

Preface

This is a book about values, valuing and evaluating (i.e., answering evaluative questions) in the practice of social science research—particularly research done in applied fields, including program and policy evaluation, policy analysis, organizational and community development, business and nonprofit management, clinical sociology, social work, community psychology, international development, education, and public health. We address a broad multidisciplinary audience of social science researchers. Some of these researchers self-identify as professional evaluators. Others conduct evaluations of social programs and policies in these applied fields but define their professional identities as psychologists, sociologists, educational researchers, program analysts, and so on.

Research in applied fields is designed to be of use to policymakers, practitioners, and communities. It is often financially and politically commissioned and shaped by an array of stakeholder perspectives and interests, including those of funders and commissioners, social researchers themselves, and the institutions within which they work. This research is often committed to producing actionable results. As noted in the *Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods* (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. x), the environment in which social researchers work is typically “complex, chaotic, and highly political, with pressures for quick and conclusive answers” to pressing problems. That environment is also infused with values and with decisions about what to value and how.

We side with those philosophers of social science and science practitioners who argue that the value-free ideal for social scientific research (and all research for that matter) is unrealistic. All social research is generated from some perspective, orientation, or viewpoint and is thus partial (i.e.,

there is no “view from nowhere”). At the same time, however, researchers are committed to identifying and addressing biases, to preserving the ideal of objectivity (in the sense of a disciplined and transparent commitment to evidence), and to generating “useful” knowledge that contributes to improving the lives of individuals, communities, and societies.

In pursuit of an alternative to a value-free ideology for social science research, we argue for sustained, systematic reflexivity about what is valued in research, what values research promotes, how decisions about what to value are made and by whom, and how evaluating takes place. Reflexivity about values, valuing, and evaluating is an essential dimension of robust inquiry. What matters is developing a judicious and critical understanding of (1) how valuing as reflected in professional behavior as well as in social policies, commissioning organizations, researcher stances, and public preferences influences the conduct of applied social research in legitimate and illegitimate ways, and (2) how evaluative questions can be effectively proposed and evaluative judgments legitimately defended.

We are fully aware of the ongoing discussion of whether there are differences between practices of social research and evaluation that truly make a difference. Some scholars argue that there is overlap between the practices, whereas others argue that each is unique (e.g., Mathison, 2008; Mertens, 2014; Scriven, 2016a; Vedung, 1997). We adopt the view that evaluators are explicitly concerned with a process of examining, appraising, or weighing up some phenomenon (a program, policy, project, strategy, etc.) against some type of yardstick or criteria. In addition, evaluation typically has a goal of providing valid and useful information to inform decision making. Social researchers may, from time to time, wear this kind of evaluator’s hat, as they systematically investigate and assess contexts, policies, and programs designed to address social problems (Rossi, Lipsey, & Henry, 2019). In that respect, what we have to say here about evaluating will likely be relevant to their work. In addition, evaluation knowledge produced by both large (e.g., Mathematica, WestEd, Abt Associates, MDRC) and small research and evaluation firms as well as in academic research centers tends to overlap with other forms of social scientific knowledge production, including descriptive studies, theory building, performance measurement, and data science (Lemire, Nielsen, & Christie, 2018). We use the terms *evaluation* and *evaluation research* interchangeably.

DEFINITIONS

Values

The term *values* is not easily defined. Sociologists, philosophers, economists, political scientists, and psychologists all have somewhat different

ways of making sense of the concept. Value can refer to a core principle or belief, a preference for something, a quality or importance of something, and a measure. We routinely speak of a variety of types of values, including moral, cultural, scientific, political, personal, social, intrinsic, instrumental, and so on. For our purposes, the concept *value* includes both normative (i.e., relating to a standard) and emotive commitments to what individuals, groups, and societies esteem, cherish, and respect—for example, equal treatment under the law, veneration of family, equality, democratic deliberation, individuality, respect for human dignity, and so on—as well as perspectives on what is right or wrong, good or bad, important or unimportant, and so on (Makau & Marty, 2013). Individuals, organizations, and communities hold values implicitly and make them explicit only when challenged.

In this book, we do not treat values as stable notions defined in advance of their application or use, but rather as ideals we grapple with, formulate, and express in day-to-day activities (Dussage, Helgesson, Lee, & Woolgar, 2015). In other words, we do not regard values as fixed influences or off-the-shelf standards that determine a decision but rather as a critical dimension of decisions made in specific situations. Often, values are thought of as preferences or matters of taste or choice that are simply there waiting to be stated or revealed. Professor of political science and economics Charles Lindblom (1977, 1990) distinguished preferences or mere matters of taste from volitions—the latter understood as patterns of desires reflecting a combination of principle, appraisal, judgment, and opinion. Borrowing his idea, we regard values as analogous to volitions. They are created and are “complex choices on which deliberation is both possible and practiced” and “emergent acts of will” that express how things ought to be (Lindblom, 1977, p. 135). Values are more like thoughtful judgments and considered choices.

Valuing

The term *valuing* as opposed to values best captures this dynamic sense of how cherished and prized values are continually explained and examined as they are made plain in actions and practices. Valuing is a kind of practice that involves identifying, naming, considering, and holding or respecting something (an action, behavior, trait, idea, point of view, etc.) as important, beneficial, right to do, good to be, and so forth. For example, valuing occurs when a researcher decides how to integrate her economic goals and personal career ambitions with ethical and scientific considerations in the conduct of a given investigation. Valuing reveals distinct perspectives on what is considered important and significant and is manifest in applied social research in multiple ways.

- Researcher behavior involves valuing the importance and priority of moral values that express what is good or right in terms of researcher conduct, including honesty, truthfulness, respect for persons, and cultural sensitivity and fairness, along with cognitive or epistemic values such as a commitment to systematic inquiry and justified belief, empirical grounding of claims, and objectivity. Both kinds of values are typically represented in professional standards or codes for ethical conduct. However, those guidelines are not “how-to” manuals. The kind of valuing involved in professional conduct is something continually conceived and achieved by practitioners in their interactions with colleagues, research funders, and those involved in the research process.

- The activity of valuing is also found in the stakes (investments, motivations, interests, perspectives) that individuals or groups bring to some situation or set of circumstances. Quite often, those stakes are not only different but may conflict, and hence must be explored and negotiated. For example, policymakers may see the highest value in the relationship between financial investment in a policy and achievement of predetermined outcomes; practitioners responsible for operationalizing the policy might instead find greater value in the practicality of implementing its provisions and sustaining effects over time; researchers examining the program might place the highest value on technical matters, including the rigor of design and analysis.

- Moral and political valuing is embedded, and often explicitly stated, in the mission and vision statements of organizations and agencies employing or funding applied researchers. Oxfam, for example, states that it values empowerment, inclusiveness, and accountability; the United Nations Development Programme claims that it exemplifies integrity, accountability, transparency, professionalism, mutual respect, and results orientation in all that it does as an organization. The Consortium of Social Science Associations in its ongoing series of briefs “Why Social Science?” (www.cossa.org/tag/why-social-science) openly promotes the very value of social research itself to society—a contested political issue in recent years in the United States.

- The activity of valuing is reflected in the conceptual frameworks that shape research, policy, and practice in applied fields. For example, studies of global health problems and their solutions can be driven by the realization of different moral values, including humanitarianism, utilitarianism, equity, and rights.

- Valuing is manifest in researchers’ epistemological, methodological, and moral-political commitments. Controversies among the merits of different research frameworks—experimentalism, participatory action research, feminism, critical and queer theories, activist anthropology, cul-

turally responsive evaluation—are most often centered on valuing different kinds of commitments.

Evaluating

Values and valuing take on specific meaning and importance in applied social research devoted expressly to *evaluating*. Evaluating is a particular kind of empirical investigation often spoken of as appraising, weighing up, assessing, calculating, gauging, rating, and ranking, depending on the field or practice where it takes place. It involves answering evaluative questions that require judging the merits of some action, typically a project, program, policy, or strategy. In social science research, this includes questions such as, are children better off if parents who want a divorce stay together; will this intervention improve child survival in countries with a high burden of neonatal and child mortality; what makes for unhealthy housing in this community; what is the most effective media campaign to lower tobacco use? Moreover, many evaluative questions arise in research situations where the valuing done by affected parties (stakeholders) conflicts—for example, when farmers wish to draw water from a river to irrigate their crops, while conservationists want to preserve the endangered fish species residing in the river. Contested perspectives on valuing make evaluating a challenging undertaking.

Answering evaluative questions about projects, policies, programs, and strategies requires making evaluative judgments; that is, decisions about what is right, good, best, important, significant, meritorious, and so on. Those judgments, in turn, often rest on both explicit and implicit appeals to specific criteria such as effectiveness, efficiency, or sustainability. Criteria are expressions of valuing done by individuals and groups holding often differing motivations, interests, and perspectives on what is being evaluated. Understanding how and whose criteria should matter in addressing evaluative questions as well as how evaluative judgments are made and by whom is a critical professional responsibility of many researchers working in applied fields.

OUR AIM AND PERSPECTIVE

This book offers conceptual and practical guidance to social researchers and evaluators who intend to navigate the tangled and complicated terrain of values, valuing, and evaluating. We focus on understanding how these phenomena and associated practices are at work in social research, what investigators can and should do in dealing with such matters, and how their actions relate to long-standing concerns about objectivity, impartiality, the nature and use of evidence, and the purpose(s) of applied social research.

Our primary aim is to help researchers become more explicit about values, valuing, and evaluative judgments in their practices and to refine their capacity to engage in deliberative argumentation guided by standards of reasonableness.

Much applied research takes place as if there is no controversy over values and valuing or as if moral-political issues can be dealt with in a purely technical way. Data-driven mentalities such as evidence-based policy and practice, reliance on big data, social technologies (e.g., regulatory impact assessment, results-based management, performance management), and best practices tend to define what can be known, depoliticize the matter of valuing, and suggest that data alone can support decisions without the interference of values. Being more explicit about valuing not only serves as a corrective to these practices, but it also helps clarify thinking and can be a remedy against smuggling values on board the applied research vessel. Of course, declaration, explicitness, and transparency do not and cannot solve problems of value conflict. Conflicts about fundamental values, including moral disagreements, are permanent conditions of democratic politics and thus are not problems to be solved but situations to be addressed through dialogue and deliberation. In this book, we explore several means of using intentional values-based dialogue to engage value conflicts.

This book is a call for a morally centered and democratic form of the professional practices of social research and evaluation, one that steps deeper and with greater awareness and responsibility into the contested ethical and political worlds of community engagement, civic involvement, and deliberation. Elsewhere, following an idea first introduced by Martin Rein (1983), we identified this as a value-critical stance (Schwandt, 1997; Schwandt & Gates, 2016). To be value critical as a social researcher or evaluator in Rein's view is not only to present the empirical case for the consequences of pursuing alternative actions to solve social problems, but also to interpret what it is we are doing in society, why we are doing what we do, and what we might do differently given our puzzlement and worry about what we do. In our view, this stance redefines social inquiry and evaluation as dialogical and critically reflective processes of democratic discussion about desirable goals and actions in which we use deliberative methods to determine what we should do and structure our conversation to permit interaction and learning.

A value-critical stance as a social researcher or evaluator involves advocacy for this way of interrogating social action—bringing together fact-sensitive appraisals of social conditions and value-sensitive deliberations about the current state of affairs and possible social direction. Given the concern of much applied research for use in decision making, a value-critical stance might also involve advocating that decision makers most concerned about the findings of such investigations take action for the com-

mon good based on those findings. However, we distinguish this value-critical stance from that of the activist researcher who serves as a community organizer or mobilizes social movements (McBride, Casillas, & LoPiccolo, 2020; Neubauer & Hall, 2020). To be sure, these are needed roles in society, but we do not regard them as essential to the skill set or experiences of social researchers and evaluators. Moreover, such activities may preempt the difficult co-produced, deliberative activity of boundary setting and critique that in our view characterizes the professional responsibility of social researchers engaged in value-critical work.

A value-critical stance inevitably requires interrogating multiple values and perspectives held by professional inquirers themselves and those espoused by the individuals and groups that they work with and address. It also requires unwavering acceptance of the fact that any inquiry always requires setting boundaries on what values, perspectives, and evidence are swept into consideration in that inquiry and what is left out. In the following pages, we advocate for critical self-reflection, support of civic agency, dialogue, and deliberation as central professional responsibilities.

Writing from our positions as privileged members of elite universities advocating for these aspects of reasoned moral-political argumentation, we realize that some scholars and practitioners might read our perspective as an appeal to the “presumed neutrality of White European Enlightenment epistemology” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Yet, in our view, deliberative argumentation means opening matters of values and valuing to critical analysis and negotiation that, in turn, invites transparency and accountability of research and evaluation practices to the plurality of groups involved and affected. Doing so provokes researchers and evaluators to wrestle with how to address normative and epistemological differences and justify choices made about what is valued within a given study and circumstances. This often means working to address power imbalances between groups and advancing the values and worldviews of minoritized and oppressed groups, such as in indigenous-led (Smith, 2012) and anti-racist research (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Moreover, reasoned dialogue need not and should not exclude the play of emotions and the affective dimensions of deliberation, nor should it require privileging certain forms of knowledge (e.g., White, Eurocentric) over others. Moral emotions such as compassion and feelings of responsibility and justice play an important role in judging the ethical aspects of policies and programs designed to achieve social change (Helm, 2007). Neither must the idea of being civil in contentious dialogues equate to silencing marginalized voices. People who wish to maintain the status quo often view pushing back against taken-for-granted understandings and practices as being uncivil. Yet, orchestrating the terms of civility with parties to a dialogue ought to be part of deliberation rather than assuming all parties to the dialogue will simply respond to the majoritarian view of what civility ought to be.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on values and valuing in terms of the responsibilities of social researchers in applied fields—responsibilities for both professional ethical behavior and knowledge generation. Some of these are moral responsibilities—duties or obligations to act in a certain way to which a professional is required, by some standard, to attend (Talbert, 2019). Standards or norms for behavior are acquired through the socialization of researchers into their respective fields of study; others are part of the general religious and secular discourses of societies; still others are role specific, for example, the moral obligations of the lawyer, the physician, the anthropologist, and so on. In the social sciences, talk of ethics, particularly applied, practical, or professional ethics (Jamieson, 2013), is more prominent than talk of morality. Yet the two terms are very closely related. One common view is that ethics is concerned with making decisions about what is right and wrong to do (or good or bad to be), whereas morality refers to a set of norms that inform ethical decisions. We abide by the convention of talking about social science research and evaluation ethics but could just as well be talking about morality in social science research and evaluation.

Throughout both chapters, we examine how the activity of valuing is visible not simply in terms of the personal value stances and decisions of investigators but also in social policies, commissioning organizations, and research frameworks. In daily practice, researchers usually do not neatly distinguish the kind of valuing involved in producing scientific knowledge from the kind of valuing that involves ethical reasoning. We separate the two here for analytic purposes, allowing a closer investigation of each.

Chapter 1, “Expanding the Conversation on Research Ethics,” focuses on applied or practical ethics in researcher behavior and addresses valuing unfolding in the practical and policy issues related to responsible scientific conduct. Rather than focusing on the growing bureaucratization of research ethics and the tendency to view ethics as a matter of regulating professional behavior, we regard ethical research norms—honesty, openness, respect for colleagues, respect for persons, social responsibility, and so on, represented in professional codes of conduct—as something developed and resolved in specific situations. We emphasize that values typically valorized in professional conduct are interpreted and expressed differently depending on historical, social, cultural, organizational, and technological circumstances. This chapter also emphasizes the contrast between raising social researchers’ awareness of ethical codes and principles and receiving instruction in ethical reasoning, and it offers some practical guidance on the latter.

Without rehearsing the extensive debates in the philosophy of social science surrounding the aims of the social sciences (*vis-à-vis* the natural sciences) and the notion of value neutrality, Chapter 2, “From Value Neutral-

ity to Morally Informed Research,” wades into the long-standing discussion of the role of facts and values in scientific research and the legitimate and illegitimate roles that values and valuing can and do play in research. It locates multiple sources of valuing and their potential influence on the conduct of research, including political, cultural, and social values and norms that tacitly, and in many cases explicitly, are represented in programs and policies that are the object of investigation; value positions held by institutions and agencies that commission research and evaluations; the honest broker and value-neutral stance of applied researchers as well as advocacy stances that may be openly ideological and promoting a particular moral and political point of view. We are particularly concerned with the relationship between moral commitments and factual discoveries and defend the idea of morally informed applied social science that does not take the form of preaching.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss how valuing—understood as naming, considering, holding or respecting, and identifying what is good with respect to professional responsibility in human conduct and knowledge production—operates in the conduct of applied social science. With Chapter 3, we shift the focus to evaluating, the making of judgments of merit, worth, importance, and significance of policies, programs, projects, strategies, innovations, advocacy campaigns, and the like that must be justified and publicly defended (De Munck & Zimmerman, 2015). Chapter 3, “The Conventional Frame for Evaluating Social Interventions,” presents the mainstream view of evaluating found in social science research. This is a traditional focus on the methodical, technical, instrumental activity of determining the value of planned interventions, policies, and projects. Chapter 3 describes the assumptions—for example, regarding the definition of social problems, the problem-solving process, the definition and role of stakeholders, the nature and use of evidence—characteristic of this frame that also serves as a mental model for many social researchers.

Chapter 4, “Expanding the Conventional Frame for Evaluating,” looks at the work of Michael Scriven and other evaluation scholars who distinguish evaluating from social research. The emerging science of evaluating raises important issues about the criteria on which to base an evaluative judgment; how and to what extent evaluative judgments involve stakeholder considerations; how evaluation practice unfolds in a political policymaking milieu; and who precisely is responsible for making an evaluative judgment.

For analytic purposes, in Chapter 5, “An Emerging Alternative Frame for Evaluating,” we contrast the conventional frame for evaluating in Chapter 3 with ideas raised in Chapter 4 and then contrast both of these accounts with an emerging alternative frame that is developing across several areas of evaluation as well as social research theory and practice. This alternative addresses the complexity of social problems and change processes and the necessity of evaluating interventions in ways that account for

this complexity and support iterative and adaptive change efforts. In this alternative framing of evaluation, researchers, practitioners, citizens, and policymakers view social problems and situations as interconnected and fluid. In addressing these problems, these groups possess varying degrees of uncertainty about the definition and extent of the problem and often operate with incomplete knowledge and information. Evaluating interventions to address these social problems requires expanding beyond a point-in-time judgment of “How did we do?” based on chosen criteria, to an ongoing learning process among all stakeholders bringing together data and values to change a state of affairs, innovate, and adapt. Evaluating is thus less like gauging performance against a standard and more like an activity of practical reasoning in which participants address the question “Given what we know now, what should we do?”

However, in the day-to-day reality of on-the-ground practices of evaluation research, evaluating may not fall neatly within one of these frames. Despite establishing a contrast between ways of thinking about evaluating through the sequencing of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, we do not suggest that one set of ideas and practices totally replaces an earlier set of ideas and practices. Thus, in Chapter 6, “Evaluating as a Multifaceted Investigation of Value,” we explore how the conventional and alternative frames for evaluating coexist and function in complementary ways both conceptually and within a specific case example. We argue that matters of determining the value of an intervention within a specific context play an important role in social policy and practice. Reaching ethically and technically defensible conclusions in such circumstances requires critical reflection and democratic deliberation about the underlying values and criteria that bound evaluative judgments. Without diminishing the importance of making such judgments, we argue that amidst complexity, questions of value are continually developing and often amplifying. We illustrate this coexistence of determining value (based on the expanded conventional frame) and developing value (based on the emerging alternative) in the case of a philanthropic initiative to transform the systems that shape health and well-being in the United States. The appendix to this chapter illustrates a variety of methods that are useful in developing value and that extend beyond what is traditionally in social researchers’ toolkits.

Chapter 7, “Valuing, Evaluating, and Professional Responsibility,” argues for a new form of professionalism in social research and evaluation. It explores the limits of professional researchers’ theoretical and methodological expertise. We espouse a view of the responsibilities of social researchers aligned with notions of co-production and democratic professionalism. Here researchers serve the public less as outside experts and more as catalysts and collaborators. Citizens are not merely beneficiaries in receipt of expert knowledge but collaborators who contribute their knowledge, experience, skills, and capabilities to creating social innovation. We

also make the case for moving applied scientific inquiry out of an adversarial and argumentative culture to one of dialogue and deliberation. We conclude with some implications for the training and education of social researchers.

Chapters 1 through 5 and 7 include an annotated “Important Resources” section as well as a “Bridge to Practice” section that encourages readers to engage issues raised in each chapter. Chapter 6 is unique in providing an extended case discussion that concludes with a briefly annotated Methods Appendix. A Glossary of select terms used in the book is also provided.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tom: I have been working on issues related to the place of moral inquiry and practical reasoning in the conduct and use of applied social science, particularly evaluation research, for more than 35 years, the last few years in fairly constant dialogue with Emily about these issues. This book is the latest statement of that evolving understanding emerging from my collaboration with Emily as coauthor, interlocutor, and tireless champion of new ways of thinking about evaluating. What we have to say here is, of course, not only the product of our joint efforts but reflects the thoughtful contributions that so many colleagues have made to our thinking. I am especially indebted to my good friend Peter Dahler-Larsen, and to Elliott Stern, Bob Stake, Mel Mark, Eleanor Chelmsky, Ernie House, Mike Morris, Martin Reynolds, Zenda Ofir, and Brad Cousins for their own work on issues in evaluation as well as for their insights into my work. Jennifer Greene’s scholarship on a values-engaged approach to evaluation and her insistence that evaluation studies must contribute to democratic decision making have been particularly inspiring. I regard it is a major gift to have had the opportunity to be in scholarly conversation with all these colleagues for so many years. In recent years, beginning with an initial collaboration on a National Research Council committee examining the use of science as evidence in policymaking, I also had the good fortune of coming to know Ken Prewitt at Columbia University. Our conversations about the use value of social science research have been enlightening and invaluable. For her unwavering support and encouragement of my work, I am most grateful to my wife, Sherry. As a senior university administrator with extensive responsibilities for supporting faculty research across the social, behavioral, and natural sciences, she was invaluable to me as a source of insight on matters of the applied sciences. But, more importantly, she showed the patience of Job at countless dinner conversations when I worked out my ideas by talking them over with her, and she offered useful questions and comments that helped clarify my thinking. All the really clear aspects of what I have written I no

doubt owe largely to her; the muddied parts are obviously my own usual creation. Finally, I confess that while writing, my mood oscillated between the excitement of perhaps offering some new work and depression on realizing that it might have all been said before and better by others. I shall leave that evaluative judgment to readers.

Emily: My perspective and inputs to this book are grounded in my evaluation work, training and influence by systems thinkers, and conversations with colleagues and friends working in this space as well as students. In no particular order, I acknowledge Jennifer Greene, Lizanne DeStefano, Robert Stake, and Melvin Hall for instilling a care and commitment to honoring values and multiple perspectives in myself and the field; to fellow systems thinkers Bob Williams, Martin Reynolds, Beverly Parsons, Tina Smith, Judy Oakden, Bobby Milstein, Pablo Vidueira, Michael Quinn Patton, Gerald Midgley, Mat Walton, and numerous others for sustaining the space for systemic evaluating; to dear friends Ayesha Boyce, Jori Hall, Rebecca Teasdale, Gabriela Garcia, Lorna Rivera, Maria Carolina Hidalgo Standen, Gizelle Gopez, and others for inspiring me in how you lead the next generations in equitable research and evaluation; and to my evaluation collaborators, particularly from ReThink Health, and students who bounced ideas and contributed examples. Finally, I thank my parents for their unconditional support.

From us both: We benefited greatly from the insightful comments of reviewers Tom Archibald, Robin Miller, Mike Morris, Anne Vo, and Deborah Wasserman, who helped us sharpen our focus and clarify our arguments. Finally, we are indebted to our editor, C. Deborah Laughton, not only for her enthusiastic support of this work, but for her wise counsel at all points in the preparation and production of the manuscript. She is a genuine joy to work with.