This article asserts that a competent evaluator knows more than one method, theory or approach to evaluation, and that feminist evaluation should be one of those core approaches. At the same time, the author acknowledges that feminist evaluation faces some constraints to its use, namely its name and its lack of concrete guidance. This article provides practical strategies to engage with using feminist evaluation for those who consider themselves feminists, and for those who adamantly do not, yet identify as evaluators who value human rights and social change.
I am a feminist. I believe, for example, that women and men should earn equal pay for equal work. I think that in any relationship, each person has the right not to be physically beaten or verbally abused by the other partner. I am also an evaluator. I believe that evaluation, and therefore an evaluator, can play an important role in creating a more equitable and fair society. Lastly, I believe that each evaluation design needs to be appropriate to its context.

Because of these beliefs and ways of thinking, I draw on multiple evaluation approaches, one of which is Feminist Evaluation (FE). An often misunderstood, somewhat contentious, and therefore overlooked (or avoided) approach (Bustelo, 2016; Patton, 2002; Podems, 2014), FE is one of many approaches that is a vital part of any practicing evaluator’s edification, and an approach that should be learned by any young emerging evaluator. To encourage its use, I address two common challenges to using FE: its name and its lack of practical guidance. I suggest several practical ways to engage with FE so that it becomes one potential evaluation approach for any evaluation that involves humans, animals or the environment.

Eight tenets of Feminist Evaluation

Multiple evaluation approaches provide a step-by-step guide, such as Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) or the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model (Stufflebeam and Zhang, 2017). Others provide clear concepts and structures, such as Realist Evaluation and Most Significant Change (2005). Still others provide a way to think about evaluation, such as Democratic Evaluation, and the focus here, FE. Sharon Brisolara (2014), building on Seilbeck and Bowan’s (2002) work, provides eight FE tenets:

1. Evaluation is a political activity; evaluator’s personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics come from and lead to a particular political stance.

2. Knowledge is culturally, socially and temporally contingent.
3. Knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose.

4. There are multiple ways of knowing.

5. Research methods, institutions and practices are social constructs.

6. Gender inequities are one manifestation of social injustice; discrimination cuts across race, class, and culture and is inextricably linked to all three.

7. Discrimination based on gender is systematic and structural.

8. Action and advocacy are considered to be morally and ethically appropriate responses of an engaged feminist evaluator.

These tenets aim to inform an evaluator’s thinking as he, she, or they design a FE, or develop an evaluation that is influenced by FE. These tenets do not describe how to do an evaluation, or how to practically use the tenets to design or guide an evaluation.

Two reasons Feminist Evaluation is not (often) selected

There are at least two common reasons that FE is not often considered in an evaluation design, as noted in the sections above: (1), the name “Feminist Evaluation” may offend (or perhaps alienate) and, as a result, some people may not try to understand, or wrongly assume what it is, and (2) FE is difficult to implement due to the lack of concrete guidance. Over the years, I have aimed to address these and other reasons, in order to make FE more accessible (Bamberger & Podems 2002; Podems 2010; Podems 2014; Podems 2019).

This article builds on my initial work. First, I suggest how to address the label challenge (i.e. feminist), I then provide some insight into how to engage with FE, and then I join FE with Principle Focused Evaluation (PFE) and provide concrete guidance on how to implement FE.

Selecting an approach by its name

What’s in a name? A lot, so it seems. Through their names, some evaluation approaches, models, and methods, naturally attract certain evaluators. For instance, evaluators who want to empower people are likely drawn to Empowerment Evaluation (Fetterman and Wandersman 2005). Evaluators who want to ensure use, often select UFE (Patton, 2008, 2014). Strong proponents of democracy tend to seek out Democratic Evaluation (House & Howe, 2000). Evaluators who identify themselves as feminists are often drawn to FE. Yet, while I am a feminist and an evaluator, I do not always practice FE; FE is not always the most appropriate approach in a given context. Rather, there are times when I find that a Democratic Evaluation approach as described by House & Howe, combined with Outcome Mapping (Earl, Carden and Smutylo, 2001), and guided by UFE, creates the most appropriate approach for the evaluation process in those circumstances. At other times, I find that some tenets of FE, when combined with Realist Evaluation (Pawson, 2006; Pawson and Tilley, 1997), provide the critical elements needed to design and implement a useful and credible evaluation. In the introduction, I asserted that knowing multiple evaluation approaches (theories or methods) is essential to being a competent evaluator. In this aspect, I seek to help move away from any connotation that “Feminist Evaluation” is only for feminists, as some evaluators are often dissuaded by its name. This article seeks to encourage FE to be one of many approaches that can be used alone or in combination with other methods. The remainder of this article makes FE practical so that it is an approach that can be selected notwithstanding its name.

Feminism in the Feminist Evaluation context

It is critical to note that FE does not identify with a specific type of feminism. Therefore, an evaluator who practices or draws

In general, FE is grounded in three feminist beliefs: (1) there should be equity amongst humans, (2) gender inequity leads to social injustice and (3) gender-based inequalities are systematic and structural. To use FE, an evaluator does not need to be a feminist. Rather they need to identify that at least one of these three core tenets are appropriate and useful ways of thinking for a particular evaluation context. For instance, an evaluator could use one or more of the tenets to inform how and what data are collected, and from whom, which would then provide critical insights and perspectives needed to adequately address the evaluation questions at hand.

To remove the initial discussion on FE that often stops the conversation in its tracks (e.g. such as starting out by stating, “perhaps a Feminist Evaluation would be appropriate”), consider using these questions: Does the evaluation context warrant, or potentially benefit from at least one of the core beliefs? How would the evaluation process be enhanced by engaging with one or more of these lenses? How would decisions around data collection benefit from this way of thinking? How would an analysis with one (if not more) of these understandings provide insightful findings that lead to actionable recommendations? If at least one of these ways of thinking is likely to enhance an evaluation in some way, an evaluator should consider using it, regardless of whether or not the evaluator identifies as a feminist or the evaluation is labelled as an FE.

My position is not to encourage the use of FE for the sake of using FE; rather I aim to educate on FE so that it can be used when, and where, appropriate, to better the lives of humans, animals and the environment.

While the name can be stripped away, the values, tenets or guidance taken from FE need to made clear to all stakeholders. In the real world, how evaluations are labelled are not nearly as important as the transparent concepts and values that an evaluator uses to guide the evaluative process.

**Agreement that evaluation is political**

The statement that evaluation is political is not unique to FE; most evaluators support that position (Candel, 2018; Chelimsky, 1987; Greene, 2000; House & Howe, 1999; Weiss, 1987). Stating that evaluation is political means that political influence (and power) is involved in every part of an evaluation, from the decision to implement an evaluation, to the evaluation design, to how data are interpreted, to how and with whom the evaluation knowledge and findings generated are communicated and used (or not). However, FE is an evaluation approach that brings the statement “evaluation is political” to life.

"Shifting the feminist approach to be principle-focused, tells the evaluator what to do, and those involved in the evaluation can then assess the extent to which these principles were applied, or not".

FE encourages an evaluator to engage with issues that likely invite not-so-pleasant responses from those who hold (political) power; often these are issues about women, however the focus can be on any marginalized or disempowered group. Here is an example. An evaluation finds empirical evidence that girls have less access to, and receive fewer benefits
from an intervention than boys. The evaluator then makes recommendations that aim to ensure equal benefits, and that the structural, social and cultural barriers to girl’s access to the intervention be addressed. These recommendations then challenge cultural and social norms, and as such, the findings and recommendations politicize the evaluation.

FE is not alone in its endeavour to challenge those in power and bring about an equitable society. Evaluation guidance documents also support that pursuit. The American Evaluation Association’s (AEA) Guiding Principles (2018) provide one such belief. One of the principles states:

Common Good and Equity: Evaluators strive to contribute to the common good and advancement of an equitable and just society.

That principle applies to all evaluators and all evaluations, regardless of the evaluation approach. An evaluator should encourage a conversation on the AEA’s principle (or a similar one held by a local evaluation association or society, as many principles overlap). If the client or colleague agrees with that statement, enter into a more specific conversation about the feminist tenets that support that statement. Facilitate a discussion around if, and how, the corresponding feminist tenets would benefit the evaluation.

Is it advocacy or promoting evaluation use?

FE supports an evaluator to advocate with empirical evaluation findings. It is here that FE often takes one of its toughest blows from evaluation purists. The critique is that evaluators should remain neutral, and some evaluators would go as far as to say objective. A critic of FE may ask, “How can an evaluator be neutral if they advocate with their findings?” Yet, according to many evaluation guidance documents, evaluators are supposed to promote use of their evaluation findings and recommendations. Let’s turn to one of these popular documents, the Joint Committee Standards for Educational Evaluation (2011), which articulates five program evaluation standards, including standards for utility. These utility standards outline several responsibilities for an evaluator using any evaluation theory, approach or method. I draw specifically on Utility Standard 8:

U8 Concern for Consequences and Influence: Evaluations should promote responsible and adaptive use while guarding against unintended negative consequences and misuse (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers, 2011, p. 3).

Here, the standard clearly states that evaluations (and therefore evaluators) should promote (e.g. support, advocate, ensure) responsible and adaptive use of evaluation and their findings. If this applies to all evaluators, where does the FE critic draw the line between what FE states, and what these standards promote? In the real world, promoting use and advocating with evaluation findings are often strikingly similar.

Who considers what is knowledge

Let’s look at three general statements about knowledge. One, all evaluations engage with knowledge and knowledge construction. Two, any evaluation approach (and any evaluator) brings a specific understanding of what constitutes a fact, what is knowledge, and whose knowledge matters (more than others). Three, most evaluation approaches are method-neutral, supporting an evaluator to select methods of inquiry that are appropriate to answer the evaluation question - in a specific time frame, with a particular budget - and in a way that is credible to the evaluation user.
The advantage to having FE as a guide in any evaluative process, is that FE makes its views about knowledge explicit, while many other approaches do not. The feminist tenets that address knowledge include: (1) knowledge is culturally, socially and temporally contingent; (2) knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose, (3) there are multiple ways of knowing; and, (4) research methods, institutions and practices are social constructs. How any evaluator views the world influences their evaluation design. Equally, how an evaluation user views the world heavily influences the extent to which data, evidence and the evaluation are found credible. Thus, it is common sense to have one's beliefs about knowledge clear in any evaluation.

FE is also explicit about access to evaluation knowledge. Here, for example, an evaluator drawing on FE tenets would ensure that the evaluation findings are written, visualized, or otherwise presented in a manner that ensures that people who were involved in or touched by the intervention or evaluation had access to that knowledge. FE is not alone in supporting this way of thinking. Other evaluation approaches agree, such as Culturally Responsive Evaluation (Hood, Hopton and Kirkhart, 2015) and Participatory Evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 2007), to name just two.

Joining FE with Principle Focused Evaluation: Making FE Accessible

Thus far we have discussed the FE name, and its values. This next section engages with how to make FE more accessible by providing concrete guidance on how to implement it. I combine FE with one of the newer forms of evaluation (and evaluative thinking), Principles Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2017). In my work as an evaluator, I have had the privilege to work exclusively with Michael Quinn Patton. Patton is a feminist who brings multiple theories to the evaluation field. While his most infamous approach is Utilization Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2012), with others fast gaining notoriety (e.g. Developmental Evaluation), the approach that helps to crystallize FE is Patton's Principle Focused Evaluation, or PFE.

PFE is based on complexity theory and systems thinking, which is compatible with FE. In PFE, Patton (2016) suggests that principles can and should be evaluated. Any program, project, or organization, for example, that is guided by principles should be ready and able to be evaluated by those principles. To evaluate them, Patton suggests that the principles need to be meaningful to those meant to follow them, be clearly articulated, provide actionable guidance, be inspirational (values-based), and be evaluable. In other words, PFE examines how a principle guides action, and what happens because of that action. By relabeling the feminist tenets as principles (principle is a synonym for tenet), and making them actionable (and therefore evaluable), they become a better guide for how to do FE.

When preparing for a presidential presentation on FE at an American Evaluation Association conference in 2017, Patton and I had the chance to explore how PFE could be used to shine a light on FE. I presented six feminist tenets (Seilbeck and Bowan, 2002) and proposed that FE had a friend in PFE, Patton agreed. That collaboration resulted in Patton suggesting six action-focused and evaluable principles (Patton, M. Q., Podems, D and Negrustuyeva, S, 2017). Drawing heavily on Patton's guidance, I then applied the same thinking to Brisolara's (2014) eight feminist tenets, as outlined earlier in this paper. I changed the eight feminist tenets into principles that passed...
Patton’s GUIDE Framework; these principles now provide guidance (G), are useful (U), inspiring (I), developmental and adaptable to different contexts (D), and evaluable (E) (Patton, 2017). The resulting Principle Focused Evaluation, Feminist Evaluation (PFE-FE) principles are as follows:

1. **Acknowledge** and take into account that evaluation is a political activity; evaluator’s personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics come from and lead to a particular political stance.

2. **Contextualize** evaluation because knowledge is culturally, socially and temporally contingent.

3. **Generate** and use knowledge as a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose.

4. **Respect** multiple ways of knowing.

5. **Be cognizant** that research methods, institutions and practices are social constructs.

6. **Frame** gender inequities as one manifestation of social injustice. Discrimination cuts across race, class, and culture and is inextricably linked to all three.

7. **Examine** how discrimination based on gender is systematic and structural.

8. **Act** on opportunities to create, advocate and support change, which are considered to be morally and ethically appropriate responses of an engaged feminist evaluator.

These revised tenets, which are now actionable and assessable principles, offer more than just a way to think about FE (as presented in the initial tenets); rather they provide concrete guidance on how to implement (and assess) FE. Shifting
the feminist approach to be principle-focused, tells the evaluator what to do, and those involved in the evaluation can then assess the extent to which these principles were applied; or not.

Conclusion

The FE label and its tenets bring inherent challenges that often prevent an evaluator from engaging with this potentially useful approach. In this article, I aimed to provide practical strategies to engage with the label; namely, rip it off and engage with what’s underneath. For those who are not encumbered by the name or dragged down by the politics of a feminist approach (rather, for those who are bolstered by it), yet are challenged by the lack of concrete steps, I looked to PFE to provide guidance. By engaging a principle focused approach, the feminist tenets became actionable and assessable principles, thus making FE more tangible, implementable, and daresay, acceptable in mainstream evaluation. Each strategy for engaging with FE is aimed at encouraging young emerging evaluators and others to consider FE as one of the many approaches that belong in any evaluator’s toolbox.

Endnotes

1. Brisolara, 2014, pp. 23-31, initial list is re-ordered.
2. He, she or they are pronouns used to denote a human being and will be used interchangesly in the article.
References


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