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## Reflective Practice, Collaboration, and Stakeholder Communication: Where Does the Field of Evaluation Stand?

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Tiffany Lee Smith entitled "Reflective Practice, Collaboration, and Stakeholder Communication: Where Does the Field of Evaluation Stand?." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology.

Gary J. Skolits, Major Professor

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John M. Peters, Ralph G. Brockett, Lisa T. Fall

Accepted for the Council:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Reflective Practice, Collaboration, and Stakeholder Communication: Where Does the Field of  
Evaluation Stand?

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tiffany Lee Smith  
August 2014

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## DEDICATION

*To my mother and father, rest in peace...*

*... and to remembering to take a step back...*

*“Insights and innovation await us only if we are capable of stepping outside of  
the frenzied worlds of data and distraction that wash over us... time for  
reflection is an open invitation to discover what awaits us...”*

*– Daniel Forrester, 2011*

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## ABSTRACT

The current study provides insight into the state of the field of evaluation regarding practitioners' understanding and application of reflective practice (RP), one of six essential competencies in program evaluation identified and discussed by Stevahn, King, Ghere, and Minnema (2005). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process. Through a snowball sample, nineteen highly experienced evaluators took part in an hour long interview. These interviews with evaluators who have been practicing evaluation for ten or more years offered a broader understanding of where professionals in the discipline stand with regard to RP in evaluation. Overall, participants conceptualized RP as both an intuitive and purposeful learning process that includes thinking, questioning, self-awareness, and multiple perspectives. Participants reported using RP for communicating and sharing with others or with the evaluation community, for thinking about their work personally, for evaluation of their work, and through the use of professional guidelines. Participants reported that RP is not specific to any part of the evaluation process but is instead a process that continues throughout the evaluation as well as after the fact. With regard to collaboration, participants discussed involving stakeholders and evaluation clients, evaluation team members, and colleagues in the process of RP, both formally and informally. Typically they collaborated for the purpose of feedback or learning and for thinking through the evaluation together. Limitations of the study are addressed, and implications for practice and recommendations for future research are provided.

*Keywords:* reflective practice, reflection, collaboration, program evaluation



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Reflective practice (RP) is one of six essential competencies in program evaluation identified and discussed by Stevahn, King, Ghere, and Minnema (2005). Stevahn and colleagues (2005) defined RP as “being acutely aware of personal evaluation preferences, strengths, and limitations; self-monitoring the results of actions intended to facilitate effective evaluation studies; and planning how to enhance future endeavors” (Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005, p. 46). However, numerous authors view reflection as having a somewhat broader definition, seeing it as a process for communication and organizational learning (Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill, Zuckerman, & Matthews, 2003; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres, Stone, Butkus, Hook, Casey, & Arens, 2000).

One of the main goals of program evaluation is to assess the value of the program or organization being evaluated (Fournier, 2005). However, assessing value brings with it the necessity of gaining a deeper understanding of the program being evaluated and all of its constituent components. Recently, many evaluators have been including the element of RP in their evaluation efforts in order to produce stronger evaluations, such as Preskill and Torres (1999) in their evaluative inquiry practice. RP, according to Preskill (2004), “Represents a shift in thinking about the purpose of evaluation and the role of objectivity and values – from the value-free objective scientist to the ‘neutral advocate’” (p. 296). RP then, becomes more than just a tool for practitioners to improve their own practice, as it also encompasses the notion of communication with stakeholders and organizational learning. According to Forrester (2011),

“Reflection isn’t just an alone thing – it happens in small group settings, but only if people have the awareness of what thinking together actually means” (p. 213).

RP is present in both the recommended evaluation competencies and in the broader evaluation literature as a tool that should be used in practice. The Program Evaluation Standards are a set of thirty standards (including the attributes of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability) used by practicing evaluators in the planning and implementation of program evaluations as well as by stakeholders who use program evaluations (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). These standards were revised in 2011 to establish a more reflection-oriented approach, with the authors claiming that “ongoing reflection on the fit between one’s practices and the full set of evaluation standards can promote responsible adaptive evaluation use” (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 66). Further, aspects of RP, as defined by this work, have been shown to provide benefits to the programs and organizations being evaluated (Ayers, 1987; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Greene, 1987, 1988, 1988; Harnar & Preskill, 2007; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill et al., 2003), but little evidence exists regarding the extent to which RP is used and the perceptions of this tool among practitioners across the larger evaluation community. An investigation into the beliefs and perspectives of evaluators regarding RP has the potential to provide foundational information for the field of evaluation in order to understand the role of this competency in evaluation work.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The literature shows that RP, as defined in this study, has potential to increase the strength and utilization of an evaluation, increase stakeholder buy-in, and promote organizational learning and capacity building; however, the problem of focus for this study is that very little is known about the extent of the actual engagement of this competency in contemporary

evaluators' professional practice. As the field of evaluation is changing, it is important to explore the element of reflection in evaluation practice. Currently, the evaluation community does not know evaluators' opinions, perceptions, or the extent to which evaluators use RP in their evaluation work.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

This research effort sought to gain insight into the state of the field of evaluation regarding practitioners understanding and application of reflective practice (RP). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work?
2. In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice?
3. In what ways do evaluators perceive reflective practice as having a collaborative element in evaluation?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study provides insight into evaluators' use of RP in their professional work. It also provides insight into evaluators' perceptions of RP and how they view the essential competency as affecting their practice (Stevahn et al., 2005). Although we have a perspective of reflection provided by this competency, RP has not been studied directly in evaluation practice. Further, the concept of RP referred to by Stevahn and colleagues (2005), emphasizes the notion of

reflection as a personal effort for professional improvement. However, the literature suggests that evaluators are utilizing reflection in order to improve many facets of evaluation including enhancing evaluation use, strengthening evaluation findings, and as a tool for organizational learning and improvement (Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Preskill, 2004; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

Interviews with professional evaluators who have been practicing evaluation for ten or more years offered a comprehensive understanding of where the field stands with regard to RP in evaluation. These interviews also provided an in-depth look at how evaluators define and perceive RP in their work. The findings of this study can be used to contribute to the knowledgebase through enhanced professional practice, improved evaluator training, evaluators' increased occupational health, and may also contribute to a deeper understanding and perhaps revision of the essential competency, *reflective practice*.

### **Background for the Study**

The theoretical framework that guided this study was based on multiple offerings in the evaluation literature and related fields that utilize RP. The framework, as conceptualized and developed for this study in Chapter Two, is presented as a way to conceptualize and operationalize the broader elements of RP in evaluation. As a preview, the following paragraphs introduce the literature base used to build and depict the theoretical framework underlying the current investigation.

RP is used in many different ways in evaluation, including as a means for self-awareness, professional growth through critical examination of one's practice and decision making processes, ethical awareness, dialogue, stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process, and organizational learning (Abma, Greene, Karlsson, Ryan, Schwandt, & Widdershoven, 2001;

Brandon, 1998; Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Forss, Cracknell, & Samset, 1994; Greene, 2001; Kandin, 2010; Morris, 2008; Newman & Brown, 1996; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005; Torres & Preskill, 2001). As encompassed within the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two, RP has been credited with increasing evaluation use, improving stakeholders' understandings of their organization, and other aspects of evaluation (e.g., Forss et al., 1994; Greene, 1987; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Kandin, 2010; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Although some authors do not specifically define and situate their work under the umbrella of RP, many authors in the evaluation literature have conceptualized the notion of RP to encompass the six major elements outlined by this framework (e.g., Greene, 2001; Kandin, 2010; Morris, 2008; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Torres, 1999). The elements provide a holistic view of RP that offers a foundation for the current study, which helped to frame the research questions. RP has not been studied directly in evaluation practice, and little is known about the way evaluators use RP in their professional lives. Determining how RP is viewed and used by professional evaluators provides insight into areas of potential improvement of evaluation practice.

### **Assumptions**

This study was conducted with the following assumptions:

- Participants in the study are willing to share their unobstructed opinions and perceptions regarding RP in evaluation.
- Evaluation professionals do indeed engage in some variation of RP in their practice, whether they label it as such or not.



- Interview questions are worded simplistically and clearly in order to generate responses that are relevant to the research questions.
- Participant responses are honest and representative of the individuals' RP experiences.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted with the following limitations:

- A descriptive interview design does not bring with it generalizability to the larger evaluator population.
- Interviews are an indirect means of data collection, relying on the perceptions of the interviewee (Creswell, 2003).
- The research was not done in a natural field setting (Creswell, 2003).
- Not all participants articulated their views and perceptions adequately (Creswell, 2003).
- Researcher presence may have biased the results (Creswell, 2003).
- The focus of data collection was only regarding those professional evaluators who had been practicing for ten or more years.
- A qualitative study necessitates a small sample size (n=19).

### **Definitions**

The following definitions guided the theoretical framework for this study. These definitions specifically relate to the components and elements associated with the RP framework created for the purposes of this work.

#### **Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice is critical and deliberate inquiry into professional practice in order to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, others, and the meaning that is shared among individuals. This

can happen during practice and after the fact, and can either be done alone or with others (Forrester, 2010; Peters, 1991; Schön, 1983).

### **Self-Oriented Reflective Practice:**

Self-oriented reflective practice is critical and deliberate inquiry into one's own practice; this aspect of reflective practice is a process that focuses on an understanding of the lenses through which one views the world (Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Torres, 1999).

**Self-Awareness:** Mindfulness of one's knowledge, skills, perceptions, and dispositions, and how those affect professional practice (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristigueta, 2013; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Stevahn et al., 2005).

**Professional Growth:** Rigorous and critical reflection on one's own practice in order to improve future actions (Denhardt et al., 2013; Kundin, 2010; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Peters, 1991; Stevahn et al., 2005).

**Ethical Awareness:** Awareness of professional ethical standards, values, and practice as they apply to each situation (Morris, 2008; Newman & Brown, 1996).

### **Collaborative Reflective Practice**

Collaborative reflective practice is critical and deliberate inquiry into a community of practice which involves critical thinking with others to understand oneself, others, and the meanings that are jointly constructed (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

**Dialogue:** A process of thinking together in order for individuals as well as the group to gain deeper understandings and enhanced perspectives of the evaluation and organizational processes (Forrester, 2011; Greene, 2001; Isaacs, 1999; Preskill & Torres, 1999).

**Stakeholder Involvement:** The participation of stakeholders in evaluation processes, decisions, and reporting, so as to increase the use of the evaluation and to give stakeholders a voice in the evaluation as a whole (Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012).

**Organizational Learning:** The involvement of and communication with stakeholders in order to promote growth and capacity for evaluation in the organization (Preskill & Torres, 1999; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduced the study and background literature, stated the problem and purpose of the study, provided research questions, discussed the significance of the study, outlined the theoretical framework as a basis for the work, addressed assumptions and limitations, provided definitions, and reviews the organization of the chapters. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature, including research and theoretical rationale, in order to set up a theoretical framework, and discusses the gaps in the literature in evaluation. Methods and procedures are discussed in detail in Chapter Three, including information on research design, methodology, and an analysis plan. Chapter Four provides the study's findings according to each research question. Chapter Five concludes the research with an overall discussion of the findings and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Review of Literature**

Reflective practice (RP) is one of six essential competencies in program evaluation identified and discussed by Stevahn, King, Ghere, and Minnema (2005). Although evaluators have a perspective of reflection provided by this competency, little effort has been put forth toward the study of RP in evaluation practice. Further, the concept of RP, referred to by Stevahn and colleagues (2005), emphasizes the notion of reflection as a personal effort for professional-improvement. However, evaluators are utilizing reflection in order to improve many facets of both the evaluation and the program or organization itself, including enhancing evaluation use (Greene, 1987, 1988, 1988; Harnar & Preskill, 2007; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; Patton, 1998; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill, Zuckerman, & Matthews, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres, Stone, Butkus, Hook, Casey, & Arens, 2000), strengthening evaluation findings (Brandon, 1998; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; ), and as a tool for organizational learning and improvement (Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Forss, Cracknell, & Samset, 1994; Greene, 2001; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres et al., 2000). These efforts require a large amount of stakeholder involvement and communication in order for reflection to take place.

Through these two problems, namely that little effort has been put forth in the study of RP in evaluation practice and that there is an apparent or potential inconsistency between the competency and the way it is practiced, it is necessary to ask: What is RP in evaluation? How often do evaluators utilize this competency in their work, and what are the perceived benefits of its use? The structure of this chapter addresses a growing focus on reflection in program

evaluation efforts, the conceptualization of RP in evaluation including the creation of a theoretical framework that addresses the essential elements of RP, and the deficiencies in the literature. Finally, the chapter closes with the need for the present research.

### **Program Evaluation: A Growing Focus on Reflection**

According to Fournier (2005), “Evaluation is an applied inquiry process for collecting and synthesizing evidence that culminates in conclusions about the state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance, or quality of a program, product, person, policy, proposal, or plan” (p. 140). The evaluation process ends with a report that summarizes the evaluation questions, methods, results, and suggestions for the evaluand in question. Evaluators are asked to assess the *value* of the program or organization that they are hired to evaluate. The culmination of this process is both empirical and judgmental, where evaluators examine the results of an evaluation and subsequently make judgments about merit and worth. A typical purpose of the evaluator is and has been to assess the efficacy of the program and provide suggestions for improvement. However, there is evidence that evaluation professionals are seeking a more engaging and encompassing view of the evaluation process in order to promote or enhance utilization of evaluation, organizational learning, and buy-in to evaluation processes (e.g., Greene, 2001; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000).

The Program Evaluation Standards are a set of thirty standards that support the major attributes of effective evaluation. These standards include the attributes of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability. Essentially, the standards provide a guide for evaluation practitioners and users in order to enhance the quality and use of evaluation. In 2011, a revised edition of the Program Evaluation Standards was published, placing a greater emphasis on using

reflection in evaluation efforts (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). This now current edition claims that the program evaluation standards address (Yarbrough, et al., 2011),

A wide variety of needs experienced by those who commission, conduct, or use program and project evaluations. It provides guidance and encourages reflective practice related to whether and when to evaluate, how to select evaluators and other experts, the impact of cultures, contexts, and politics, communication and stakeholder engagement, technical issues in planning, design, and managing evaluations uses and misuses of evaluations, [and] other issues related to evaluation quality, improvement, and accountability. (p. xii)

This focus on reflection came from their surveying of a number of stakeholders involved in evaluation. According to Yarbrough and colleagues (2011), “Stakeholders asked for more integration of the standards into recommendations for reflective practice, taking into account the necessary trade-offs and compromises made necessary by limited resources and other features of evaluation settings” (p. xiii). Reflection has thus become an encompassing theme throughout the thirty purported evaluation standards, with regard to almost every facet of the evaluation process (Yarbrough et al., 2011).

Similarly, a number of evaluators have published articles on the utility and use of RP in their evaluation work, representing both self-directed and collaborative approaches (Abma, Greene, Karlsson, Ryan, Schwandt, & Widdershoven, 2001; Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Stevahn et al., 2005; Torres et al., 2000). Contrariwise, there is suspicion with regard to how much evaluators actually use reflective practice in their evaluation work (Patton, 2012). Patton (2012) claims, “In speeches and workshops at professional evaluation association meetings, I like to ask for a show of hands

of those who systematically reflect on evaluations they have conducted for learning and further professional development. Few hands go up; typically, in fact, no one raises a hand” (p. 400). Part of the lack of a positive response to RP that Patton (2012) highlights can be attributed to the perspectives of "traditional evaluators" (Preskill, 2001). The typical purpose of the evaluator is to assess the efficacy of the program and provide suggestions for improvement. A traditional view of evaluation places the evaluator on the outside of the program or organization. In this view, there is minimal stakeholder involvement. Torres and Preskill (2001) suggest a number of reasons why the evaluation field continues to look at the profession this way:

A desire for perceived objectivity; lack of training, skills, and expertise (in collaboration and facilitation) among evaluators; lack of resources for making evaluation work more inclusive and collaborative, particularly with large-scale, multisite evaluations; and lack of awareness among evaluation clients that other approaches are available/appropriate, and could be beneficial in particular ways. (p. 390)

Among the reasons for evaluators’ perceptions of their role as being an outsider to the program or organization with which they are working is the notion of evaluation in today’s society as being part of objective science, with a primary focus on hard data and evidence (Schwandt, 1997; Torres & Preskill, 2001). This concept leads some evaluators to want to perpetuate that stereotype, for better or worse (Torres & Preskill, 2001). Abma and colleagues (2001) express this concern as a detriment to reflection in evaluation; they posit that, “Speaking up is more important than listening; loudness dominates silence; action is valued over reflection” (p. 177). Increasingly, however, the role of the evaluator is to explicitly promote positive change in organizations, stakeholder participation in the evaluation process, and the utilization of evaluation results (Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012).

Schwandt (1997) diagnosed the field of evaluation, stating that, “This desire to abstract ourselves from our experience and to impose order on the messiness of human practices is readily evident in the field of evaluation” (p. 72). He makes the argument that evaluators are not apart from the evaluand that they are investigating; they are not observing a mere object. He states, “The knower does not stand as a solitary, subjective spectator over and against a self-contained, self-enclosed object, rather there is a dynamic interaction or transaction between that which is to be known and the knower who participates in it” (p. 76). Schwandt (1997), along with many other evaluators (e.g., Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Harnar & Preskill, 2007; Patton, 1998; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000), argue for the need for both a more reflective and more collaborative approach to evaluation efforts.

RP has come to the forefront for some evaluation theorists as a part of a solution to the need for more collaborative and stakeholder focused evaluation efforts (Harnar & Preskill, 2007; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Torres et al., 2000). Some evaluation professionals have included RP in a pivotal role in evaluation work (Kundin, 2010; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Most notably, Preskill and Torres (1999) argue for such an approach through the practice of evaluative inquiry, which is defined as “the fostering of relationships among organization members and the diffusion of their learning throughout the organization; it serves as a transfer-of-knowledge process” (p. 18). RP, thus, is beginning to be expounded on as a more encompassing view of critical thinking and reflection, including self-awareness, professional growth, a recognition of ethical obligations, a tool for dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning.



## **Theoretical Framework**

The following section explores the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter One in a lot more depth. Specifically, this section aims to define and describe each aspect of the framework in the context of both theoretical and empirical literature. Figure 1, Theoretical Framework for Reflective Practice in Evaluation, provides a pictorial illustration of the major elements of both the self-oriented and collaborative components of RP in evaluation work as reflected in both the evaluation literature and literature in other fields that utilize RP. It is important to note that both the self-directed and the collaborative components are not mutually exclusive. Both of these components influence one another, as self-oriented reflection can sometimes involve reflection with others for feedback, suggestions, or probing deeper into individual practice and reflection with others can help to benefit one's self-awareness, professional growth, or ethical awareness.

RP, for the purposes of this framework, is defined as: Critical and deliberate inquiry into professional practice in order to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, others, and the meaning that is shared among individuals. This can happen during practice and after the fact, and can either be done alone or with others (Forrester, 2010; Peters, 1991; Schön, 1983).

Donald Schön (1983) remains one of the most influential writers in the area of RP. He defines reflection as, generally, the ability to critically and deliberately think about the things that happen in daily life in order to learn from them, both in action as well as after the events happen (Schön, 1983). Peters (1991) also discusses Schön's (1983) work, and provides a comparable definition: "Reflective practice involves more than simply thinking about what one is doing and what one should do next. It involves identifying one's assumptions and feelings associated with practice, theorizing about how these assumptions and feelings are functionally or dysfunctionally

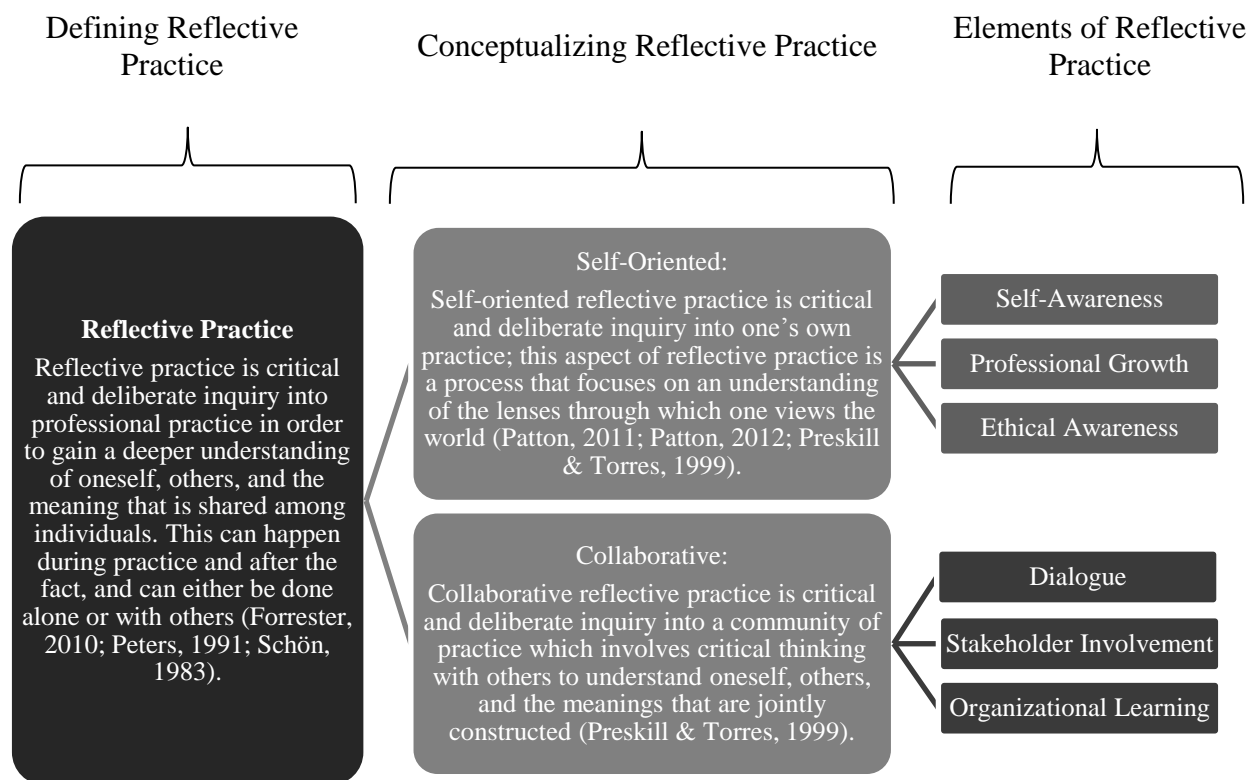


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for Reflective Practice in Evaluation

associated with practice, and acting on the basis of the resulting theory of practice” (p. 89).

Finally, Forrester (2010), an advocate for RP in organizations, defines RP as “the deliberate act of stepping back from daily habits and routines, either alone or within small sequestered groups. It’s where meaning is derived through reconsideration of fundamental assumptions, the efficacy of past decisions and the consequences including the downside of future actions” (p. 18). All three of these definitions have something in common and relate to one another in important ways. However, these definitions do not include all facets of RP.

An important part of the definition that is used for this work is borrowed from all three of these individuals as well as from Gergen’s (2009) concept of “the relational being”. It is important to understand that one’s interactions with the world can be looked at in three different ways. The first way is as a self; a person can interact with the world as an individual and for self-oriented reasons. The second is as a community; a person can interact with the world through collaboration and relationships with others. Thirdly, and least often thought of, is as something beyond both. This is what Gergen (2009) refers to as the “relational being”; namely, this is a meaning that comes from constructing new knowledge together. Through this concept, a concept that Schön (1983), Peters (1991), and Forrester (2010) all subscribe to, the definition of RP is complete.

Moreover, in this framework, there are two components to the notion of RP, self-oriented and collaborative. Self-oriented RP is defined as: critical and deliberate inquiry into one’s own practice; this aspect of reflective practice is a process that focuses on an understanding of the lenses through which one views the world (Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Although the two components overlap in some ways, the major purpose of this component is self-directed, focused on self-improvement, and improving one’s professional practice. On the

other hand, collaborative RP is defined as: critical and deliberate inquiry into a community of practice which involves critical thinking with others to understand oneself, others, and the meanings that are jointly constructed (Preskill & Torres, 1999). This portion of the framework encompasses Gergen's (2009) concepts of "community" and "relational being".

In Preskill and Torres's (1999) evaluation work, these two components are specifically articulated. They state that the "reflection process helps us come to know and understand ourselves. Knowing ourselves is critical to creating new meanings that lead to personal development and change" (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 60). This explanation of what RP does for evaluation is a self-oriented perspective. However, Preskill and Torres (1999) further explain RP as a collaborative effort. They argue that reflection is "a process that enables individuals and groups to review their ideas, understandings, and experiences. Reflection enables team members to explore each other's values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge related to the issue of interest" (p. 56).

These two components, self-oriented and collaborative, can be broken down further into different elements. Through the literature, six elements have surfaced. The main elements of the self-oriented component of RP are self-awareness, professional growth, and ethical awareness (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristigueta, 2013; Kandin, 2010; Morris, 2008; Newman & Brown, 1996; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Peters, 1991; Stevahn et al., 2005). In terms of the collaborative component, the main elements include dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning (Abma et al., 2001; Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Forss et al., 1994; Greene, 2001; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997;

Preskill & Torres; 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

### **Defining and Conceptualizing Reflective Practice in Evaluation**

The first part of Figure 1 introduces the definition of RP. The definition is created based on those theorists who emphasize the notion of RP as an individualized effort, a group effort, and as a joint construction of knowledge. In evaluation, RP is one of six essential competencies defined by Stevahn and colleagues (2005). The competencies were developed in an effort to benefit the field through improving the training of evaluation professionals, enhancing evaluators' abilities to reflect on their practice, advancing research on evaluation, and the continuation of the professionalization of the field (p. 45). In the development of these competencies, the authors define RP as "being acutely aware of personal evaluation preferences, strengths, and limitations; self-monitoring the results of actions intended to facilitate effective evaluation studies; and planning how to enhance future endeavors" (Stevahn et al., 2005, p. 46). The focus of the competency is on "one's awareness of evaluation expertise and needs for growth, including knowing oneself as an evaluator, assessing personal needs for enhanced practice, and engaging in professional development toward that goal" (p. 52). For Stevahn and colleagues (2005), the focus of reflection is self-oriented.

In Jones and Stubbe's (2004) work in evaluation, Schön's (1983) work has surfaced. The authors claim that the evaluation "sees the organisation holistically as a communicative system. It seeks to involve the whole organisation in a reflective learning process which builds on existing strengths, and it enables a focus on organizational rather than individual competencies" (Jones & Stubbe, 2004, p. 195). Evaluation and development in organizations are seen as reflective processes through which organizational members pay attention to what is happening in

the organization and subsequently make future plans. Through this approach, the knowledge of the practitioner becomes the focal point, and RP becomes more than what you have done and how to do it better; instead, it “encourages re-thinking professional values and goals by subjecting them to critical scrutiny, and by developing new processes for doing so” (Jones & Stubbe, 2004, p. 194). Stakeholders can act as members in the evaluation process, lending a critical eye to evaluation and producing utilizable and change-oriented results.

Similarly, according to Bronn and Bronn (2000) in a paper on the processes that influence perceptions regarding stakeholder groups in evaluation, reflection is “an internally focused skill. The objective of reflection is to make the practitioner more aware of his or her own thinking and reasoning processes. Slowing down the thought processes and avoiding a rapid climb up the ladder of inference accomplish this” (p. 17). They discuss the notion that it is not enough to just ask stakeholders what they think, the organization has to be willing to “engage an analysis of their own mental models. These are then compared with the models of perceptions of various stakeholders” (pp. 22-23). For Bronn and Bronn (2000), RP is an individual as well as collaborative effort.

Jarvis (1992), seeking a theory of practice in nursing, describes RP as:

More than just thoughtful practice, it is the process of turning thoughtful practice into a potential learning situation and, significantly enough, it is the utilisation of good theory in practice in what must always be a situation of probability – but the professional reflective practitioner is always trying to ensure that the outcome of any action is close to what is anticipated by the theory and the previous experience combined. (p. 178)

For Jarvis, RP is bringing to light a problem or situation and thinking about and learning from it.

Through each of these definitions, there is both a self-oriented as well as a collaborative component to reflection. These two components are articulated in Preskill and Torres's (1999) work. Preskill and Torres (1999) define RP both as a self-oriented effort and a collaborative effort, and each of the six elements can be expressed through both collaboration and introspection. Although the focus of their (1999) work was on evaluative inquiry and organizational learning, they recognized that RP is not as simple as the competencies (Stevahn et al., 2005) define it, but instead feeds into both evaluation practice in a self-directed way and into stakeholder communication and organizational learning. In evaluation, RP can be seen through the elements of self-awareness, professional growth, ethical awareness, dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning. Each of the six elements of the theoretical framework is explored in more depth below.

### **Self-Oriented Elements of Reflective Practice**

As noted in Figure 1, the self-oriented component of RP in evaluation is concerned with how evaluators can use RP in order to enhance self-awareness, professional growth, and ethical awareness in their evaluation practice. Each element is defined, described, and relevant theoretical and empirical sources are explored below.

#### **Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness is defined as mindfulness of one's knowledge, skills, perceptions, and dispositions, and how those affect professional practice (Denhardt et al., 2013; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Stevahn et al., 2005). A primary source for the self-awareness element of the theoretical framework comes from the essential competencies for program evaluators (Stevahn et al., 2005). Two skills are highlighted in the description of the competency that address the self-awareness element of RP: "Aware of self as an evaluator (knowledge, skills, dispositions)" and

“reflects on personal evaluation practice (competencies and areas for growth)” (Stevahn et al., 2005, p. 51). Self-awareness involves knowing oneself in a number of different ways (Patton, 2011; 2012). In Patton’s (2012) book on Utilization Focused Evaluation, he explains the notion of reflection: “‘Reflexivity’ has entered the evaluation lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s own perspective. Being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding” (p. 55). This idea of RP brings about questions like *what do I know?* and *how do I know what I know?* Patton (2012) suggests that this introspection “reminds the evaluator to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, economic, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective as well as the perspective and voices of those you gather data from and those to whom you present findings” (p. 55).

In the educational literature, reflection focuses on self-awareness as well (Denhardt et al., 2013). Denhardt and colleagues (2013) characterize reflection as a way to gain a better understanding of who we are. They write, “If we can enhance our understanding of ourselves and how our values influence our behavior, if we can gain insight into how our attitudes and behaviors affect others, and if we can accept that how we view the world is not necessarily how others view the world, then we can build our [professional] capacity” (p. 22). The lenses of culture, politics, economics, ideology, behavior, worldview, and other viewpoints are elements that evaluators bring to the table, personally. This awareness of oneself is essential to professional practice (Denhardt et al., 2013; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012).

### **Professional Growth**

For the purposes of this theoretical framework, professional growth is defined as rigorous and critical reflection on one’s own practice in order to improve future actions (Denhardt et al.,



2013; Kundin, 2010; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Peters, 1991; Stevahn et al., 2005). The essential evaluation competencies also highlight professional growth as a component of RP (Stevahn et al., 2005). There are two skills that are highlighted in Stevahn and Colleagues' (2005) work: "Pursues professional development in evaluation" and "pursues professional development in relevant content areas" (p. 51). Professional growth can take many forms, such as attending conferences and workshops, or reading about new techniques and skills, but Patton (2012) posits that, "The most personalized and individualized professional development comes from rigorous and systematic reflection on your own practice" (p. 401). RP becomes systematic inquiry for personal professional growth and improvement. Here practitioners ask *what worked well?*, *what didn't work well?*, *what was useful and not so useful?*, in essence, the practitioner is evaluating the evaluation and their own work. Patton (2011) argues, "When we engage the world as reflective practitioners... we are committed to testing our assumptions, theories, and ideas against how the world actually works" (p. 270). Evaluators should be better at reflecting on their competence, according to Patton (2012).

Patton (2012) situates this reflection process as both a part of general evaluation practice and as a tool to be used in metaevaluation. Metaevaluation is essentially the evaluation of evaluations, "Was the evaluation well done? Is it worth using? Did the evaluation meet professional standards and principles?" (Patton, 2012, p. 185). He argues that metaevaluation is best done through RP, and is "a commitment to get better at what we do and adapt to new challenges with innovative approaches as the world changes" (p. 402). In order to perform metaevaluation, it may be necessary to rely on the stakeholders and their feedback for improvement to professional practice (Patton, 2012).

Decision-making, a facet of the professional growth element of RP, also involves reflection (Denhardt et al., 2013; Kundin, 2010). Kundin (2010), in an article on a framework for decision-making in evaluation, proposes that one of the central elements in decision making is “reflection in action in everyday practice” (p. 354). This part of Kundin’s (2010) model focuses very specifically on Schön’s (1983) work on reflection-in-action. Kundin (2010) notes that, “Through reflection, practitioners build up a collection of images, ideas, examples, and actions that they can draw upon when making practice decisions” (p. 354). This reflection in action aims at evaluators thinking on their feet, in the moment and after the fact, in order to make practice decisions and improve the evaluation. Kundin presents a list of reflection questions for evaluators to think about when making decisions that call for an assessment of the situation and environment while probing knowledge, experience, and judgment.

Similarly, Peters (1991) presents a systematic process for RP in order to improve professional practice through the DATA model, which calls for practitioners to (D)escribe their situation, (A)nalyze it, (T)heorize about how to handle that situation, and (A)ct on the basis of the resulting theory. Peters (1991) argues that RP, “Involves more than simply thinking about what one is doing and what one should do next. It involves identifying one’s assumptions and feelings associated with practice, theorizing about how these assumptions and feelings are functionally or dysfunctionally associated with practice, and acting on the basis of the resulting theory of practice” (p. 89). For Peters (1991), this process involves learning and critical thinking, which leads to professional development and improving practice.

### **Ethical Awareness**

Ethical awareness is defined as an awareness of professional ethical standards, values, and practice as they apply to each situation. This aspect of RP requires questioning assumptions

and values in order to produce an ethically sound evaluation. As Sheinfeld and Lord (1981) point out, “Evaluators’ tasks, oriented toward the organization, pose value-related questions, the answers to which evaluators may now find only in themselves” (p. 378). This act requires great self-reflection, as evaluators are frequently faced with ethically charged tasks that oftentimes do not have clear solutions.

Newman and Brown’s (1996) approach to evaluation ethics is hoped to stimulate evaluators to “be more reflective about ethical concerns” (p. 113). Newman and Brown (1996) have an ethical decision-making flowchart that addresses the steps that need to be taken in an ethically charged situation. Huotari’s (2010) analysis of this flow chart focuses on the idea that “it is necessary to develop our personal ethical reflection... personal ethics is mostly concerned with balancing the conflicting principles and values” (p. 122). Newman and Brown (1996) stress this need to take time to be reflective, they strongly emphasize the fact that evaluators are responsible for the decisions they make in ethical situations. They claim, “We cannot be reflective about every moment of every evaluation, but we have a professional obligation to pause periodically and examine the shortcuts, to question the assumptions we make, and to think about the consequences of our actions” (Newman & Brown, 1996, p. 188).

According to Morris (2008), another pivotal author in evaluation ethics, “Moral courage requires doing the right thing simply *because* it is the right thing to do. Reflection must be transformed into action” (p. 202). RP is a necessary tool in order to critically examine ethical situations, both at the time of the event and after the fact. Morris (2008) also claims that it is necessary in these ethical situations to “reflect on the process you have been through and explore future implications for you and the system or organization” (p. 109). Ethical situations bring

room for the evaluator to learn from their actions and decisions in order to improve their ability to adequately handle the next ethical dilemma.

These three self-oriented elements of RP in evaluation – self-awareness, professional growth, and ethical awareness – have been defined and theoretical literature has been outlined. Self-oriented RP has as its base the idea that reflection is a means of learning more about oneself including assumptions and worldviews, improving professional practice, and becoming more aware of ethical and moral ideas and implications.

### **Collaborative Elements of Reflective Practice**

The collaborative component of RP in evaluation is concerned with how the evaluator can use RP in order to enhance dialogue and communication between evaluators and stakeholders, promote stakeholder involvement and use, and increase organizational learning regarding both the organization itself and evaluation processes. Each element is defined and described, and relevant theoretical and empirical sources are explored below.

#### **Dialogue**

Dialogue is defined as a process of thinking together in order that individuals as well as the group gain deeper understandings and enhanced perspectives of the evaluation and organizational processes (Abma et al., 2001; Forrester, 2011; Greene, 2001; Isaacs, 1999; Preskill & Torres; 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres et al., 2000). The venue for RP as defined by Preskill and Torres (1999) is dialogue. According to Isaacs (1999), “The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. In dialogue, one not only solves problems, one dissolves them” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 19). If we think of dialogue as a process for how we reflect on the issues in question together,

and in turn understand each other better, it makes the argument for increased utility of RP in the field of evaluation. According to Preskill and Torres (1999), “Dialogue is what facilitates the evaluative inquiry learning process of reflection, asking questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge” (p. 53). Through dialogue, the group as a whole creates new meaning together.

The concept of dialogue is not new to evaluation; it can be seen in many different theoretical approaches (Abma et al., 2001; Greene, 2001; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001). According to Abma and colleagues (2001), dialogue is “an event that can foster understanding and respect across difference... efforts to reach an evaluative understanding can be ‘useful’ simply because they help people to come to a clearer understanding of who they and others are” (p. 166). Abma and colleagues (2001) assert that, “Evaluators should not only present empirical evidence and deliver a report with their findings, but also engage in a process of deliberation – using reasons, evidence and the principles of valid argumentation to combine statements of fact and value and reach a reasoned judgment” (p. 166). This deliberation, for Abma and colleagues (2001), is through dialogue, which uses a very reflective approach. Dialogue is “probing into the heart of the matter, asking for explanations and stimulating reflection on underlying assumptions” (p. 174), and they (Abma et al., 2001) think “another way of looking at evaluation is to see it as a process, a platform for reconsideration, learning and developing new thoughts about the problem, not in a judgmental way but simply to learn more about it” (p. 177). Through these efforts we can get a more explanatory, knowledgeable, and utilization-focused approach to evaluation.

For Greene (2001), dialogue is a fundamental concept for evaluation. The meaning of the use of dialogue is more than that of a conversation with stakeholders. Greene (2001) states that dialogue in evaluation, “Fundamentally means a value commitment to engagement, engagement with problems of practice, with the challenges of difference and diversity in practices and their understandings, and thus with the relational, moral and political dimensions of our contexts and our craft” (p. 181). Dialogue should be inclusive of all stakeholder perspectives and values. She states that each evaluative gathering “is a potential site for dialogue, for the respectful sharing of views and values, the reciprocal teaching and learning about different perspectives and experiences, the effort to understand the Other and to thereby develop a stronger, more authentic relationship with her or him. From such strong relationships come strong programs” (Greene, 2001, p. 185-186). The use of dialogue can help to democratize evaluation and increase utilization and organizational capacity for evaluation.

The purpose of dialogue in evaluation should be looked at as not only a means to build upon personal professional practice, but also as a way to build relationships of trust, respect, caring, and openness, and as a way to “enable stakeholders to more deeply understand and respect, though not necessarily agree with, one another’s perspectives” (Greene, 2001, p. 182). According to Greene’s (2001) approach, dialogic evaluation, this enabling helps bring to light a more reciprocal and equitable stakeholder relationship in evaluation. It is also argued that dialogue can help to discern quality in evaluation. Greene (2001) also denotes that “dialogue in evaluation is inclusive of all legitimate stakeholder perspectives, experiences and value claims” (p. 183). Through this process, the evaluator can see everyone as equally in the role of speaker and listener, of teacher and learner. Dialogic evaluation is underpinned by traditional methodology, but at its core looks at the idea that “what is center stage is engagement... dialogic

evaluation seeks to be of the world, not just to report on it.” (p. 186). Dialogue in evaluation makes the process both an individual and a collaborative effort in evaluation.

Rallis and Rossman (2000) and Rossman and Rallis (2000) discuss the role of language in dialogue, how dialogue enhances evaluation effectiveness, and the role of critical inquiry in the evaluation process. Dialogue is described as “a fundamentally interactive process of authentic thinking together. It is generative. It moves beyond any single individual’s understanding to produce new knowledge” (Rallis & Rossman, 2000, p. 83). Rallis and Rossman (2000) state, “In an ideal world, individuals would be reflective and critical of their work, and programs would engage in self-sustaining and developmental learning – they would be *inquiry-minded organizations*” (p. 83). Dialogical inquiry can generate data and encourage organizational learning. They (Rallis & Rossman, 2000) describe dialogue as grounded in the assumption that knowledge is not a given. Knowledge is a social construction of individuals and groups. Dialogue is a way to discover multiple meanings in an organizational context. A process of dialogue leads to “new areas of inquiry” (Rallis & Rossman, 2000, p. 86) where one can consider that there is more detail than what is at the surface. Finally, Rossman and Rallis (2000) describe the evaluator’s role as “partner and coproducer of knowledge” (p. 67). They posit that all stakeholders should be a part of the evaluation process and the construction of knowledge.

Ryan and DeStefano (2000) put together a set of descriptions of different uses of the term “dialogue” in evaluation. They discuss dialogue as a conversation, an inquiry process, debate, instruction, “practical hermeneutics”, collective inquiry, and dialectic method. As a collective inquiry, Torres and her colleagues (Torres et al., 2000) describe dialogue as providing efficiencies in evaluation, contributing to its use, and as an inspiration to become more involved and take action in organizational improvement. For Torres and colleagues (2000), “Dialogue that

surfaces multiple points of view that need to be addressed and negotiated, helps to make individual and hidden agendas visible, contributes to building a sense of community and connection, enables sensitive topics to be surfaced and addressed, and facilitates individual, team, and organizational learning” (p. 28). Dialogue and reflection invite questions such as, “What do the findings mean? What impact is this having on the program? What can we do about it? Where are we coming from in how we see this?” (p. 32). They argue that reflection is included in a dialogue, “It provides for the review or reconsideration of ideas, assumptions, underlying values, understandings, working hypotheses, and tentative decisions” (p. 28). Dialogue in evaluation is a means of reflection with others.

Two case study evaluations were performed with local human service agencies using a dialogic evaluation approach (Greene, 1987). Stakeholders reported that the benefits of participation included learning about the program, gaining interest and learning about evaluation and evaluation processes, gaining opportunities for reflection on the program and evaluation, analyzing the situation, gaining program credibility and publicity, and overall positive feelings about the evaluation and the program. One of the major costs reported by the stakeholders was the time that it took to generate the evaluation. According to Greene (1987), “The benefits of such participation include enhanced utilization without necessarily compromising technical quality, and such benefits substantially outweigh perceived costs” (p. 393). Greene (1988), also addressed the utilization and results phases of these evaluations, and found that communication of results being ongoing and iterative, using both written reports and discussion, comprehensive content, communicating in an open and pluralistic manner, contributions of active and involved stakeholders, and the evaluator acting as an advocate for use who was responsible for the communication, led to higher utilization of the evaluation.



## **Stakeholder Involvement**

Stakeholder involvement has become a focus of current evaluation practice in the past 40 years (Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012). Stakeholder involvement is defined through the literature as the participation of stakeholders in evaluation processes, decisions, and reporting, so as to increase the use of the evaluation and to give stakeholders a voice in the evaluation as a whole. The involvement of stakeholders has been shown to improve the effectiveness of evaluation efforts (Ayers, 1987; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; Greene, 1987; Harnar & Preskill, 2007; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill et al., 2003; Torres et al., 1997).

There are a number of different approaches in evaluation that promote stakeholder involvement. Utilization-Focused Evaluation has as its premise that evaluations “should be judged by their utility and actual use” (Patton, 2012, p. 4). With this premise, Patton (2012) suggests that evaluators need to focus on the facilitation aspect of the evaluation process and focus on how any piece of the evaluation will affect the use of the results. Patton (2012) defines Utilization-Focused Evaluation as “a process for making decisions about... issues in collaboration with an identified group of primary users focusing on their intended uses of evaluation” (p. 6). Utilization-Focused Evaluation involves stakeholders in the process in order to increase the above mentioned components.

Collaborative or participatory evaluation is another type of stakeholder-focused evaluation that has come to the forefront (Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). The focus of this type of evaluation involves “collaboration of evaluators with program stakeholders for the purpose of improving educational program evaluations” (Brandon, 1998, p. 325). Brunner and Guzman (1989) specifically address

the notion that this process helps social groups produce action-based knowledge about what is really happening, address norms and values in their organization, and subsequently reach consensus about what to do next.

Fetterman (1994) also focuses on the stakeholder approach to evaluation through empowerment evaluation. This type of evaluation promotes “helping people help themselves” (p. 1). This approach to evaluation is very similar to the others in that it gives stakeholders a sort of autonomy with regard to the evaluation process. Weiss (1983) endorses a comparable theory of evaluation through the stakeholder model, which represents, “A recognition of the political nature of the evaluation process... an appreciation that each program affects many groups, which have divergent and even incompatible concerns... (and) an awareness of the developmental nature of large social programming” (p. 11). Both of these evaluation efforts seek to bring autonomy and power to the stakeholders involved in the process and conclusions of the evaluation.

Ayers (1987) conducted a set of interviews at a multisite school district with stakeholders after being a part of Stakeholder Based Evaluation. All of those interviewed rated the process positively. The stakeholders defined the evaluator as someone who developed primary documents, facilitated the group, helped to generate questions, listened and synthesized information, prepared data collection, analyzed data, developed a reporting format, assisted presentation, and performed most of the evaluation work. The evaluator was looked at as a “necessary ingredient... [who] provided us with alternatives, a format, summaries of what we had done, and direction; the evaluator polished the process” (Ayers, 1987, p. 267). However, Ayers (1987) described the role of the evaluator as less autonomous and more service oriented. Interviewees reported logistical issues, group dynamic difficulties, less objectivity of the

evaluator, less rigor and generalizability, and higher workloads. Suggestions for improvement from the interviewees included: administrative assistance and support, group membership and effort in the evaluation process, laying out clear goals and time limitations, and clarification of the characteristics and roles of the evaluator.

Greene (1988) gathered field data from two case studies in order to understand the link between stakeholder participation and the use of evaluation in a day care setting. The two major benefits cited from participating in the evaluation process were learning more about the program and the organization and learning more about the evaluation itself. Many stakeholders, especially those highly involved, viewed their engagement in the evaluation as a venue for discussion, reflection, and program analysis. This created an ongoing communication among stakeholders and evaluators during the evaluation process. There was also a report of increased worth and value from the stakeholders involved in the process. A political element was also present, where it was perceived that a voice was given to stakeholders that might not have otherwise had one in the evaluation process.

Papineau and Kiely (1996) performed a set of interviews with stakeholders and engaged in participant observation in a participatory evaluation in a community economic development organization. Overall findings presented an increase in self-efficacy within the organization itself as well as the acquiring of new skills and information about the program and the evaluation. There was a positive impact on internal group processes, an increase in commitment to the organization and the evaluation, better task accomplishment, and the organization served as a model for other organizations. Also, there was an opportunity for hands on evaluation experience for the stakeholders, an increase in the knowledge of issues in the organization, and it was reported that participatory observation contributed to personal development of stakeholders.

However, having the responsibility to consider the diversity of stakeholders in the evaluation process made the evaluation more complex, time consuming, and lengthy than expected.

Patton's (1998) notion of process use was researched by Harnar and Preskill (2007) through a survey sent to American Evaluation Association members. Patton (1998) describes process use as "relating to and being indicated by individual changes in thinking and behaving that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process" (p. 225). This approach to evaluation entails involvement of stakeholders during all times in the evaluation so that the results can be used during the process. A web survey was sent to all AEA members, and the major finding of the survey was that most respondents either implied or discussed the idea that stakeholder engagement or involvement is crucial to the ongoing use of the findings of evaluation.

Similarly, a survey on evaluation use was sent to the AEA Use Topical Interest Group in 1997 in order to assess evaluators' perceptions on what use means and how to promote use in evaluation (Preskill & Caracelli, 1997). Preskill and Caracelli (1997) argue that the most important strategies for facilitating use are "planning for use at the beginning of an evaluation, identifying and prioritizing intended users and intended uses of the evaluation, designing the evaluation within resource limitations, involving stakeholders in the evaluation process, communicating findings to stakeholders as the evaluation progresses, and developing a communication and reporting plan" (p. 209). It was reported that over three fourths of survey respondents agreed that the purpose of evaluation is to promote organizational learning and investigate merit and worth. There was overwhelming agreement that it is the evaluator's responsibility to involve stakeholders in the evaluation. Most respondents agreed that stakeholder

involvement increases use of evaluation processes and findings and helps to balance political agendas.

The results of an exploratory study on process use with the American Cancer Society were reflected in an article by Preskill, Zuckerman, and Matthews (2003). This study included 30-90 minute interviews with members of the organization in order to understand their perceptions of evaluation process use. It was found that the organization members learned about evaluation in general as well as particular evaluation practices. They also learned about things in the program and the organization through process use. For participants, participation in the evaluation was reported to be a good use of time. Preskill and her colleagues (2003) report that they learned that process use should be an intentional part of evaluation in order to provide the largest benefit to the evaluand.

Torres, Preskill, and Piontek (1997) surveyed a random sample of American Evaluation Association members focusing on the difference between internal and external evaluators' communicating and reporting styles. They found that both groups were relatively similar in their styles, and there was an overall heavy reliance on technical reports in their evaluations. However, they discussed the results by stating that, "Early, ongoing communication and collaboration were defined by evaluators in two ways: first, as strategies which they feel would have reduced or even prevented frustrations they experienced; and second, as a contributor to helping things go right when they did" (Torres et al., 1997, pp. 120-121). Communication was viewed as a problem-solving and necessary piece of evaluation efforts.

### **Organizational Learning**

Organizational learning is defined as the involvement of and communication with stakeholders in order to promote growth and capacity for evaluation in the organization (Preskill

& Torres, 1999; Torres & Preskill, 2001). According to Torres and Preskill (2001), this element of reflective practice “(a) uses information and feedback about both processes and outcomes (i.e. evaluation findings) to make changes; (b) is integrated with work activities, and within the organization’s infrastructure; and (c) invokes the alignment of values, attitudes, and perceptions among organizational members” (Torres & Preskill, 2001, p. 388). Organizational learning is a concept in evaluation that has gained increasing attention in evaluation in the past 25 years (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Forss et al., 1994; Patton, 1998; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill et al., 2003; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

According to Forrester (2011), “When reflection becomes habit we see evidence of a learning organization; a critical hallmark that proves an organization can stand the test of time” (p. 139). The organizational learning aspect of RP involves stakeholder involvement and dialogue as venues for the learning process, and this is reflected by the focus on learning in the above two elements of collaborative RP. The organizational learning approach takes on the idea that organizations need to learn more about the evaluation and program process in order to promote positive change in the organization.

Preskill (1994) argues that “once the seeds of organizational learning are sown, evaluation can then become the energy for bringing people together to reflect on previous and current practices, engage in dialogue, and plan for future action” (p. 294). Making the stakeholders a part of the process and helping them to understand how to think evaluatively is the purpose of an organizational learning approach to evaluation. Learning from others in the organization is claimed to produce greater insights into evaluative issues. According to Preskill and Torres (1999), “Within organizations, individuals are always learning. It is becoming

increasingly clear that this learning is maximized through opportunities to share individual knowledge experiences with others” (p. 23).

Torres and Preskill (2001) take a historical look at how evaluation and organizational learning has developed. They posit that organizational learning involves “providing time for reflection, examination of underlying assumptions, and dialog among evaluators, program staff, and organizational leaders” (Torres & Preskill, 2001, p. 388). The organizational learning approach to evaluation blends organizational development with program evaluation. This helps the organization to learn from the evaluation and the evaluation processes through focusing on issues and concerns in the organization, reflecting on how to improve, and gaining the courage to face “harsh realities” in the organization (p. 393).

Torres and Preskill (2001) also discuss challenges to taking on an organizational learning approach to evaluation. These challenges include: funders’ and legislators’ focus on accountability, little time or support for engaging in reflection and dialogue, leaders with little or no experience basing their decisions on data, overworked staff, lack of evaluators who are willing to participate in this type of evaluation, little support for changing the organizational culture, organization members who may perceive evaluation as threatening, and difficulty gaining upper management support. However, they maintain that the organizational learning approach has as its basic intent to, increase stakeholder “buy-in to the evaluation... understanding of the evaluation process, and... ultimately, their use of the evaluation’s findings” (Torres & Preskill, 2001, p. 388).

Cousins and Earl (1992) identified 26 empirical studies that support organizational learning in order to make the case for participatory evaluation. They claim that organizational learning requires “that the evaluation study becomes part of a complex interplay of

informational, personal, political, and organizational variables, all at work simultaneously in ongoing decision making” (Cousins & Earl, 1992, p. 398). They also argue that organizational learning happens when the actions of an organization are more informed. This approach to evaluation is “distinct from adaptation and from unreflective change” (Cousins & Earl, 1992, p. 401). In order for organizational learning to occur, stakeholders and evaluators must participate in reflection together. This orientation requires the recognition that knowledge is socially constructed, inquiry focused, and concentrates on learning systems.

Jones and Stubbe (2004) also discuss the organizational learning element of RP in evaluation. They claim that evaluation and development are “reflective practices which draw attention to what is already happening in the organization, and to what people want to create in the future” (p. 197). They associate organizational learning as a concept directly associated with RP, and acknowledge that both concepts can look like “just another group of buzzwords” (Jones & Stubbe, 2004, p. 206). However, organizational learning is an influential approach in which the evaluator and the stakeholders can create and share knowledge.

Forss, Cracknell, and Samset (1994) make the argument that one of the main objectives of the evaluation process is to promote organizational learning. They reported on a case study involving the experiences of the Norwegian Aid Administration that focused on organizational learning, and there were two ways in which learning was generated: “via involvement and via communication” (p. 574). Through their case study they promoted organizational learning in the context of the Norwegian aid administration. They claim that “evaluation is, by definition, synonymous to feedback, and feedback is the link between performance and knowledge structures” (p. 575).



Patton (1998), in an article on process use, discusses organizational learning as a result of involving stakeholders in the evaluation process. He claims, “learning how to think evaluatively is learning how to learn” (p. 226). Process use is becoming more valuable in organizations, as engaging in process use provides the opportunity to engage in thinking evaluatively, which can have an ongoing impact in the organization. Patton (1998) argues that “the experience of being involved in an evaluation then, for those stakeholders actually involved, can have a lasting impact on how they think, on their openness to reality-testing, and on how they view the things they do” (p. 226-227). The concept of process use has as its major premise the promotion of organizational learning.

Similarly, when reflecting on the process of an exploratory study on process use, Preskill and colleagues (2003) assert that “when dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and validating assumptions and beliefs are built into the evaluation process, group members may be more actively engaged in and aware of their own learning” (p. 438-439). Preskill and Caracelli (1997) also discuss organizational learning in a survey study mentioned above, and they report that “evaluation can be a catalyst for learning that has the potential to improve and transform individuals and organizations” (p. 223). Over three fourths of survey participants agreed that evaluation’s purpose is to facilitate organizational learning (Preskill & Caracelli, 1997).

These three collaborative elements of RP in evaluation – dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning – have been defined, theoretical literature has been outlined, and empirical evaluation research has been discussed where available. Collaborative RP has as its base the idea that reflection is a means of learning together and thinking together about evaluation and organizational processes.

## **Conclusion**

Through the literature, a theoretical framework has been produced that addresses the major aspects of the use of RP in evaluation. RP has been defined generally, and has been divided into both a self-oriented and collaborative component. These two components are not mutually exclusive, as self-oriented RP can be enhanced through collaboration, and vice versa. Six major elements of RP have been illustrated through both theoretical and empirical literature in evaluation and related fields; these six elements are self-awareness, professional growth, ethical awareness, dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning. Finally, it is necessary to discuss the three major conclusions that can be drawn from the literature on RP highlighted in this chapter.

First, there is a large amount of theoretical and conceptual literature regarding the notion of RP and the six elements detailed in the text. This provides a strong argument for RP as it is defined and detailed for the purposes of this research. However, there is very little empirical research on RP in evaluation work. The empirical research outlined in this chapter regards only those elements that are part of the collaborative component of RP. The self-oriented elements of RP have not been studied directly in evaluation. One reason for the lack of research on the self-oriented component could be that evaluators have not taken much time to study themselves. The empirical literature regarding the collaborative components comes largely from case studies and stakeholder perspectives, although there have been a few surveys directed towards evaluators in efforts to gauge their opinions and perceptions of components of evaluation practice. It is also important to note that all of the empirical literature outlined in this chapter does not focus on RP directly, but instead focuses on the elements outlined by this chapter; namely, stakeholder

involvement (including evaluation use), dialogue, and organizational learning. There is no empirical literature in evaluation that addressed RP explicitly.

Secondarily, the literature in evaluation has not previously been organized into a model from which research can be performed regarding RP in evaluation. The theoretical framework that forms the basis of this chapter has provided a potential organization of RP in evaluation and its associated elements in an effort to operationalize the concept and make it easier to study. Following the creation of a theoretical framework, and with the indication that there is very little empirical literature on RP in evaluation, it is thirdly and perhaps most prominently concluded that more empirical work needs to be done to address the role of RP in evaluation efforts.

It is clear that RP is an important part of evaluation work, as it is outlined as an essential competency (Stevahn et al., 2005), has been employed as an important concept throughout the Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough et al., 2011), is a component of the evaluation decision-making framework (Kundin, 2010) and the framework for evaluative inquiry (Torres & Preskill, 1999), and is written about conceptually by numerous authors in the evaluation literature (Abma et al., 2001; Brandon, 1998; Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Greene, 2001; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Kundin, 2010; Morris, 2008; Newman & Brown, 1996; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Stevahn et al., 2005; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres et al., 2000; Yarbrough et al., 2011). However, we do not have an understanding of its actual use by the evaluation community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through this chapter, RP was introduced as one of six essential competencies in evaluation as well as a key concept in the Program Evaluation Standards (Stevahn et al., 2005; Yarbrough et al., 2011). Next, the argument was made that evaluators are becoming more focused on reflection efforts in evaluation. A theoretical framework was produced through the literature regarding RP in evaluation. Next, RP was defined and elaborated on and the six elements of RP, both self-oriented and collaborative, were addressed in detail. Finally, three major conclusions were drawn with regard to the literature-base of RP in evaluation: the absence of empirical literature regarding RP, the lack of a model for RP in evaluation, and the need for further investigation into what RP means to evaluators.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Method and Procedures**

Through this chapter, research questions are introduced regarding evaluators' conceptualizations of reflective practice (RP), methods for answering the research questions are explained, proposed analyses are highlighted, and quality and credibility of the research are addressed. The current study sought to gain insight into the state of the field of evaluation regarding practitioners understanding and application of RP. This study views RP from two major perspectives: a self-oriented conceptualization through self-awareness, professional growth, and ethical awareness, and a collaborative conceptualization through dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work?
2. In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice?
3. In what ways do evaluators perceive reflective practice as having a collaborative element in evaluation?

### **Study Design and Rationale**

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design through individual interviews, as the purpose of the study was to get at evaluators' perceptions regarding the essential competency, RP, and how they use it in their professional lives. Merriam (2009) describes this type of "basic" qualitative research as being grounded in constructionism, where "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (p. 22). According to Kvale (1996), the key questions that need to be asked prior to an interview in order to plan accordingly are "what", "why", and "how" (p. 94). Specifically, the "what" relates to gaining an understanding of the literature and prior knowledge about the subject matter; in this case, RP. Chapter Two outlines the relevant definitional and theoretical underpinnings of RP for this interview process. Next, the "why" necessitates clarifying the purpose of the qualitative investigation. The research questions highlighted above provide this study with the answer to the "why" question, as it is necessary to understand what evaluators think right now with regard to RP in evaluation. Finally, the how relates to understanding the different techniques of the interviewing process and how to analyze the data.

For the purposes of this descriptive investigation, the "how", or the design that fits best with the research purpose, is basic qualitative interviewing, as basic qualitative interviewing has as its focus understanding the meaning that a particular phenomenon or subject has for the individuals involved (Merriam (2009). The purpose of this research is solely to understand and be able to describe how people make sense of the concept RP and use it in their professional practice.

It is important to note that the theoretical framework employed in Chapter Two of this work was not provided for the participants in the study, but instead the hope was that any

definition or interpretation that these evaluators provided will supplement the ideas described in the literature. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the content that was provided by the participants paints a clearer picture of the phenomenon of RP in evaluation.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were evaluators with ten or more years of experience in program evaluation who have also been members of the American Evaluation Association (AEA). The AEA is “an international professional association of evaluators devoted to the application and exploration of program evaluation, personnel evaluation, technology, and many other forms of evaluation” (AEA, 2013). The association has over 7,700 members from the United States and more than 60 other countries. It is important to note that the purpose of selecting evaluators with at least ten years of experience in evaluation is to gain an understanding of those who have a lot of experience with evaluation and its processes. A snowball sample of 19 evaluators with ten years or more of evaluation experience participated in these interviews.

Following IRB approval, these evaluators were contacted via email inviting them to participate in this research (Appendix A). The email conveyed the nature of the research project, the approximate length of the interview, how the individuals were identified, and participant confidentiality. Participants were given the option to participate either via Skype, phone call, or in person. They were prompted with a follow-up email if it was necessary (Appendix B). Individuals who agreed to participate were asked to provide a set of times for participation via email in order to start the process of data collection. Those participated were asked about their experience with evaluation prior to participation to ensure that they fit the criteria for the study. An informed consent was provided to participants with an understanding that their recorded response indicated their consent to participate (Appendix C).

### **Interview Protocol**

According to Kvale (1996), “Interviews are particularly suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world” (p. 105). A basic qualitative interview design was used in order to answer the research questions for this study. This study requires a very descriptive focus in order to understand the experiences of evaluation professionals regarding RP. Merriam (2009) argues, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 88). RP is an internally focused process, although there may be parts of it that can be directly observed via dialogue and stakeholder communication. Therefore, interviewing provided the richest view of the way evaluators conceptualize and use RP in their work.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were briefed regarding who the background of the interviewer and their role in the investigation, the purpose of the interview, the use of an audio recorder, and the interviewer responded to any questions that the participant may have had (Kvale, 1996, p. 128). Following this briefing, the interview started.

The interview protocol was semi-structured, where the questions acted as more of a guide to the interview process, and although most participants received similar questions, the process acted more as a conversation (Merriam, 2009, p. 89). According to Kvale (1996), “The very virtue of qualitative interviews is their openness” (p. 84). The interview questions were designed to be brief and simple (Kvale, 1996, p. 132). One of the important aspects in the design of this interview protocol regarded what Kvale (1996) calls “getting wiser” (p. 100). Getting wiser refers to the idea that the interviewer may learn more about the subject matter throughout the investigation. The interview protocol was designed so that the researcher did not give too much



of their own context and viewpoint to the participant. Unexpected aspects regarding RP were expected to arise through the interview, and ensuring room for this exploration required that the questions be relatively broad. Follow-up questions and probing were necessary as participants respond to these general questions. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix C, and can be seen in the following table as each question relates to the primary research questions (Table 1).

Through an interview investigation the interviewer acts as the instrument (Kvale, 1996). In order for the interviews to yield the best responses possible, the interviewer field tested the protocol with four practicing evaluators. This served as a way to understand the nature of responses to the interview questions, the types of follow-up questions that might come up, and ensured that the protocol would provide the necessary data to answer the research questions. This practice also helped the interviewer to be confident that they had sufficient knowledge of RP and helped them understand the role of listening, being clear, interpreting meaning as the interview progressed, remembering what the participants said, and being open to new perspectives (Kvale, 1996).

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain the heart of the idea of trustworthiness as a question of “Why should the reader of an inquiry report believe what is said here” (p. 11). In order to address trustworthiness, and in turn establish the study’s rigor, this study employed three qualitative techniques: reflective journaling, peer debriefing, and member checks (Flick, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Long & Johnson, 2000).

Reflective journaling was utilized during field-testing, data collection, and analysis in order that the researcher will examine their own beliefs, values, and opinions as new information

Table 1. *Interview Protocol as it Addresses the Research Questions (RQ)*

Interview Questions (In Order)	Research Question(s) Addressed
1. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in what evaluators think about reflective practice. The concept of Reflective Practice has not been well defined or articulated for practitioners in evaluation... and it is something we are suggested to do, but it is unclear in what capacity we actually do it, or how we conceptualize it. So, the first question that I have for you is, how do you define reflective practice as it relates to your evaluation work?	RQ1
2. What specific areas are there where you would use reflection in the evaluation process?	RQ1
3. In what ways do you personally use reflective practice in your evaluations?	RQ2
4. How do you think reflective practice could be utilized collaboratively?	RQ3

is gathered. The specific personal biases that the researcher acknowledged initially were: belief that RP is an important part of evaluation practice; belief that RP is a purposeful investigation into one's practice; that many evaluators engage in RP, they just do not have a name for it; and that she has created a theoretical framework for RP in evaluation which may have an influence on her perspective of the interview process. Further notes and thoughts were recorded as the data collection process was underway and the notes and the journal were shared during peer debriefing.

Peer debriefing involved ongoing discussions with a selected colleague regarding the data and the analysis in order to “disclose one's own blind spots and to discuss working hypotheses and results with them” (Flick, 2009, p. 392). Frequent meetings were held with this peer in order to discuss the data analysis as it transpired. The peer analyzed the data alongside the researcher in order that they could discuss differences in perspectives regarding the transcripts. Essentially, these meetings were used in order to reflect further on the data and its analysis so as to gain new perspectives and insights that may not have been thought of previously. Additional perspectives regarding the data helped to establish a more concrete and thought out thematic analysis.

Finally, this study utilized respondent validation. The transcriptions of recorded interviews were shared with respondents to ensure the stability of their perspective and its representation in the study. Transcriptions were shared with participants immediately after they were transcribed in order to get a more immediate assessment of their responses. Comments from the respondents were considered in the completion of the analysis as well as in peer debriefing meetings.

### **Data Analysis**

A recorder was utilized to gather the interview data, although the interviewer also took notes as needed during the interviews. The purpose of this recording was to ensure that the data reflected exactly what the participants shared, verbatim. Data were analyzed inductively, using Microsoft Excel, in order that any categorizations, themes, reflections, or memos were in one place and readily accessible to the researcher at all times. According to Kvale (1996), “The purpose of the qualitative research interview has been depicted as the description and interpretation of themes in the subjects’ lived world” (p. 187). This depiction is a continuum between describing what happened and interpreting it in the context of previous literature and theory.

The primary form of analysis that was used for this research is labeled “ad hoc,” where different approaches and techniques were used for meaning generation (Kvale, 1996, p. 203). The interviews were first read through without any analysis, in order to get an understanding of the content of the data. Once the interviews were read, the transcripts were analyzed first descriptively, through categorization and condensation. Categorization refers to coding long statements into simple categories in order that the data are easier to navigate. These categories were created ad hoc during the analysis, which required reading through transcripts as they were obtained and coming up with specific categories that each individual transcript and explanation fit into (Kvale, 1996, p. 192; Merriam, 2009). Condensation entails expressing meanings from the transcripts into briefer rephrasings in order to be more succinct. Coding the data as it was collected helped to create more solid categories, and themes emerged and solidified during the collection of the data. During the process of analysis, notes, memos, and reflections were noted in the software program in order to produce more comprehensive results.

Once all of the data were coded and specific themes emerged, a more interpretive approach was used. Here it is understood that “the interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent in a text” (Kvale, 1996, p. 201). A theoretical perspective of the results of the data was constructed that highlights how reflective practice is viewed presently by evaluators in the field.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through this chapter, the study purpose and research questions were detailed, methods for answering the research questions were explained, and proposed analyses were highlighted. Specifically, three research questions were outlined that had been derived from the unanswered questions in the literature review. A semi-structured qualitative interview design was discussed in order to describe evaluators’ perceptions of RP in evaluation, participants were described, the interview protocol was explained, and the researcher established the trustworthiness of the qualitative research proposal. Finally, an ad hoc analysis plan was detailed.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The primary focus of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process. Three questions were used to guide this study: (1) How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work? (2) In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice? (3) In what ways do evaluators perceive reflective practice as having a collaborative element in evaluation?

First, a description of the interview participants is presented, and then this chapter provides an account of each of the primary themes that emerged. The findings are presented according to research question in order to align with the primary purposes of this study. Relevant respondent quotes are included and themes are represented in table format. The themes that came out of this qualitative investigation were the result of consistent responses and patterns in these interviews. Finally, the chapter explores additional findings from the interviews that do not directly relate to the research questions but came up in conversations with participants.

#### **Participants**

Participants for this study were 19 program evaluators with ten or more years of evaluation experience. The range of experience was from ten to forty-nine years. Four had ten to 14 years of experience, five had 24 to 30 years of experience, four had 31 to 37 years of experience, and six had 45 to 49 years of experience. 11 participants were female and eight were male; 9 of them were primarily practitioners while ten of them held educational positions at

universities. There were a range of types of evaluation settings, from non-profit to government sector, from K12 to higher education, and including multiple training programs in health, addiction, and other social service programs. Seven participants claimed they were “generalists” with regard to evaluation and many (14) worked in multiple different areas of evaluation. 15 of the participants had completed a doctorate degree, seven of which had degrees specifically in program evaluation. Interestingly, 17 of the nineteen evaluators became evaluators serendipitously; they had not intended to become evaluators but instead ended up there through suggestions, curiosities, and job placements. This is not uncommon for the profession, as some claimed that they belonged to the group of “accidental” evaluators, because program evaluation as a profession is relatively new itself.

### **Analysis**

The following four sections outline the major themes and sub-themes for each research question as well as whether participants think evaluators should receive any sort of formal training in RP. Participants in this study generally did not have a working definition of RP readily available, but rather conceptualized one as a part of the interview. A number of participants were uneasy about having to come up with their own conceptualization of RP and asked if one could be provided, although requests were only met with further probing. Three participants were given the interview protocol beforehand as requested, and one identified having researched the concept before the interview. Research Question One has six major themes, Research Question Two has five major themes, and Research Question Three has three major themes.

**Research Question One: How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work?**

Six major themes emerged from the analysis of participant responses regarding the first research question: How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work? The themes are: (1) Learning, (2) Multiple Perspectives, (3) Intuition versus Purpose, (4) Thinking, (5) Questioning, and (6) Self-Awareness. These themes and their related sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

**1. Learning.** Learning was a major topic of discussion for participants with regard to how RP is conceptualized. It was discussed in a number of different ways, including: feedback and improvement, either during the evaluation or for the next time; metaevaluation and metaanalysis; stakeholder learning, organizational learning, and evaluation capacity building; and in terms of facilitating the learning process.

When participants talked about learning in terms of feedback and improvement, they typically discussed the idea of both thinking personally about what they could have done differently as well as getting feedback from stakeholders and evaluation team members in order to improve the evaluation for next time. One participant claimed that, “I really do feel... that learning is an outcome of reflective practice.” For her and many other participants the purpose of reflection is learning. When discussing the importance of reflecting in evaluation, another participant claimed, “If you don’t reflect you can go from evaluation to evaluation to evaluation and within the evaluation and just not be learning and improving on what you’re doing.”

A number of participants mentioned metaevaluation, both formally and informally, as part of their conceptualization of reflective practice. One participant discussed it in detail:



Table 2. *Themes for Research Question 1*

Theme	Sub-Themes	# Discussed
1. Learning	Feedback/Improvement Metaevaluation/Metaanalysis Stakeholder/Organizational Learning Capacity Building Facilitation	19
2. Multiple Perspectives	Collaboration Triangulation Sources of Information	19
3. Intuition versus Purpose	Intuition Purpose Both Intuition and Purpose	2 7 10
4. Thinking	Thinking Back Critical Thinking Evaluative Thinking Understanding Context	17
5. Questioning	General Questioning Process Questioning Improvement Questioning	16
6. Self-Awareness	Previous Experiences Worldview General Self-Awareness	10

For me the key is to build in rigor in examining evaluation work through such means as standards, formative and summative metaevaluations, accounting and auditing, and the like. If evaluators seriously adopt and apply standards, regularly subject their work to metaevaluations, improve their work based on lessons learned, and share important insights, then they will advance their services as professionals and also help develop their field.

The conceptualization of metaevaluation as a reflective learning process was discussed many times as a more rigorous and systematic way to reflect on evaluation work.

Participants also presented the idea of stakeholders learning through the RP process, both about the evaluation itself and about the organization or context in which they operate. For example, one participant elaborated, “Any time that we are engaging folks in some systematic reflection, we are involved in helping them get beneath the surface of what they’re doing and understand it better.” These types of comments were made with an eye toward facilitating the reflection process and helping people to understand the process better. Another participant noted that, “A key part about reflective practice is it’s basically a learning process, and to just deliver the findings to a group doesn’t help them really engage with it and understand how to move forward... reflective practice can also help with building consensus.” Finally, the notion of “double-loop learning” was directly compared to RP by a few participants while others alluded to this by saying it was a “cyclical” or “continuous” process of improvement. Double-loop learning is a concept from educational theory that means people are thinking more deeply about their situation, assumptions, beliefs, and generally the way in which they operate in their practice (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

**2. Multiple perspectives.** All of the participants mentioned multiple perspectives as being a part their conceptualization of RP. This was either mentioned by participants without prompting or when prompted by the interviewer. The idea of multiple perspectives was brought up in terms of actually including multiple perspectives through collaboration; taking into account different sources of data and triangulating; and considering different sources of information available in the evaluation or program context.

With regard to the collaborative element, there were two contexts where participants discussed including multiple perspectives: in evaluation team or peer contexts and in stakeholder or client contexts. Although the idea of collaborative RP is addressed more thoroughly in Research Question Three, it is worth noting that most participants claimed that the inclusion of others in RP strengthens the process. One participant said, “To me reflective practice is a very participatory kind of process, where it’s not just thinking about whether you think it’s the right thing that you’re doing, but to have a team together and to have ongoing communication not only with your evaluation team but also with the clients, as far as where are we right now, where do you want to go.”

Triangulation was discussed by a number of participants with regard to looking at multiple data sources and sources of information in order to make sound evaluative conclusions and judgments. For example, one participant said:

What you’re doing is you’re saying what are the different sources of information, and it’s not necessarily triangulation in the true... in the truest sense of the word where you’re talking about can I confirm this piece of data with that piece of data with another piece of data... but rather this notion that there are going to be multiple perspectives on any given set of evaluation questions, on any given set of... questions, indicators, instruments,

findings, there are going to be multiple perspectives of those and you have to take into account the fact that there are multiple perspectives.

Participants also discussed thinking about what it means to have other points of view involved in the process and the context of the evaluation. One participant noted, “So I guess my sense of reflective practice is reflecting on different sources of information. Reflecting on different sources of information that you have, which would include literature review, not only what the clients know and have, to influence what you’re doing and that study.”

**3. Intuition versus purpose.** As a part of conceptualizing RP in evaluation, the question of whether RP was intuitive or purposeful was asked to all participants. Overwhelmingly participants claimed it was both. Those who claimed it was purposeful made the distinction that there is indeed an intuitive element, but that RP is a purposeful practice. Respondents who thought of it as intuitive really focused on the idea that it is just something that they do in their everyday practice as humans.

In the context of RP as purposeful, it was considered an intentional process with tools and/or structure to it. Participants used words like “systematic,” “explicit,” “rigorous,” or “intentional.” One participant claimed, “Intuition can tell you a bit about interacting with stakeholders but being purposeful on things like reflecting on your practice and learning from what you’ve done is important because otherwise we’ll do like we do in other things in life and not think about the hard parts.” Some participants also claimed that if RP is more purposeful then it is more likely to impact practice. For instance, one participant said:

I think that if it’s more purposeful then it has more, there’s a greater likelihood that it’s actually going to... reflection will improve your practice. So to me reflective practice, you do it for a purpose. You reflect because you know you don’t know everything and you

want to figure that out, and try to do better next time, or try to find the things that worked really well and do them again.

Intuition, in contrast, was talked about in terms of being in the moment and operating with your past experiences and background to guide you. Participants chose words and phrases like “natural,” “emotional,” “personalities,” and “human nature.” One participant stated:

You could almost say there is a Zen of practice, and part of that is being present not just in the moment, but present all the way through the experience so that you can look back. You’re looking, it’s almost like there’s two of you so... it’s a cognitive process, it’s an intuitive process, and it’s an iterative process, where you review, you think, you study what you’re doing, you study what you have done. You look at the results that came out of that and then you make a judgment accordingly. So it really is the process of conscious and intuitive thought that come together.

**4. Thinking.** Although thinking is a theme that runs implicitly throughout each and every interview, 17 of 19 people explicitly mentioned thinking or “understanding” the context of the evaluation in their responses. Some participants talked about thinking generally, mentioning that reflection is a process of thinking through the evaluation, while other participants talked about thinking back over past work with an eye towards improvement. Other conversations centered on critical or evaluative thinking, which was reported to be more systematic. Finally, some participants focused on understanding the context of the program they are operating in.

In terms of thinking, generally, participants discussed thinking about what is happening in the evaluation and having stakeholders think about the evaluation. One participant claimed, “And my idea of reflection is thinking... I mean you think all the time in evaluation, it’s... it’s your weapon, thinking. I mean you can’t be without it for a minute.” Another participant

discussed RP in a similar context, “You know sometimes reflections are just thinking.” Some participants looked at it as an ongoing process, “You know I think it has to do with thinking about what you’re doing. You know both while you’re doing a study and afterward, thinking about what I learned from this.” Involvement of the stakeholders in this thought process often looked like making sure they were brought along and understood the evaluation process. One participant claimed, “I think that if people... if evaluators... consistently and consciously have their stakeholders think about the issue on the table, the puzzle if you will... it helps to minimize the cognitive bias that prevents access to the target audience.”

When discussing the idea of thinking back, participants were focused on what had been done in the past and what could have been done differently. Thinking back was a prominent element of RP among participants, where they discussed the notion of reflection as an after-the-fact sort of process. Some participants’ definitions of reflective practice included thinking back:

In order... to reflect on something means to think back over it... to practice something means to do it. So if I’m going to do reflective practice, and if I practice the school of “if it works use it” form of evaluation... which I do typically... and I have to think over what I have done over the past however long the framework is... to be able to pull from those experiences to apply them to current situations that are relevant either directly or indirectly in a transferable situation.

The notion of reflection on practice was brought up by another participant, where she described it as thinking “about your own practice from the perspective of when you’ve done something thinking back on what you did, thinking about how you could do it better, thinking about ways to develop and build your practice as you’re in the field.”

Some respondents talked about critical or evaluative thinking in relation to RP. One participant talked about the relationship between RP and critical thinking, saying:

I would think that an awful lot of being a reflective practitioner would be using critical thinking. And a lot of critical thinking would involve being reflective about your practice. I'm not sure that I've thought through the two constructs in relation to each other enough to be able to give you a good sense of whether one would be subsumed by the other or whether they are basically loose synonyms. I guess my instinct would be to say they're probably loose synonyms. The Venn diagram would be very highly overlapped between the two.

Finally, some evaluators discussed the idea of understanding the context of the program that one is operating in as an evaluator. This context could relate to the stakeholders one is dealing with, the nature of the evaluation, what is required of the evaluation, what type of information is going to be collected, and a number of other situational factors. One participant noted that RP, "Gives you better ways of understanding, of developing the information you are going to collect, collecting the information, and then understanding what that information means."

**5. Questioning.** A relatively frequent theme that was discussed among participants involved questioning. This came up in both discussions about the idea of questioning as well as participants actually posing a number of questions regarding the evaluation process. There were three main categories for questioning: general questions, process questions, and improvement questions. One participant claimed that they "can't imagine doing an evaluation that is not extremely questioning and reflective from beginning to end."

General questions focused on questions about the context of the evaluation and the situation of the program. Some participants went so far as to question multiple truths between individuals in the evaluation process. A participant summed this theme up nicely by saying, “First and foremost I think it’s a matter of mindfulness, but it moves one’s work beyond simply getting the task done to understanding how and why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

Process questions were typically questions that would come up in various stages of the evaluation process, such as: “who are your stakeholders,” “do I need to be making adjustments,” “what happened here... what did we learn,” “where are we right now, where do we want to go,” “have all opinions been included,” and “how do we fix this program so it works better?” One participant broke the types of questions down into accountability questions, knowledge questions, management questions, and development questions.

In terms of questioning for improvement, the questioning process looked like: what happened, why, and how can I/we do it better next time? Many of the participants discussed this sort of questioning process. In terms of self-questioning, to one participant this looked like, “What are my weaknesses and what can I do to kind of alleviate those?” Another participant used the analogy of taking a scalpel to their work, stating, “Does it hold up? Is it credible? Are your inferences valid? Is it actually evaluation? What would you have done differently now looking at this from a different lens?” Some participants entertained the notion of questioning in a team setting. One noted, “Why am I doing this, whatever this may be at the time? If it’s analysis, why am I doing this analysis and not that analysis? Why did I make these decisions and not those decisions? And the second question is: how can I do it better? And if it is a team that’s reflecting on practice, the questions become why are we doing this? Or how can we do it better?”



Finally, yet another participant discussed asking stakeholders what worked, what didn't, and what could be done differently.

**6. Self-awareness.** About half of the participants in this study discussed the notion of being aware of oneself as a part of reflective practice. This theme included awareness of previous experiences, awareness of worldview (biases, assumptions, values, culture, etc.), and general awareness of oneself during the evaluation process.

Previous experiences were discussed in terms of being aware of one's background and past and how those experiences influence the evaluation situations that they are in. One participant explained this self-awareness, stating, "I would say reflective practice... I would say it's the way in which the evaluator takes into consideration all of his or her experiences as well as the context in engaging in practice." Another example was a participant explaining that one must check their experiences and hunches with collaborators: "So whether your reflections, your experiences, your hunches, your intuitions make sense has to be filtered through these understandings of the reflections and background of the collaborators."

In terms of worldview, participants discussed sociocultural biases, cognitive biases, different sorts of assumptions, and values that the evaluator brings to the table. One participant concisely described a definition of RP in which the focus was on these topics: "The extent to which people look primarily at their own values, biases, opinions, and so on, beginning their work with the value-oriented self-examination." Yet others focused on making biases and parameters explicit and making sure to be aware of how others' values interact with their own; one participant stated that RP helps you to "see when you're getting bias toward one particular point of view or one group and ignoring the values of others and that link, how that work is positioned within other systems or other contexts."

Respondents who discussed general self-awareness identified a consciousness about what they were doing or where they were and what they brought into the picture. One participant elaborated on this distinction, stating, “It gets away from the evaluator thinking that he is simply a technician using specific tools to, in a rote way, kind of go through a set of procedures.” A number of participants talked about having “blinders,” and one referred to RP as knowing “yourself as the instrument,” borrowing a term from qualitative research. Another participant noted, “Being reflective, having some sense of knowledge of yourself and what you consider to be important in an evaluation will help you... understand where your blind spots are.” Also, one participant mentioned the Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators (Stevahn, King, Ghore, & Minnema, 2005), and referred to the notion of self-awareness in the competencies. She said, “There are seven competencies listed in the reflective practice domain but only one of them deals directly with reflection: ‘1.6 Aware of self as an evaluator (knowledge, skills, dispositions) and reflects on personal evaluation practice (competencies and areas for growth).’”

**Research Question Two: In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice?**

Five major themes emerged with regard to the second research question: In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice? Those themes were: (1) Sharing, (2) Individual RP, (3) Prevalence, (4) Evaluation, and (5) Using Guidelines. These themes and their related sub-themes can be found in Table 3.

**1. Sharing.** The idea of having different venues to share information and engage in reflection was discussed in some form by all participants. In terms of multiple individuals getting together and sharing, only one person did not mention this form of RP. However, five participants discussed sharing their work through the evaluation community as a form of RP. A

Table 3. *Themes for Research Question 2*

Theme	Sub-Themes	# Discussed
1. Sharing	Sharing with the Evaluation Community Meetings Dialogue / Discussion Steering Committees / Advisory Boards Debriefing/Briefing	19
2. Individual Reflective Practice	Introspection Journaling Voice Memos Checklists Reviewing Resources	18
3. Prevalence	Negotiation Pre-Evaluation Design Implementation Analysis Reporting Post-Evaluation	18
4. Evaluation	Self-Evaluation Metaevaluation/Metaanalysis Feedback	11
5. Using Guidelines	Program Evaluation Standards Guiding Principles Essential Competencies Ethical Codes	3

couple of participants mentioned publishing lessons learned, one of which referred to evaluators in the evaluation community, stating, “I believe it is incumbent on all of them to examine their practices in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to figure out as best they can better ways to evaluate (or train evaluators), to try out and evaluate their new approaches, and along the way to write up and share what they have learned.” Another participant claimed, “To publish, you have to reflect a little.” A few also discussed presenting at conferences regarding similar topics. For example, one participant discussed different sorts of sessions, “One would be sessions on things that haven’t worked... I think we might have sessions on what didn’t work, or we might poll people on things they learned about evaluation that didn’t work and get some publications out.”

With regard to sharing with other individuals, a number of different venues were discussed, including: Meetings, dialogue and discussion, steering committees and advisory boards, and debriefing and briefing. All of these were venues in which participants claimed that evaluation team members, stakeholders, and even outside perspectives such as “sounding boards” or “consultants” could participate in the process. A number of participants discussed team meetings; one person described a recent set of meetings with his team members:

I organized I think three separate meetings where we come together and talk about our individual projects and kind of the lessons learned... what we’ve accomplished and what we’ve learned and what we’ve learned about the evaluation practice specifically from each of those and then tried to develop... ideas about what we’ve learned about evaluation from the past that might need to inform practice in the future.

Another emphasized the notion of having a schedule of times for these meetings:

Let's get together every six weeks or whatever and reflect on what we've learned in the last phase, and kind of as compared to the previous six weeks, what we concluded and all keep a record of that so we can see how we change. But let's make it mindful, if you will. Use that meeting every six weeks, and before the meeting to reflect on what we're learning and how our views have changed on this program or the clients, that sort of thing.

In terms of meetings and discussion with stakeholders, the importance of keeping them on board throughout the process was explored by many participants. An example of this element of RP comes from one person who placed great emphasis on the importance of meetings in evaluation. She said:

Meetings, meetings that as each one goes it's separate way and comes back in, where the findings are shared, and where the thoughts about how this might in some way jeopardize the original intent... I think that's one of the things you do in reflective practice. You have to keep checking that you're looking at the right thing. This is because of the amount of ignorance that we have about the world, about other people, and it's always possible that we're just flat wrong in the way we're going ahead. It's something you have to keep in mind. We just don't know.

One participant discussed these meetings in terms of steering committees, she noted, "I try to use the stakeholders in a steering committee all the way through and get them to sign off on the design phase, and then inform them throughout the data collection phase and try to keep them engaged. I'm trying to get them to own the evaluation."

In the same fashion, with a focus on stakeholders, the notion of debriefing was discussed by some participants. One participant discussed debriefing as a form of RP: "I think debriefing is

in many ways a form of reflection. It just depends on how much you want to structure it. But by doing that, you open it up for greater interpretation, you also open it up for other perspectives that I think makes, makes your data, and makes what you do even richer.” Another discussed the notion of “briefing” the stakeholders:

Well, I think especially what that would look like is that you brief them. You plan very carefully how you’re going to do that. Because until the end of the evaluation, you really don’t know what the bad news is going to be. So... whether there is any of course it goes without saying, there might not be. There may be somewhere in the world of evaluation that does not have any bad news... but if there is I’ve never seen one! So, all I can tell you is that there has to be some circumspection... but the amount of briefings should be really very large. People, they should know where you are. So much of use depends on the fact that people think they’ve been brought along properly. That nobody has end run them, nobody is manipulating them, you see... that kind of thing.

Finally, the idea of getting together with colleagues, consultants, or fellow evaluators to discuss evaluation was mentioned by participants. One discussed her need to gain insight from other individuals. She said:

I have to find people... you know my colleagues from other places, and you know sometimes colleagues from here who just have good insights, to talk through some of the things that I’m thinking about in terms of evaluation design, or an overall strategy... and to get that, just basically peer debriefing... this is what I’m thinking what do you think? You know this is where I see this data going, am I overstretching? You know, do you see it going in a different direction?

Another discussed email and listserv discussions to talk through problems with other evaluators:

I see emails all the time from my colleagues who are on the listserv for independent consultants at AEA, and when anybody has a problem they throw it up there and people start to give examples of things that worked for them, or provide good resources, and so that kind of collaboration is reflection in action. For example, someone says, oh I'm in the middle of a project, I've run into a problem what can I do? Who else has run into this, and what did you do and how can we solve this problem? And sometimes, the ideas that come forward are great, and sometimes they're brand-new.

Another brought up occasional phone calls from other evaluators who needed advice:

Once in a while not too often, I'll call people or people will call me who are evaluators... I'm doing this, what do you think about this idea or that idea? I think we could do that. I think on big projects what we could do, probably midway through if there were enough funding, is have someone consult as an outside evaluator, looking at what we're doing and possible directions or shifts, utility of what we're doing things like that. . All of these things rest on money, of course.

**2. Individual reflective practice.** When it comes to how participants actually use RP in their work, it was not something that was typically done with specific tools in mind. Only a few participants indicated they had actual tools that they used for RP, which were journaling, voice memos, having checklists, and reviewing their notes. Some participants also talked about taking the time to review the different resources that were available to them in the evaluation, such as the literature, past evaluations, and different sources of data. The major theme for individual RP was introspection; many participants thought of RP as “just thinking.”

Introspection was encountered a lot in the way participants discussed questioning themselves during the process of the evaluation and after the evaluation was over. One

participant said, “The basis of reflection is what would I do different?” Another discussed this notion in terms of thinking about how she handled herself during a series of observations. She said, “Following each, reflective examination of common/unique features of the observations, biases I might have had both favorable and unfavorable, missed opportunities, what went well to be repeated, and adjusting plans for the next observation – iteratively.” Another discussed looking back at RFP’s when she does not get awarded them:

I will sit and read the winning proposals and actually do some comparison to my own, and think about... and get a sense of what was really successful about this, what was good? And looking at it from both writing, because writing is really important... the communication aspect... specific sections of the proposal as well as the design itself. What can be done in terms of the design and methodology particularly if it’s different from what I proposed, so I’ll use them in aspects of helping to improve what I’d design and what I put forth for later evaluations.

The clearest example of introspection came from a participant who talked about just thinking about what happened during the course of the day. She noted, “Just sitting in your chair at the end of the day and going what worked well, what didn’t work well, and how am I going to resolve this challenge? I got feedback about something, what do I think about that feedback? So it’s, that’s the kind of ongoing reflective practice. But that’s more informal.”

Three participants talked about keeping journals or keeping track of your thoughts by using index cards. One participant keeps a field book that is partially on paper and partially in audio format:

Well part of it is I keep a journal. So I actually have, and this is a function of long training in qualitative research, I keep a field book and I also, half my field book now is



digital because... I carry an iPod touch with me everywhere and then I will often use – especially when you're driving and you have a two hour drive to go to collect data, and then you've got that two hour drive home... it's a really good opportunity to just ramble into like voice memo, and put down things. I also make a point of trying to do, in between interviews that I do I don't like to go to stray from one interview to the next, I will sit and just make some quick off the top of my head notes... that are reactive notes to what I just heard. And that helps me then when I interview the next person because when I'm starting to think about things that I may want to be looking for and things that I want to follow up with.

Another participant talked about writing stream of consciousness every day, "Just whatever's in your head. I've been doing that for ten years and it's very fruitful. It could be anything that I'm thinking about, but I find that a lot of my problems are solved without really thinking about them. The solution just emerges." Also, another participant discussed an idea she had read about for keeping track of assumptions: "He proposes a system for monitoring how your reactions and assumptions are changing. It's just basically keeping track of them on index cards."

One respondent talked about checklists that she keeps in mind for when she is doing certain types of work. She said, "One of the things I've done is just sort of have checklists or key points... things that I want to not forget for a certain project. Like I was making sure that I've checked in with all of the stakeholders that it's feasible for me to check in with and I'm not just rushing forward. You know if I have some key things that I know can be my weaknesses that I try to just sort of keep tabs on." Another talked about an evaluation checklist of things to ask oneself during the evaluation process, "If you look at a tool for example like the key evaluation checklist and you go through that for an evaluation, and you know you have to go through it

again, and again, and again. It's something that stimulates critical thinking that is a critical element of reflective practice."

Finally, a few participants talked about RP involving reviewing different resources available to them. One participant noted reviewing the literature as a potential source for RP, "I think if you look at the literature, you do a better job of understanding a whole bunch of things and how to do them. So it makes you a better practitioner, if that's reflection, so be it." Another talked about keeping up with the literature to be a better practitioner, "I think evaluators, and this is true for any social science discipline or even the natural sciences or whatever it may be... but kind of keeping up with the current practices and trends and issues that arise and educating oneself." Other participants discussed triangulating with data, past evaluations done by those who came before, and knowledge of clients and programs from past evaluations they had worked on.

**3. Prevalence.** The extent to which participants claimed RP is used in evaluation was reflected throughout the evaluation process, from pre-evaluation until after the evaluation is over. 18 of 19 participants demonstrated or explicitly stated that RP is used in all stages of the evaluation process. However, some of the specific stages of evaluation that participants discussed were: negotiation, pre-evaluation, design, implementation, analysis, reporting, and post-evaluation.

11 participants offered descriptive answers to the question of where RP fits into the evaluation process. One discussed the idea of reflecting throughout the process in order to not make mistakes. He said, "I try to integrate it with, I mean I've learned over the years that I need to do it as part of the process. That I can't divorce it, it's... I guess it's my nature now. I've

learned you have to reflect on things or else you'll make more mistakes.” Another participant discussed using RP for learning and improving their work:

It's one of those weird things because you're saying when would I use it, and I use it, I think I use it all the time. You know... so I'm always kind of thinking about, okay what will we learn if we do things this way... what have I learned in my past experiences that's going to predict how I'm gonna do it again the next time around...? Like, I guess you just, you always would be using that to... improve on your work.

One participant discussed using RP throughout and being honest with yourself, “I think you have to be throughout the time you're conducting an evaluation... honest with yourself about how it's going and thinking about what you've done and how it could be improved for the current evaluation or how it could be changed in future evaluations to make the process work better.” Other participants used phrases such as “something that I use in order to do my day-to-day practice better,” “it's a part of all that I do,” “I think the evaluator does it in everything he does,” and “for me reflection has to be built into evaluation.”

Some participants described RP through the stages of evaluation. One participant described the use of RP from the request for proposals stage to results:

Well I mean I think we do, I think, as I do find it I think that I am reflective in every project in every stage of the project. So, you know, it starts when you get an RFP to respond to... you have to kind of look at it, okay what are they asking for, is what they want even reasonable... and then you know in the middle of the project you have to kind of look and say was what we proposed, does it really work in a real life situation, and how do we have to change it? And then at the end you have to look at your results and

look at what you did and give, kind of a caveat if you will, to study design and what you can and can't claim based on your results.

Another participant discussed RP starting from implementation to report writing and interpretation:

I think you have to do it throughout. So it begins with the planning, but then also let's say you start your evaluation implementation... you start collecting data. You may... like whether you are piloting and testing your instrument, and get feedback that way, and get feedback from actual participants on reflection... that's a form of reflective practice. Whether you have to change the evaluation midway... during the reporting it's a matter of internally when we are doing reports we do reports a lot with planning on what should be in a report, how do we interpret it... I mean one thing is people doing data analysis of different parts of an evaluation, but what does it mean together, and for the whole data interpretation. Again, sharing... team meetings with clients, in that process but then also during the report writing... Simple track changes from each other on the report. Because there's always stuff that people either don't understand or that is very different from client to client. I'm working with such a broad range of clients that the reports that I'm writing are looking very different depending on the clients that I'm having and I only know that through reflective practice. Not by using our standard templates and writing reports.

One participant also described using RP beginning at the design stage and going through engaging stakeholders and team members about the findings:

Well I would say it's at probably every step. I mean when you're designing it, you're looking at it from multiple ways, you see the evaluation's really going to be useful, and

then once... when you're designing your data instruments, data collection instruments, when you get to actually interpreting the data and you know the analysis, that's a really key point to look at, making the link from the findings to what does it mean and getting multiple perspectives on that. And that's where reflective practice would engage beyond your own evaluation team to reflective practice with the clients and you know with possibly other people.

**4. Evaluation.** Some participants made the analogy of RP to evaluating yourself or your own work. This came up as being as formal as metaevaluation or metaanalysis and as informal as just evaluating yourself or getting feedback from stakeholders on how to improve for next time. It also came up in the sense of either being a tool for reflection or a conceptualization of RP as noted in Research Question One. A participant noted that the researcher of this study should “make an analogy between metaevaluation and reflective practice.”

One participant discussed metaevaluation having two “senses.” She said:

Well then you get into this whole notion of metaevaluation in the other sense of the word, because there's two senses – I see metaevaluation used two different ways - one is to say I'm gonna take a bunch of evaluations and I'm gonna put them together and say what's the net impact of this program or whatever it is the evaluations are looking at? And then the other sort of metaevaluation, which I think Scriven writes about, is the notion of looking back and saying where were the flaws in what I did?

One participant claimed that a method of RP would be metaevaluation. She stated, “Another formal method would be an actual metaevaluation where you hire somebody or some group to review your work as you're doing it.”

Other participants looked at the idea of evaluating their work as they go. One participant claimed, “I define it as basically evaluating what I do. So it’s the sort of meta... meta-way of doing your work, metaevaluation; which can happen both formally and informally. Reflective practice, it’s about not making assumptions that you know what you’re... that you know what you’re doing.” Participants also discussed getting feedback from participants for improvement. One participant discussed the idea of interviewing stakeholders to learn what could be improved about the evaluation. He said,

You could indicate when you start a project that you will periodically go to the people being evaluated or those funding it and come back to them maybe with a short 10 to 15 minute interview about four or five questions as you’re in practice. I think we could do that routinely. I didn’t do enough of that but I think we could easily do that. That would be one way I could see of using reflection, ask them to reflect on the process, ask them to reflect on findings and stuff like that... And so yeah I think – we could do a lot more of that. I’ve seen a couple people do that and I think it’s a good idea.

**5. Using guidelines.** To a small extent, the established guidelines for program evaluators were discussed in the interviews, including: The Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011), the Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators (Stevahn, King, Ghore, & Minnema, 2005), the American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles (American Evaluation Association, 2013), and ethical codes of conduct. One participant claimed that, “Looking at these gives you a chance to reflect and to see if your gut feeling is right about something. They can help you reflect and try to analyze the problem you are facing.” She also noted, “I would look at the Program Standards or Guiding Principles to help

me out if I'm in some kind of an ethical conflict situation.” Another participant discussed using Standards throughout their evaluation work:

On a more formal level, I negotiate up front with clients to ground a projected evaluation in the Joint Committee Standards, do what I can to instruct the client group in the Standards, formally include the Standards in the evaluation contract, recommend to the client that they contract separately for a metaevaluation of my evaluation, use the standards to guide my evaluation work, and include in the final report an attestation of the extent to which each of the 30 individual standards was or was not met.

**Research Question Three: In what ways do evaluators perceive reflective practice as having a collaborative element in evaluation?**

18 out of 19 participants saw a collaborative element to the RP process in evaluation. The one who did not discuss collaboration noted:

Personally, I hope we can abandon the soft rhetoric of “reflection” in evaluation and, instead, turn serious attention to the more professionally apt concepts of evaluation standards, guiding principles, internal metaevaluation, independent metaevaluation, evaluation-oriented leaders who expect and regularly employ standards and metaevaluations, and professional evaluators who regularly act like professionals in gearing and subjecting their evaluations to standards-based metaevaluations.

His perception was that RP should be abandoned, and instead we should focus on evaluation of our work, using the standards as a rigorous guide.

With regard to those who discussed collaboration in terms of RP, 13 participants started discussing the collaborative element of RP before the interviewer asked, four of which brought up collaboration early on in their definition of RP. One participant stated that RP is a “very

participatory process” where you have an evaluation team and ongoing communication with clients. Another respondent distinguished between collaboration and self-oriented reflection; she said, “And so I think there’s one level at which you have your own process of reflective practice but equally important is how you engage other people in the process.” Another defined it as more of a tool for evaluation, stating, “So, reflective practice for me is a process for having people share stories about whatever the phenomenon of interest is... whatever the practice is that we are focusing on and reflect together on what patterns there are in those stories and what they... what actions are implied by the patterns that come out of it.”

The major themes for this question are broken up a little differently based on the varied ways participants answered the collaborative questions. In the analyses of the former two research questions the number of respondents was broken up in terms of themes, as sub-themes tended to overlap. In this research question sub-themes were very different. Table 4 breaks up the number of respondents who talked about sub-themes. (1) The first theme regards who is involved in the collaborative process, including stakeholders or clients, evaluation team members, and colleagues. (2) The second is whether these collaborative elements are formal or informal. Finally, (3) the third theme focuses on the purpose of the collaboration, including feedback/learning and thinking together. These themes can be found in Table 4 below.

**1. Who is included?** 15 participants discussed stakeholders or clients specifically as part of the collaborative RP process. A number of participants talked about involving stakeholders in the evaluation processes. One participant said, “More reflection could be devoted to the relationship with the stakeholders and what they are going to use and how they would use it and so on. And how you are relating to them, you know, how their reaction to you, how you can improve your value to them, and to others.” Another participant discussed the need for



Table 4. *Themes for Research Question 3*

Theme	Sub-Themes	# Discussed
1. Who is included?	Stakeholders / Clients	15
	Team members	14
	Colleagues	6
2. Formality	Formal	13
	Informal	11
3. Purpose	Feedback/Learning	14
	Thinking Together	6

stakeholders to be involved, noting that if they are not, then RP is not going to happen:

Yeah, I mean there has to be some stakeholder involvement. And the lower the stakeholder involvement, the less reflective practice, you know... if it's really a matter of, well you're the expert, just do it, you do what you're supposed to do... there may still be reflective practice within the internal team... but the end result of the evaluation is likely not going to be as good as otherwise. And with good meaning evaluation that is useful, and you know valuable to the stakeholders.

Another participant talked about stakeholder involvement in order to understand what their needs and wants are:

I think that's something that we need to build in upfront so that the stakeholders are involved in defining the indicators that are most important. And it's, it's interesting over the years how at one point it was, oh you're doing the evaluation, you define what's important, and then you tell us whether we made a difference... And now it's much more collaborative... it's, help me understand, as the evaluator help me understand what's important to you, what's important in the community and let's make sure that we look at those.

Participants also discussed RP in the context of evaluation teams. A couple of participants noted the importance of teams in RP. One stated, "I can't imagine any evaluator not working in a team. I can't imagine any evaluator working in isolation and if that's the case then the evaluator has to be reflective of what has gone before, what is going on now, and what could happen." Another described RP, saying, "There cannot be any reflective practice process without the collaborative element. I mean if it's just you reflecting on your own, well that's great... you know. It's like you're swimming in your own sweat. You are not... your boundaries are the

boundaries of your reflective practice. But collaboration brings the strengths of other team members.”

A few participants discussed using teams more frequently in their evaluations. One participant noted:

I’ve increasingly moved to always having teams of people working on evaluation so that the people together are interacting and thinking about what’s going on and challenging, and the interpretation of results and putting it, taking it from multiple perspectives. That’s kind of important, that’s one dimension of the process of reflective practice is to ensure that you’re seeing it from multiple points of view and perspectives and values. So that would be a part of it is doing it with other people.

Another discussed meetings for updates on projects and for sparking new ideas:

We routinely have meetings where we update each other on how different projects are going. We bring people in and out of different projects to help out in various ways. We’re constantly looking at the approaches that we have been developing and trying to protocol-ize so that others may be able use them and asking ourselves how they are faring as we are doing this kind of stuff. Sometimes these discussions go “down the rabbit hole” and we get into all sorts of very interesting philosophical or tangential discussions. We do allow ourselves a certain latitude to play with ideas and the implications of ideas for our practice. So one of the big things that happens to us is we share and nurture new ideas.

Some participants also discussed having colleagues to turn to with questions about evaluation. Some people reported having “sounding boards” or “liaisons” that they talked to about their evaluation experiences. One participant talked about this as a direct source of RP. He said this about a colleague he works with: “He is my sounding board, we talk back and forth and

he asks a lot of questions and so that's where that reflective process occurs." Another talked about reflecting with a colleague on a project, she said:

We would really sit and think about the project, and think about our experience with it. And how each of us interacted and what we took away from it... the perspectives that we took away from our interactions, and we would share them and they were often different because we brought different viewpoints to the situation in the first place. And, I think that that is one of the greatest values is that when you are engaged in reflection, it is an internal process that reflects your personal worldview and your personal belief system and the context that you bring to the situation. So when you have, when you collaborate, particularly when, I think more so when people are very different... even when you're the same you still bring something, everybody brings something unique to, to the interaction. And, we would use reflection to actually improve the efforts that we were doing together.

In that instance, the participant brought up diversity in colleagues, which was noted by one other participant who stated, "I seek diversity and try, for reflective practice, to avoid people likely to agree with me for whatever reason. It is a great honor if someone will make the time for a thorough discussion, challenge, & critique. Treasure these beyond rubies!"

**2. Formality.** In the context of collaboration in RP, 13 participants talked about formal settings for RP and 11 discussed informal settings. There was a bit of overlap since, depending on context, nine discussed both formal and informal settings for collaboration.

Formality typically consisted of making sure to set aside time for these reflective processes through meetings. One participant noted, "We purposefully find it essential to get together and reflect on things. There's no question about it. If we didn't make that a priority it

wouldn't necessarily happen." Participants talked about having set schedules for these types of meetings as well. One noted:

My preference is for frequent meetings over the annual report – nine to ten weeks, and sometimes as much as 12, although I don't like to go as long as a quarter. Where we sit down and say typically here's what I've got so far, let's take a look at it see... what it's telling us. And then we work together, but we're working to meet together to meet the program and the client's learning needs.

The more informal ways of collaborating were mentioned more frequently as just having people to go to for RP when things come up. Some participants noted that RP shouldn't be something that is too structured; otherwise it may not work as well. One participant said generally, "I think having multiple kind of heads together around approaches, considerations, it just helps you not overlook something, and it's been you know obviously the more... the more minds you can have looking at projects the better the results gonna be." Another referred to just learning through conversation, "I'm more likely to have learned a lesson from having an insight come through discussion and through conversation." Another framed the informal process with just knowing who they are working with, both on the team and in terms of the stakeholders. She said:

Okay, so I guess with respect to fellow evaluators I think I need to understand their reflections and where they're coming from... for us to be able to work in any kind of way. And I guess the same, the same for the other kind of situation, participatory evaluation. It's a question of do I really understand this person... and where he's situated, and where he's coming from. What are the agenda items and how did we get there?

**3. Purpose.** Although the purpose of RP in evaluative processes was discussed in Research Question One, it is important to discuss what the purpose of *collaborative* RP was for participants as well. The most prevalent theme was collaboration for learning and/or feedback while some participants also discussed thinking as a purpose of collaboration.

In terms of learning and feedback, participants discussed both their own learning and feedback as well as the stakeholder's learning. One participant discussed the idea of coming back to the stakeholders for constant revision during the evaluation. She said:

Probably at every stage and every proposed activity, we are always coming back to them with a need to revise... not because we're lazy or don't want to do what we said we're gonna do, but we just learned something going through the process, that well what you thought was going on was not really what was going on. So in reality, these are the constraints that we are operating under. So when we come together, we kind of revise our approach or we revise our methodology, where we're constantly kind of revising what we are doing to make sure that at the end of the day we get meaningful data. And so I think that it goes on as the project goes on.

The same participant discussed coming back to stakeholders so that they could learn about the results:

And at the end it's definitely important because you have to educate everybody to know what you learned, what you can conclude from these results, what you can't conclude from these results, you know what could've been done differently I guess... If it's gonna be done next time, what we can do next time to make it better I guess.

Other participants discussed the idea of constant feedback for improvement as well. One participant said that they structure their meetings for purposeful reflection on learning. Another

said it is “constant analysis of what’s going on in an evaluation and getting feedback from people.” Yet another discussed evaluation team members learning from each other during these collaborative sessions. He said:

We tend to work pretty collaboratively ourselves and very often we’re going to have multiple people on our teams who are going to be coming in and out of different phases of an evaluation, while some people will be there throughout the whole thing. We do a lot of experimenting and bring promising ideas and tools back to our XXXX group and reflect on what’s happening and learn from each other about how this stuff plays out while we work in multiple contexts.

Others talked about gaining deeper understanding of findings, information, and contexts in the evaluation process.

Some participants discussed the idea of thinking together in the context of RP. One participant talked about this element with regard to making sure everyone is on the same page. She said, “I think it could be very beneficial, in a collaborative situation to make sure that everybody is on the same, the same page and has the same expectations, and... really kind of to work through any differing expectations I guess.”

Another participant talked about coming to a shared understanding of a situation. She noted:

You’re very certain about what you saw and about what you believe and about what this is, and then you know this is the reality. And then you talk to somebody else who thought completely different, and you have to negotiate. Now the two of you have to negotiate, so what was the truth as both of us saw it? Not as each of us saw it, but as both of us saw it.”

For this participant the process was looked at as thinking together to create new meaning.

Another participant made note of talking with her evaluation team members and how that strengthens the evaluation work. She said that collaborative RP adds a lot of depth:

For example, I can't know all of the workplace politics that are going on behind the scenes, or recent management decisions that have had an impact on people's attitudes.

They are there on the ground and they know what's going on. So they see it much more from a specific perspective and I'm seeing it more at an abstract level such as a cultural issue or an environmental issue. When you put the two perspectives together, you put some meat on the bones I think.

### **Training in Reflective Practice**

Participants were all asked if they thought evaluators should receive any sort of formal training in RP. 11 believed that there should be formal training, five were unsure, and three believed that there is no need for formal training in RP.

One participant who disagreed with the need for training in RP claimed that we need to focus on rigorous training of evaluators and that reflection would come naturally with it. He stated, "I see no need for formal courses and practicums in reflection, but I do see needs for such courses and field experiences in professional standards for evaluations and metaevaluation. If we do the latter, rigorous processes of reflection will be inherent in the application of standards, conduct of metaevaluations, and uses of metaevaluation findings." The other two who did not think that evaluators should receive training in RP felt that it is already built into what evaluators do. One claimed:

To me, reflection... critical reflection... critical analysis... reflective practice is an inherent part of science. Not an add-on. It's inherent to it. From the start of educating children on how scientists work, how to do science, reflection ought to be part of the



process they use... back to the days when you're doing your first science fair experiment, all the way through. If you are teaching evaluation then reflective practice ought to be inherent, infused so that there's no need for kind of a special course or special attention to reflective practice. It ought to be like breathing. But you know that's possibly not what happens.

The other suggested, "I think it comes with the territory. I think its part of the process of doing an evaluation... it's so totally involved in everything you do." However, these two individuals believed that RP ought to be integrated into the training that evaluators already receive.

With regard to those who were unsure about RP, they were categorized this way either because they did not know what the training would look like or because they thought that it is good to get training but the extent of that training should be integration into coursework. One participant said:

You could do it, especially in an evaluation planning course. You could show, probably develop reflective prompts for evaluators to consider as they are going through the process. You could do it after the fact, ask them to go back through. There are a variety of ways you could build it in, you can talk about reflective practice I guess in a first course, a theory course and so on, but I think it would fit much better into a practice course. And that's where I would put it.

Another participant talked about being unsure of how to structure a course in RP. She said:

I think that if you have good coursework that uses critical thinking or reflective practice then it is an integral part of the whole education. I'm not sure how I would structure a course around reflective practice... there could be such a course, I think it would be cool... but would it be the bread and butter of evaluation training... I think in terms of

rating the importance here, there are probably other things that are more important and reflective practice can be a part of those.

Both those who were unsure about training in RP and those who said yes believed that the application of RP in practice is what is really important. One participant said, “I would want us to be using those kinds of approaches, especially when they’re rooted in the real world practice experience. That’s the kind of stuff where I think you’re going to get some real excitement and not so much what I would think of as training.” He also added, “There certainly should be experiences that are conscious and deliberately constructed that are designed to provide you with a forum where you can develop your ability to think critically or be a reflective practitioner.”

Of those who said yes, a few gave suggestions as to what that training might look like. Participants suggested venues such as: brown bag seminars, webinars, books, preconference workshops and other professional development, and a couple discussed the option of a course in RP. One participant said:

You can never underestimate what people don’t understand. So my first reaction was gonna be no, anybody knows how to reflect... but maybe they don’t you know, and who wants to chance it? You know, I think picking a couple of themes on what to reflect on... you know work with stakeholders, and your data... and then people sharing stories about reflecting, and role modeling reflecting on something would be helpful to students and practitioners.

Another participant articulated the idea of application, saying, “So, I guess my point is that I think that training in that has to be very applied. People experience it. They experience reflective practice. They experience the benefit of getting other people’s point of view on it and they do it

in that context of seeing the bigger systems and work that they're doing." Another participant discussed the importance of these non-technical skills to the profession, "So, yeah I do think that it should, these kinds of things, beyond technical skills, are an important part of an evaluation program. Unfortunately I don't think we do very much of it either." Participants also suggested role playing and role modeling as good ways to teach RP to professional evaluators.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an analysis of the major research questions in this study. Overall, participants conceptualized RP as both an intuitive and purposeful learning process that includes thinking, questioning, self-awareness, and multiple perspectives. Participants reported using RP for sharing with others or with the evaluation community, for thinking about their work, for evaluation of their work, and through the use of professional guidelines. Participants reported that RP is not specific to any part of the evaluation process but is instead used throughout the evaluation as well as after the fact. With regard to a collaborative element, participants discussed involving stakeholders and evaluation clients, evaluation team members, and colleagues in the process of RP, both formally and informally. Typically they collaborated for the purpose of feedback or learning and for thinking through the evaluation together. The collaborative element of RP ran through each of this study's research questions through multiple perspectives and sharing. 11 participants believed that there should be some formal training in RP while three were against the idea. Participants converged on most of the major themes of this study, although some participants had slightly varied perspectives on what RP is and its importance in evaluation.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This research study sought to gain insight into the state of the discipline of evaluation regarding practitioners understanding and application of reflective practice (RP). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine how professional evaluators view RP, the extent and manner in which they engage in RP behaviors, and how evaluators conceptualize whether RP efforts affect, if at all, the evaluation process. The findings of this study were presented in detail in Chapter 4. The conclusions that can be drawn from the findings in Chapter 4 are presented by research question and discussed below. Implications for practitioners in evaluation and recommendations for future research on RP follow the findings.

### **Findings**

#### **Findings for Research Question One**

Six major themes were found for Research Question One, “How do professional evaluators conceptualize the notion of reflective practice as it relates to their evaluation work?”

(1) The first theme was learning, where the major conceptualization of RP was as a learning process. Participants discussed getting continuous feedback and continually seeking to improve their work. Some participants also equated metaevaluation or metaanalysis to RP. Many participants discussed stakeholder learning and capacity building and the need for evaluators to facilitate stakeholder learning in evaluation. (2) The second major theme addressed having multiple perspectives in the RP process. Respondents discussed multiple perspectives in terms of collaboration with others as well as triangulating data and looking at different sources of information.

(3) The third major theme came out of a question that was asked to every participant: whether they believed that RP is an intuitive or purposeful process. Over half of the participants believed that RP is both an intuitive and a purposeful process, and there were a number of participants who thought RP is something that is purposefully done. Two participants thought that it is just an intuitive part of the way they operate.

(4) The fourth major theme was the idea of “just thinking” as a conceptualization of RP. Participants discussed thinking back on previous experiences, critically or evaluatively thinking alone or with others, and understanding the context of the program or the evaluation. (5) In terms of the fifth theme, questioning, respondents also used a lot of hypothetical questioning and discussed questioning as a conceptualization of RP. These came in the form of general questioning, questioning of the process, and questioning for improvement, and they were questions they either asked themselves or collaborators (i.e. evaluation team, stakeholders). (6) The final theme was self-awareness. Some participants conceptualized RP as a way of being aware of yourself both personally and professionally. This meant knowing “where you are coming from,” in terms of worldview, previous experiences, and biases.

### **Findings for Research Question Two**

Research Question Two was, “In what ways do professional evaluators engage in behaviors associated with reflective practice?” When participants discussed ways in which they used RP in their evaluation practice, five major themes emerged. (1) The first theme addressed sharing. Some participants talked about sharing experiences and insights with the evaluation community through presentations and publications. Many respondents talked about having meetings with both stakeholders and evaluation team members. More informally, participants talked about having dialogue and discussion with others as well. Some discussed having steering

committees or advisory boards for advice and providing direction in their practice. Finally, a few participants talked about briefing and debriefing stakeholders and team members during the process of the evaluation.

(2) When discussing RP, the second major theme surrounded the individualized processes that participants discussed. Many participants elaborated on introspection as a way of reflecting. Some talked about keeping journals or voice memos, and others talked about keeping checklists as reminders during their practice. Some participants also talked about reviewing resources and keeping up with the literature as reflective behaviors. (3) In terms of the third theme, prevalence of RP, participants discussed it as being something that happens all the way through the evaluation process as well as after the evaluation is over. Some respondents mentioned different stages as examples, such as negotiation, design, implementation, analysis, and reporting. (4) In terms of the fourth major theme, participants discussed evaluation of their work, whether it was in terms of feedback for improvement, self-evaluation, or formally as metaevaluation. These were viewed by respondents as tools or behaviors associated with RP. (5) Finally, a few participants brought up the fifth theme, using established guidelines as tools for reflection.

### **Findings for Research Question Three**

Many participants associated a collaborative element of RP in evaluation. There were three major themes that emerged for Research Question Three, “In what ways do evaluators perceive reflective practice as having a collaborative element in evaluation?” Only one participant did not discuss collaboration as a part of RP. (1) The first major theme addressed who was included in collaborative RP efforts. Participants talked about including stakeholders and evaluation clients in the RP process for learning, both for evaluation improvement and for program improvement, and to keep them aware of how the evaluation was going. Respondents

also talked about including evaluation team members as part of RP as well as including colleagues and peers in RP; people who are not necessarily a part of the evaluation but are just “sounding boards” or “liaisons” to go to with ideas or for inspiration.

(2) The second major theme of collaboration was formality. There were a number of formal processes participants used for collaborative RP, such as meetings and setting up times for debriefing and discussion. Informally, participants focused on just having people to talk to when they needed to. Some participants talked about RP needing to not be too formal as the nature of it is really to just be able to think things through. (3) The final theme surrounded the purpose of collaboration where participants discussed using RP for feedback or just thinking together in general.

### **Discussion**

Participants in this study were not provided with a definition of RP, as they were told to provide their own conceptualization of RP in their work. This was met with uneasiness for most of the respondents, as only a few were familiar with literature on RP. This uneasiness expressed by participants was not surprising, as the assumption was that evaluators may not be able to define RP outright, but they probably use RP in their work in some form or fashion. All participants had to construct their own definition, and their definitions were in line with the literature on the topic, as addressed further below. This shows that although participants are not using the words “reflective practice,” they are engaging in the behaviors associated with the notion and can now label those behaviors in their practice. Some specific behaviors include introspection, questioning, critical thinking, sharing with others, including multiple perspectives in evaluation efforts, and evaluating their own work for improvement.

Participants' interview responses and the themes that emerged can be associated with the theoretical framework (Figure 1) and supporting literature introduced in Chapter Two. Firstly, participants' conceptualizations of RP were in line with both the essential competencies for program evaluators (Stevahn, King, Ghore, & Minnema, 2005) and the Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). The essential competencies reflect the notion that RP is an individualized process for self-awareness and professional development. The Program Evaluation Standards encourage RP and include stakeholders in the evaluation process. Participants of the current study provided responses that reflected both of these professional guidelines.

It is also important to note that Patton (2012) expressed suspicion with regard to how much evaluators actually use RP in their evaluation work, stating "in speeches and workshops at professional evaluation association meetings, I like to ask for a show of hands of those who systematically reflect on evaluations they have conducted for learning and further professional development. Few hands go up; in fact, no one raises a hand" (p. 400). Interestingly, participants in this study claimed to be engaging in behaviors associated with RP, as those discussed above, but it is unclear how "systematic" those behaviors are. Many participants claimed that RP has to be purposeful, but a number of the behaviors and concepts expressed in the interviews were not systematic. Some examples of systematic behaviors from participants were journaling and memoing, creating checklists, sharing experiences with the evaluation community, and perhaps having meetings with teams and stakeholders to discuss findings; however, the label of RP for those behaviors appeared to be more of an afterthought than an explicit association.

Participants' responses and the themes that emerged also have a direct association to the theoretical framework (Figure 1) provided in Chapter Two. The theoretical framework first



defined RP as critical and deliberate inquiry into professional practice in order to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, others, and the meaning that is shared among individuals (Forrester, 2010; Peters, 1991; Schön, 1983). This definition is generally consistent with participant responses. Exploring further, the framework established two conceptualizations of RP in evaluation, self-oriented and collaborative. Self-oriented RP was defined in terms of the elements of self-awareness, professional growth, and ethical awareness (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristigueta, 2013; Kundin, 2010; Morris, 2008; Newman & Brown, 1996; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Stevahn et al., 2005). Collaborative RP was defined in terms of the elements of dialogue, stakeholder involvement, and organizational learning (Abma et al., 2001; Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Brandon, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Forss et al., 1994; Greene, 2001; Patton, 1998; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000; Ryan & DeStefano, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

Participants discussed both a self-oriented and a collaborative element to the RP process. With regard to the self-oriented conceptualization, participants discussed a need to be self-aware, citing the need to know who they are as evaluators, the skills they bring to the table, the biases and lenses in which they view the world, and to keep in mind their previous experiences. Participants also talked about professional growth. They focused on gaining feedback and doing evaluation of their own work with an eye toward improvement. With regard to ethics, only one participant explicitly mentioned ethical situations, although a number of participants discussed being aware of biases and how they impact practice, and a few brought up being aware of and using the established guidelines in their practice.

With regard to the collaborative conceptualization, most participants did not use the term “dialogue” to discuss their communication with stakeholders and evaluation team members, but they did talk about ongoing discussions, team meetings, getting together to critically think about the evaluation, and gaining a collective perspective of their experiences in the evaluation environment. Many participants discussed involving stakeholders in their evaluation endeavors from the beginning of projects until the end, and including their opinions in the process. They discussed use of the evaluation as increasing because of this involvement. Finally, with regard to organizational learning, participants talked indirectly about this concept, but emphasized the notion of stakeholders learning about the evaluation (i.e. evaluation capacity building) and the programs that they operate in.

Overall, participants’ conceptualization of RP appears to be above and beyond the call of duty presented by the essential competencies for program evaluators described by Stevahn and her colleagues (2005). Specifically, all three research questions encompassed the notion of collaborative RP, where evaluators are including multiple perspectives (Research Question One), sharing ideas with others (Research Question Two), and collaborating with stakeholders, team members, and colleagues with an eye toward learning and improving practice (Research Question Three). This element of reflective practice relates directly back to the concepts presented by Schön (1983), Isaacs (1999), Gergen (2009), and Peters (1999), where RP necessitates multiple perspectives. The stated competency defined by Stevahn and colleagues (2005) appears to only rest on self-awareness and professional development. However, the participants of this study are not alone in their conceptualization of RP as collaborative. Theoretical literature on RP highlights the need for collaboration for organizational learning, evaluation capacity building, and to enhance evaluation use (Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Jones &

Stubbe, 2004; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill, Zuckerman, & Matthews, 2003; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Torres, Stone, Butkus, Hook, Casey, & Arens, 2000).

### **Implications for Practice**

Although the findings of this study are limited to 19 highly experienced evaluation professionals, they are in line with theoretical literature on the topic of RP. These findings have implications for (1) how professional evaluators label RP in evaluation, (2) including a more systematic approach to RP in evaluation, (3) ensuring professional evaluators build time into evaluation for reflection, both alone and with others, and (4) training professional evaluators in RP and its associated behaviors.

With regard to labeling, it may be time for evaluators to find the words to talk about RP as a structured or purposeful part of their practice. Participants in this study could very easily discuss the times when they reflect during and after their practice, but the vocabulary to see that as an important part of how you operate in practice has not been readily available. This study provides insight with regard to how the day-to-day evaluation process necessitates the use of RP, and that evaluators use it as a part of everyday life. A revision of Stevahn and colleagues' (2005) essential competency would give evaluators a way to talk about RP in their practice, thus making it a more explicit part of their work.

A revision of the essential competency as not only more encompassing, but also more systematic, seems to be necessary in light of both the theoretical literature and the findings of this research. Participants discussed the idea that if RP was more purposeful then the evaluation would improve and the stakeholders would use the results of the evaluation more because of it. Similarly, the literature suggests that evaluators can utilize reflection in order to improve many

facets of evaluation including enhancing evaluation use, strengthening evaluation findings, and as a tool for organizational learning and improvement (Bronn & Bronn, 2000; Jones & Stubbe, 2004; Preskill, 2004; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Preskill et al., 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001).

It is also important to note that it seems essential for evaluators to build time into their evaluation efforts for RP both alone and with others (both stakeholders and the evaluation team). Most participants in this study spent a lot of time discussing the need to reflect together to gain more perspectives, to have people to think critically with, and for learning and improvement. Building this time into evaluation activities could improve the process for both stakeholders and evaluators alike. Finally, the findings of this study make explicit the potential benefits of training in RP behaviors and processes. This could include training in communication and facilitation skills, training in self-oriented reflection skills such as journaling or note-taking, and training in metaevaluation. Training in these processes could happen both at the doctoral level as well as at the professional development and training level.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study represents the first of its kind, in that there has been little research that focuses specifically on RP in program evaluation. However, this study provides a stepping stone for a series of potential future research projects. The following are five recommendations for future research on the concept of RP in evaluation based on the findings of this study: (1) The study should be replicated with less experienced evaluators in order to gain insight into their initial perspectives of RP in the evaluation process. More recently trained evaluators may have more training or awareness of RP in evaluation. There may be a number of differences between new evaluators as compared to more experienced evaluators, as they have been brought into the field

with a different lens with regard to evaluation practice. This field has recently become increasingly popular and important in the age of accountability, and more focus has been given to stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process (e.g. Patton, 2012). (2) Looking at the perspectives of RP in evaluation from different countries who have different sets of competencies may be beneficial to our understanding of the importance of RP in evaluation work. (3) It would also be valuable to understand the differences between males and females with regard to their use of RP in evaluation. (4) It would be beneficial to follow up this study with a quantitative examination of evaluators' views and uses of RP in evaluation. (5) Finally, the field would benefit from case study research on evaluators, where they participate in either journaling or collaborative RP over the course of an evaluation project and assess their behaviors and opinions in order to gain insight into how that implementation affected their practice. This case study approach may provide further understanding of the "affect" of RP on the evaluation and program processes. The current study found that evaluators believe that RP "improves" the process in a number of ways, but what RP specifically affects in the evaluation/program process could be explored in further depth.

### **Conclusion**

This study offers initial insights into how professional evaluators conceptualize and use RP in their evaluation efforts. Overall, the findings of this study are in line with the theoretical literature on the topic. According to the literature as well as participant responses, RP is critical and deliberate inquiry into professional practice in order to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, others, and the meaning that is shared among individuals. This can happen during practice and after the fact, and can either be done alone or with others. The need for further a

new and more systematic way of viewing RP in evaluation, the need for time to engage in RP, and the need for training in RP skills are key implications for practice.

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**APPENDIX**

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Email**

Title of Email:

Invitation to Participate in an Interview about Your Experience with Reflective Practice

Body of Email:

Hello,

My name is Tiffany Smith, and I am a doctoral student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement at the University of Tennessee working on my dissertation research. You have been suggested as a participant by \_\_\_\_\_ for a brief interview in order for me to gain a deeper understanding of evaluator perceptions regarding how they think and reflect about their evaluation practice.

This interview will last approximately an hour, and we can either talk on the phone or via Skype, whichever you would prefer. In order to be able to get the most depth of data, I hope to record the interview.

These interviews will be confidential, and your participation in this study is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this interview, please reply to this email with your contact information and some times that would be convenient for you to participate. I know it is a busy time of year, but I was hoping to schedule your interview for the beginning weeks in December.

Thank you so much for your time!

Tiffany Smith

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Tiffany Smith, Doctoral Candidate  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Graduate Student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement  
Educational Psychology and Research  
[tsmith92@utk.edu](mailto:tsmith92@utk.edu)

**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Follow-Up Email**

Title of Email:

REMINDER - Invitation to Participate in an Interview about Your Experience with Reflective Practice

Body of Email:

Hello!

My name is Tiffany Smith, and I am a doctoral student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement at the University of Tennessee working on my dissertation research. As indicated in a previous email, you have been suggested by \_\_\_\_\_ for participation in a brief interview in order for me to gain a deeper understanding of evaluator perceptions regarding how they think and reflect about their evaluation practice. I know we are quickly approaching the holidays, so I wanted to remind you that I am still seeking participants for my research.

This interview will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour, and we can either talk on the phone or via Skype, whichever you would prefer. In order to be able to get the most depth of data, I hope to record the interview.

These interviews will be confidential, and your participation in this study is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this interview, please reply to this email with your contact information and some times that would be convenient for you to participate. I am available pretty much anytime other than the 24th and 25th next week, and will be available in the beginning of the year as well. Whatever is most convenient for you works for me!

Thank you so much for your time,

Tiffany Smith

---

Tiffany Smith, Doctoral Candidate  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Graduate Student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement  
Educational Psychology and Research  
tsmith92@utk.edu



## APPENDIX C

### Interview Consent

#### Perceptions and Use of Reflective Practice in Evaluation

##### *Part A: Explanation of Study*

My name is Tiffany Smith and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee in the Educational Psychology and Research program. I am interested in evaluators' perceptions and use of reflective practice in evaluation. I invite you to participate in my dissertation research project, looking at your professional experience in evaluation and your use of the tools and concepts of reflective practice. Should you decide to participate in this project, you will play an important role in helping to formulate a more thorough understanding of the concept, perceptions, and use of reflective practice.

##### *Part B: Your Part in this Study*

If you agree to participate, you will participate in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately one hour. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and you may ask to have your data withdrawn from the study after the data has been collected. Data collection for this research study is expected to conclude no later than May 2014.

##### *Part C: Privacy and Confidentiality*

Your information will remain confidential at all times and will not be shared with others. These interviews will be audio recorded; however, after your data has been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. Identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms, or will be omitted from the transcript. For three years, all data will be kept on one password protected computer and in a locked file cabinet in the Bailey Education Complex room 503, located (1122 Volunteer Blvd, Knoxville, TN 37996).

##### *Part D: Compensation and Benefits*

No payment or other compensation will be given to participants for their involvement in this research. While participants will receive no immediate benefit, the evaluation community will benefit from gaining an understanding of evaluators' perceptions and experience with reflective practice.

##### *Part E: Getting More Information about this Research*

If you would like to obtain more information about this project, please feel free to contact me at 865-207-1177 or via email at [tsmith92@utk.edu](mailto:tsmith92@utk.edu). If you would like more information about your rights as a researcher or have questions about university policies and procedures for research involving human subjects, please contact Brenda Lawson, Compliance Officer and IRB Administrator for the University of Tennessee Knoxville, telephone 865-974-7697, email [blawson@utk.edu](mailto:blawson@utk.edu).

##### *Part F: Statement of Consent*

If you agree to take part in this project, please sign and date the form below.  
Thank you!

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 Participant Signature

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 Date

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questions

#### **Opening Questions:**

- What led you to choose program evaluation as a career?
  - o How long have you been working as a program evaluator?
  - o In what settings do you do most of your evaluation work?

#### **Reflective Practice Questions:**

1. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in what evaluators think about reflective practice. The concept of Reflective Practice has not been well defined or articulated for practitioners in evaluation... and it is something we are suggested to do, but it is unclear in what capacity we actually do it, or how we conceptualize it. So...
  - o The first question that I have for you is – how do you define reflective practice as it relates to your evaluation work?
2. What specific areas are there where you would use reflection in the evaluation process?
  - o *What would Reflective Practice improve, generally?*
  - o *Evaluation planning, implementation, completion, reporting and dissemination of results, post-evaluation?*
    - o *Stakeholder needs, data collection, analysis, etc.*
3. In what ways do you personally use reflective practice in your evaluations?
  - o *Specific areas of your own evaluation work in which you've reflected...*
    - o *"Think back to a recent evaluation..."*
  - o *Is reflective practice more intuitive or more purposeful?*
    - o *Learned or Self-Taught?*
  - o *If there are barriers to using reflective practice – time? Why is time a barrier?*
4. How do you think reflective practice could be utilized collaboratively?
  - o *How have you used RP collaboratively in your own evaluation efforts?*
  - o *What types of individuals would you include in those efforts?*

#### **Closing Questions:**

- Are there any other comments or thoughts about reflection in evaluation?

Thank you for your time!

## VITA

Tiffany Smith was born in Rochester Hills, Michigan, to the parents of Pamela and Glen Smith. She has one sibling, Benjamin Smith. She attended Mercer County Elementary and continued to Mercer County High School in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. After graduation, she headed south to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2010, majoring in both Psychology and Philosophy. During her time as an undergraduate, she worked in a social psychology laboratory for three years under the supervision of Dr. Michael Olson. This challenging experience led her to pursue a doctoral degree in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement through the Educational Psychology and Research Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. During her time in graduate school she was a graduate research assistant for: the Department of Educational Psychology and Research under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Morrow; the University of Tennessee Graduate School of Medicine under the supervision of Dr. William Metheny; and the Center for Educational Leadership under the supervision of Dr. Autumn Cyprès, and Betty Sue Sparks. She has accepted a tenure-track faculty position in the Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin, Stout.