focus has been on the empowerment of program participants in isolation from the systemic realities within which their lives are embedded, defined, and often manipulated. Guba and Lincoln, for example, preempt a discussion on the redistribution of power by suggesting that we think of power as “potentially ever growing and enlarging, as in the case of love” (1989, p. 267). Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman (1996) acknowledge the problems associated with power and privilege but do little more than caution evaluators to remain alert to these disparities and sensitive to the voices of the dispossessed. Consequently, and here we find the second source of constraint, by relegating the discussion of participant versus systemic power to the sidelines we end up thinking about empowerment-oriented evaluation purely in terms of “empowering” research techniques.

As I have argued elsewhere, the inclusion of empowering methods, in and of themselves, cannot effectively inform and support the political aspirations of emancipatory intervention (VanderPlaat,
1995a). In a recent review of more than 100 evaluation reports of Canadian health promotion activities (Castle & VanderPlaat, 1996) we found that the practice of participatory research is all too often reduced to a process whereby program users “contribute” within the confines of a predetermined evaluation research design. There is also the widespread assumption that only qualitative data can serve an empowering practice. This misconception regarding quantitative data collection seriously undermines the important contribution such data can make to emancipatory efforts. In addition, we found that the concern with “voice” and the focus on story telling is often pursued without clear reference to an analytical context. As a result, the effectiveness of some programs becomes extremely difficult to substantiate.

What we have today, in terms of empowerment-oriented evaluation, is a solid body of literature that explores empowering evaluation methodologies and data collection strategies. However, a single-minded concern with technique tends to negate the political value of both the participatory approaches employed and the narratives generated through qualitative approaches. What we need is a careful consideration of how evaluation research, as a practice, can support emancipatory interests. The starting point for this endeavor is not methods, but a critical reconstruction of the role and focus of evaluation research.

To demonstrate what an emancipatory approach to evaluation would look like, I will now turn to an examination of the Canadian government’s evaluation policy. Before doing so, however, I would like to stress the importance of retaining the conventional notion of evaluation as a form of assessment. The ideas of “accountability” and “program effectiveness” are not antithetical to emancipatory politics, and we must be careful to maintain the distinction between evaluation and action research (Reason, 1988; Reinharz, 1992). Action research constitutes an important part of an empowerment-based interventionary strategy. It provides the means through which collective interests are articulated and pursued. It emphasizes collaborative research to produce knowledge for the purposes of social change. Evaluation research is distinct. It focuses on the effectiveness of such efforts. Of course, action research may include an evaluation function, but the two are not, in principle, the same thing. Bearing this in mind, let us now look at the Treasury Board’s guidelines to the evaluation function.
CRITICAL EVALUATION AND CANADIAN EVALUATION POLICY

The Canadian government’s policy on program evaluation is that any project funded fully or partly by federal monies must participate in a periodic, formal evaluation process. Since 1981 it has been the responsibility of the Office of the Comptroller General to implement this policy, which it has done with varying degrees of success (Mayne, 1986). The role of program evaluation at the federal level is to serve as a systemic informant — “a strategic management tool” (Mayne, 1986, p. 35), “a source of information for resource allocation, program improvement and accountability in government” (Office of the Comptroller General [OCG], 1981, p. 4). According to Mayne, evaluation distinguishes itself from other information-gathering systems, such as audits, in that it has the capacity to determine “the influence of a program on the events or conditions it is intended to affect” (1986, p. 33). Although relatively flexible in terms of methodology and data collection techniques used, the OCG does recommend that all program evaluations address the basic evaluation issues outlined in Table 1.

If we apply a Habermasian understanding to the OCG’s conventional notion of evaluation-as-systemic-informant, we note that evaluation is perceived as an activity that assesses how well “the system” has penetrated and manipulated a problematic area within the lifeworld. Evaluation thus functions from a system to a lifeworld location. Projects initiated and/or sponsored by the system are consequently judged in light of systemically defined criteria of effectiveness. In essence, it is a self-monitoring process.

An emancipatory approach to intervention necessitates a reversal of this position. The evaluative gaze should be from lifeworld to system. The focus should be on the extent to which communicative interference from the lifeworld has resulted in the effective organization and allocation of systemic resources. The role of emancipatory or critical evaluation is a bridging one between the administrative and professional apparatus of the state (system) and a program site (lifeworld). Evaluation acts as critical informant on behalf of the lifeworld. Its primary purpose is to assess how well the energies and resources of the state have been organized to meet the realities of everyday life. Evaluation becomes a self-conscious, as opposed to a self-monitoring, activity. This stance need not contradict the government’s view of evaluation. Critical evaluation still functions to inform the system, but it does so based on the interests of the lifeworld.
In assuming this role, however, critical evaluation must acknowledge its emancipatory “interest.” It cannot adopt the position recommended by the OCG, which casts evaluators as disinterested third parties:

The independence of the evaluators is essential to the production of objective and credible evaluation work ... Independence also requires evaluators to be able to stand back from everyday concerns of a program’s operation and to look at what is going on in a detached, but not uninformed way. (OCG, 1981, p. 54)

From a critical perspective there are no innocent positions from which one can conduct research (Haraway, 1988; Lather, 1991; Smith, 1987). Traditional approaches are not apolitical. The systemic privileging of scientific discourses and the scientific notion of objectivity constitutes not only an epistemological position but also a political one (Cain, 1990; Harding, 1991). As Smith notes, this can lead to ironic results:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Basic Program Evaluation Issues</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A. CONTINUED RELEVANCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Rationale</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To what extent are the objectives and the mandate of the program still relevant?</td>
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<td>• Are the activities and outputs of the program consistent with its mandate and plausibly linked to the attainment of the objectives and intended impacts and effects?</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. PROGRAM RESULTS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objectives Achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In what manner and to what extent were appropriate objectives achieved as a result of the program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impacts and Effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What client benefits and broader outcomes, both intended and unintended, resulted from carrying out the program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In what manner and to what extent does the program complement, duplicate, overlap, or work at cross purposes with other programs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. COST-EFFECTIVENESS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Are there more cost-effective alternative programs that might achieve the objectives and intended impacts and effects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are there more cost-effective ways of delivering the existing program?</td>
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Curiously, objectivity in the social sciences is to be guaranteed by the detachment of the social scientist from particular interests and perspectives; it is not guaranteed by its success in unfolding actual properties of social relations and organization. (1990, p. 32)

For evaluators who adhere to emancipatory politics a more consistent and useful understanding of “objectivity” is Haraway’s, which states that “objectivity is about limited location … not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become responsible for what we learn to see” (1988, p. 583). The evaluator is thus not an “invisible, anonymous, disembodied voice of authority” but a “real, historical individual with concrete specific interests” (Shields & Dervin, 1993, p. 67).

The development of a critical approach to evaluation also requires a careful rethinking of who, or what, is the focus of an evaluation. The Office of the Comptroller General, in describing the evaluation function, defines the measurement of program impacts and effects in terms of “the resulting goods, services and regulations produced by others and the consequent chain of outcomes which occur in society and parts thereof” (1981, p. 16, emphasis mine). Here again, the underlying assumption is that the direction of an interventionary act and the subsequent evaluation is system to lifeworld. Even in more participatory approaches to evaluation, the idea of “program effectiveness” is primarily constructed in terms of the relationship between the program and those for whom the program was designed, that is, its participants/users. This assumption underlies the basic evaluation criteria identified by the OCG and has a significant impact on both how the issue is understood and where we look for the answer.

Consider the evaluation issue regarding program sensibility. The research question posed is: “To what extent are the objectives and the mandate of the Program still relevant?” (OCG, 1991, p. 1–4). The conventional approach would include, among other things, an examination of whether “the problem” still exists. Is the original, systemically defined and validated rationale for the program still relevant? In considering health promotion programs one might, therefore, question the extent to which the physical and mental health of children of young, single, poor parents is at risk (Health Canada’s Nobody’s Perfect and Ready or Not programs) or explore whether people who work in the sex trade continue to have diffi-
culty accessing existing social and legal services (e.g., the City of Halifax’s Stepping Stone project). Alternatively, one might question the rationality of a targeted approach to health promotion (e.g., Health Canada’s Nobody’s Perfect, the Canadian Assistance Program for Children [CAPC]) or probe the wisdom of government involvement in the establishment of self-help groups (e.g., Nova Scotia’s Self-Help Connection and DAWN-Ontario). In any event, the issue of continued rationality is a question that “the system” asks itself, about its own original assumptions, and using its own discourse.

A critical approach requires that the question of program rationality be asked from the perspective of the lifeworld. The questions become: Does the program make sense given the needs emerging from lifeworld experience? Can we establish linkages between systemic assumptions, practical activities, and collective interests? The key point is not whether we can find lifeworld evidence to support systemic assumptions, but whether systemic assumptions (activities) support lifeworld realities.

The same argument applies to the basic evaluation issue concerning program consequences. In the words of the Comptroller General (OCG, 1991, p. 1–4), “What client benefits and broader outcomes, both intended and unintended, resulted from carrying out the program?” Conventional approaches to this question look to the behaviors and attitudes of program users as the prime indicators of program effectiveness. However, there is a considerable body of critical literature that argues against the idea of an interventionary mindset focused exclusively on “the other” (Fine, 1994; Gore, 1992, Hooks, 1990). This argument needs to be incorporated into a critical evaluation function. An emancipatory ethic requires that professional and technocratic “systemic agents” place themselves at the center of the evaluative gaze. The focus of attention should be on the effectiveness of systemic actions as they relate to the expressed (not assumed) needs and interests of program users. The worth of a program is not judged by how well program users respond to a systemically organized resource, but rather by how responsive systemic resources are to the realities of program users. In essence, a critical approach to evaluation necessitates a change in the object of the evaluative inquiry and puts systemic agents and their activities in the center of the assessment. Program users/participants come to act as critical informants, or expert witnesses, to the process rather than as bearers of the indicators (e.g., behaviors and attitudes) by which the effectiveness of a program is judged. A critical approach thus
requires an examination of the effects a program site, as a communicative space, has on the subsequent organization of resources and systemic responsiveness to everyday experience.

This shift in focus greatly expands the range of evaluation questions we might pose. For example, for public participation programs like DAWN-Ontario and the Self-Help Connection the concept of “participation” is almost always measured in terms of the number of people who join the network and remain actively involved (Castle & VanderPlaat, 1996). A critical approach would define participation in terms of the political input the network is allowed to have in public policy formation and the reorientation of health services. The question is not only how many political activities participants engage in, but also how these activities were responded to and incorporated by the system, the assumption being that one’s involvement in an empowerment-oriented social program, which does not afford the capacity to influence social change, serves little more than a therapeutic function.

Likewise, if we look at Health Canada’s parenting programs, such as Nobody’s Perfect and CAPC, conventional evaluations are content with measuring the learning experiences of parents — little attention is given to the learnings that systemic agents could be deriving from these sites and applying to the reorganization of resources. For example, the opportunity for mutual support among participants has consistently been identified as the precursor to needs identification and a sense of collective identity. As such, it is often identified by parents as the catalyst for individual change and it is obviously the basis for potential collective action (VanderPlaat, forthcoming). Critical evaluation would demand that this finding be carried back into the system and incorporated into the way we (as systemic agents) organize resources and design and evaluate programs. Subsequent evaluation questions would focus on how well the system has supported the capacity for mutual support and allowed political energies to emerge. Instead, we continue to treat mutual support as one of the many, and often anecdotal, indicators of participant behavior, thereby effectively disarming its emancipatory potential.

As noted earlier, critical evaluation also requires that systemic agents become self-conscious or reflective about their interventionary efforts. In doing so they must seriously address the barriers imposed by their own political/disciplinary locations and the institutions that
they help to maintain. This requires a willingness to address potentially difficult and politically sensitive questions. For example, what impact does the involvement of “professionals” have on the effectiveness of empowerment-oriented programs? What barriers are posed by professional assumptions and approaches? What implications does this have for staffing and interventionary training? Similarly, if we look at projects such as the Nova Scotia Family Violence Prevention Initiative, an evaluation question that demands to be asked is the extent to which “turfism” poses barriers to the project’s effectiveness. Does the fact that one department has intergovernmental responsibility for “family violence” detract from the potential contribution of other departments? Do the different “languages” of “family violence” as constructed by different departments pose barriers to program effectiveness?

There is enough anecdotal evidence emerging from evaluations to warrant serious consideration of these types of questions. Whether or not they get asked depends on the extent to which we, as systemic agents, are willing to commit to an emancipatory ethic. To do so requires that we redirect the power inherent in our positions and act more like Foucault’s idea of a specific intellectual (1977, p. 126) — a person who uses their privilege as a weapon to dismantle, rather than guard, the structures of domination and oppression.

CONCLUSION

Evaluation activities informed by emancipatory politics retain the notions of “accountability” and “program effectiveness” but respond to these imperatives from the perspective of the lifeworld, not the system. As such, they require that a participatory, democratic ethos be restored to the concept of “public policy.” The criteria by which a social program is judged should be validated by the public for which it was intended. The question of proof lies not in the behaviors and attitudes of program users but in the responsiveness of system agents and resources to the needs of everyday life.

Evaluation underscored by an emancipatory intent is also a process that must be judged by its catalytic validity (Reason & Rowan, 1981), “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1991, p. 68). Integral to this idea is the recognition that academics, professionals, and bureaucrats are often the participants in question. They (we) and their (our) activities become the foci of
the evaluative gaze (dispelling the subject/object dichotomy so disdained by critical and feminist thinkers). The catalytic validity of an evaluation is thus judged by the extent to which it provides system agents with a precise picture of the systemic barriers that block the emergence of collective interests, political agency, and communicatively secured resource allocation. Key questions galvanize around the ways in which a program site has created an empowering space and whether emancipatory interests have been allowed to penetrate and influence the energies, resources, and policies of the system.

Those committed to emancipatory politics must also give careful consideration to the research practices that best support this position. Although quantitative methods, in particular the survey, have been less than adequate in reflecting lived experience and supporting emancipatory interests (Graham, 1983; Reinharz, 1992), the usefulness of empirical data cannot be denied (Finch, 1991; Harding, 1991; Jayaratne, 1983; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1990). Harding (1987) and Smith (1987) note that it is not the methods or techniques themselves that are problematic, but rather the ways they are deployed to construct knowledge. We need to be conscious of and sensitive to the limitations and impositions presented by particular ways of collecting and analyzing information.

A critical approach to evaluation also raises questions about representation (Borland, 1991; Brodkey, 1987; Fine, 1994; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989). In traditional evaluations a research report is presented in the voice of the system or in a detached voice that claims to be representing the interests of all parties. Critical evaluation as a narrative form problematizes the writing of the voice(s) of others. Can complexity be presented without privileging a voice? Should the voice(s) of program users be presented in their own speech styles and grammatical structures or do we edit this narrative to give it greater “legitimacy” within the system? These questions are not easily answered. Although we may want to present the voices of the dispossessed as heard, this does not necessarily aid the process of systemic change. Indeed, there may be value in translating the voice(s) of the dispossessed so that, say, the implications for resource reallocations are clearly understood by the system in system terms.

Herein lie the very profound contradictions that face researchers who step out, who presume to want to make a
difference, who are so bold or arrogant as to assume we might. Once out beyond the picket fence of illusory objectivity, we trespass all over the classed, raced, and otherwise stratified lines that have demarcated our social legitimacy for publicly telling their stories. And it is then that ethical questions boil. (Fine, 1994, p. 80)

The issue of representation leads directly to questions of validity, and these touch all areas of the evaluation process, including the validation of data collection instruments and procedures (Cronbach, 1980; House, 1980), the credibility of narratives and descriptions (Lather, 1991), and the legitimacy of conclusions and recommendations (Heron, 1988). At a minimum, most critical researchers require the considered reaction of the actors from whom the information was derived. Guba and Lincoln suggest that the process of establishing validity through member checks is

the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility. If the evaluator wants to establish that the multiple realities he or she presents are those that the stakeholders have provided, the most certain test is verifying those multiple constructions with those who provided them. (1989, p. 239)

Lather (1991) puts forward the concept of maximum reciprocity where all concerned are actively engaged in the design of the research tool, and in the construction and validation of findings and conclusions. For Lather, it is the principle of maximum reciprocity that determines the potential usefulness of a data collection technique and the subsequent validity of the knowledge generated.

This, then, is the context for a critical approach to evaluation. Clearly, participatory strategies are not empowering if they are conducted within the confines of predetermined systemic mandates. Likewise, empowerment-oriented interventions are not emancipatory if the concept of social change begins and ends with the behaviors of program participants. As Habermas (1987) reminds us, social change requires interaction between human agency and social structures. Evaluation strategies that ignore this and focus only on the program user have little capacity to inform an emancipatory interest.
ENDNOTE

1 Fischer (1980) and Ryan (1988) have also applied Habermasian concepts to evaluation research, particularly from his earlier work on knowledge and human interests (1971).

REFERENCES


