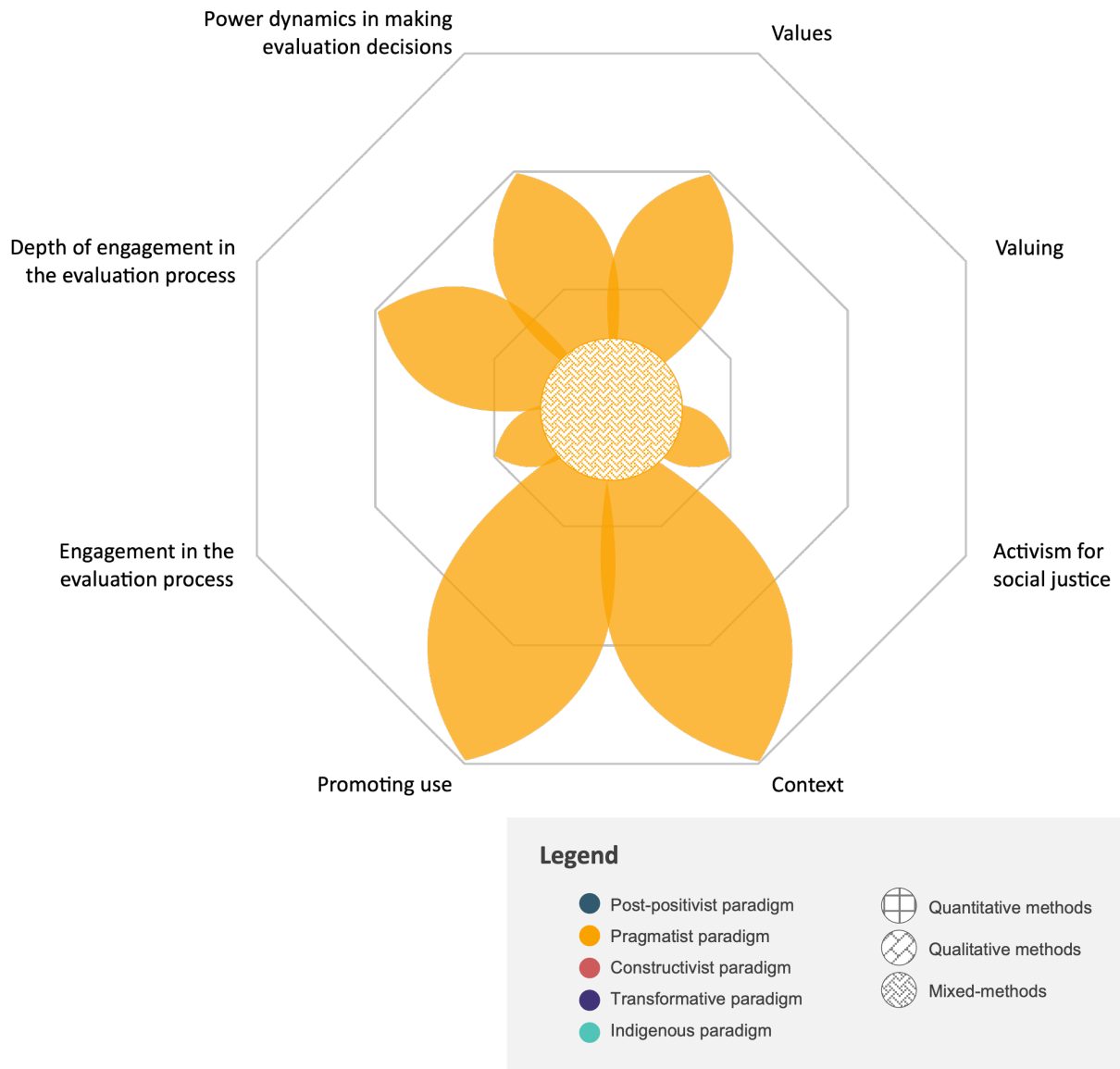


Practical Participatory Evaluation (P-PE)

The practical participatory evaluation (P-PE) approach has been written about by J. Bradley Cousins and colleagues beginning in 1992 and continuing to the present day. This approach primarily draws from the pragmatist paradigm and advocates for the use of mixed methods. One thing that distinguishes this approach is that while organizational leaders are involved in co-planning, instrument development, data collection, analysis and reporting, the evaluator retains decision-making authority for highly technical work.



Citation:

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Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
<p>Values Values refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators includes the surfacing and use of values in an evaluation. Values include the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of those involved in the evaluation about what is of value, good, important, worthwhile, desired, needed, or preferred. Values guide, implicitly or explicitly, what happens at each stage in the process and how the work at each stage is carried out.</p>	2	One of the principles common to all types of collaborative approaches to evaluation, P-PE included, is the need to clarify motivation for action. This entails assessing “through consultation, documentation examination who are the important stakeholders and what do they value” (Cousins, 2020, p. 27).
<p>Valuing Valuing refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators includes an implicit or explicit process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of something.</p>	0	P-PE gives little specifics on the processes used to define the merit, worth, or significance of an evaluation object, or the processes used to identify and apply values within evaluation.
<p>Activism for social justice Activism for social justice refers to an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators to take clear action in support of a cause, and positioning advocacy or activism as the primary purpose of evaluation activities. Thus, the role of the evaluation team is to advocate for social</p>	1	While not an explicit or intended focus of P-PE, transformations can and sometimes do occur within a P-PE intent (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012). For example, “developing and applying learned concepts associated with systematic inquiry, the creation of evaluation organization structures, the appointment or promotion of individuals into such structures, and invigorating professional development experiences are all reported examples of transformative effects within the context of P-PE” (p. 25). However, these changes are unintended and not something P-PE actively tries to foster, nor are

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<p>justice, or to use the evaluation in support of social justice activism efforts.</p>		<p>they necessarily and intentionally focused on social justice.</p>
<p>Context Context refers to an evaluation approach's guidance on the extent to which evaluations directly and actively attend to their surrounding cultural, historical, political contexts or systems.</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>“In any partnership, individual partners bring different perspectives, skills, qualities and interests to the table. It is through partners’ unique contributions that they operate effectively. In practical participatory evaluation, the evaluators (1) bring as a primary contribution a wealth of technical knowledge and expertise about evaluation logic and its application, and (2) have a clear professional stake in ensuring that such interests are respected. Program practitioners, on the other hand, have understandings of context and program logic that are likely to be difficult for evaluators to access or may even be beyond their grasp. It is the integration of these unique contributions that defines the real power of practical participatory evaluation to inform decision making and learning. Knowledge, in this context, is socially constructed, the product of intense deliberation about important questions to ask, how best to answer those questions and the important meanings of the answers provided. The intensity of such deliberations is naturally heightened when involvement extends to a full range of evaluative activities as the project unfolds” (Cousins, & Earl, 1999, p. 314).</p>
<p>Promoting use Promoting use refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance for evaluators to directly and actively facilitate use. This use could be use of evaluation findings, or use of knowledge gained through the process of engaging in an evaluation. Use can</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>P-PE has “as its central aim, fostering evaluation use for program, policy or organizational decision making” among decision-makers as defined by the power hierarchy already in operation (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 23).</p> <p>For P-PE, “The ‘use’ or ‘utilization’ construct has been traditionally conceptualized in terms of three types of impact arising from evaluation findings: (1) <i>instrumental</i>, meaning the provision of support for discrete decisions; (2) <i>conceptual</i>, as an</p>

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<p>be immediate and large, or slow, steady occurring over time.</p>		<p>educative/learning function; and (3) <i>symbolic</i>, meaning the persuasive/political use of evaluation to reaffirm decisions already made or to further a particular agenda” (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 23 [emphasis in original]).</p>
<p>Engagement in the evaluation process Engagement refers to an evaluation approach’s guidance to evaluators on who is involved in evaluation planning, interpretation, reporting, and decision-making. These groups of people might include those who work on the design, implementation, and/or management of an evaluation (e.g., donors, funders, taxpayers), those who are the immediate recipients of a program (e.g., program participants, or those who receive services), and those who are not direct recipients, but benefit nonetheless (e.g., families of people who participated in the program, others conducting similar activities).</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>“Diversity of participation is likely limited, as nonevaluator stakeholders are typically ‘primary users’ (those with a vested interest in the program who can enact change)” and who have the clout or hold power within the evaluation context (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 28). This approach primarily serves organizational leaders, meaning individuals who contribute to decisions that influence a program, its evaluation, or both.</p>
<p>Depth of engagement in the evaluation process Depth of engagement refers to an evaluation approach’s guidance on the extent to which</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Depth of stakeholder participation is “deep” for organizational leaders only. P-PE advocates for “participation by stakeholders in the full range of evaluation activities,” but only for those who hold the power to make decisions related to the program,</p>

Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
different groups of people are engaged throughout an evaluation, and in what role (i.e., no role, consulted, partners or co-directors).		the evaluation, or both (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 28).
<p>Power dynamics in making evaluation decisions</p> <p>Power dynamic in making evaluation decisions refers to an evaluation approach's guidance about who is engaged in decision making and how.</p>	2	<p>“In our work on P-PE, evaluator and non-evaluator stakeholders typically share technical decision making about such decisions as planning, instrument development, data collection, analysis and reporting” (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 28). However, “the value and viability of engaging practitioners in highly technical activities” is questioned (Cousins, & Whitmore, 1998, p. 14) suggesting that evaluators are best-suited to make technical decisions under the assumption that scientific knowledge should be privileged.</p>

Steps for Implementing this Approach in Practice

Step 1. Assess Organizational Fit for P-PE

“A PE approach does not work with an organization that is not participatory” (Whitmore, 1998, p. 227). Organizations who are a good candidate for P-PE are committed to the following: (i) they value evaluation, (ii) they are willing to invest the time and resources required for a P-PE approach, (iii) they are committed to an organizational learning agenda as a route toward improvement, (iv) primary users are motivated to engage in P-PE and organization learning, and (v) the organization could benefit from someone with sufficient research experience and knowledge to help guide the P-PE approach and build their own internal capacity to engage in evaluation (Cousins, & Earl, 1992, 1995).

Step 2. Implement the P-PE Approach

“In the participatory model the evaluator is the coordinator of the project with responsibility for technical support, training, and quality control, but conducting the study is a joint responsibility” (Cousins, & Earl, 1992, p. 400). Thus, the evaluator serves as a facilitator, and the primary intended users engaged in the nuts-and-bolts of P-PE implementation (Cousins, & Earl, 1992, 1995). The nuts-and-bolts of P-PE implementation include:

2.1. Problem formation,

- 2.2. Instrument design or selection,
- 2.3. Data collection,
- 2.4. Analysis,
- 2.5. Interpretation,
- 2.6. Recommendations, and
- 2.7. Reporting.

Critically Reflecting on the Philosophical Orientation for this Approach

This approach is firmly rooted in the pragmatism tradition of philosophies of social science. Recall that pragmatists argue that what is “true” is what “works” or that truth is that which the evaluators say is true at the end of the inquiry effort based on the process of gathering and interpreting the data. That said, this has not always been the case. Early years of P-PE were marked by a view that embraced “hypothetico-deductive reasoning and classic positivist principles of falsifiability, logical consistency, quantifiability, and relative explanatory power” (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 11). However, the current design -- the one described in this document -- has “evolved from this early socialization to a ‘revisionist-traditionalist’ orientation to empiricism, distinguished by methodological eclecticism, pragmatism, and an appreciation of and tolerance for epistemological diversity” (Cousins, & Chouinard, 2012, p. 11-12).

Aligned with pragmatism, a number of assumptions underlie the P-PE approach (Cousins, & Earl, 1995):

- Organizational learning is a key principle or motivator of the work. (Axiology)
- What questions are asked, who gets to decide, how they are answered, is controlled by a small set of primary users. (Ontological, Epistemological)
- Knowledge is co-constructed by the primary users and evaluators, who work together to frame the problem, design or select instruments, collect data, analyze and interpret data, develop recommendations, and write reports. Thus, what is true is what results from this process. (Ontological, Epistemological)
- The evaluator, as the expert, is best positioned to guide the technical aspects of the work, give training to build primary users evaluation capacity, and to ensure quality control of the evaluation study. (Epistemological, Methodological)

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Further Reading

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