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Mirror Method as an Approach for Critical Evaluation in Social Work

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Abstract

In this article, the Mirror method is studied as an approach to critical evaluation. The method offers a research approach to social work practice that is in line with the ideology, mission, and purposes of critical evaluation. The strengths of the approach include a dialogical process, an empowering effect, an understanding towards a client's situation as a whole, collective knowledge creation, and integration into daily social work. The potential of the Mirror method to facilitate critical thinking, enable changes towards equality, challenge oppression, and empower marginalized and silenced groups should be explored in the evaluation process.

Keywords: critical evaluation, social work, mirror method

This analysis examined the Mirror method as an approach for critical evaluation in social work. Firstly, we review the approaches to and requirements of critical evaluation in Finnish social work. Secondly, we outline the theories and methods of critical evaluation in social work. Thirdly, using the Mirror method as an example, we look at how much the current evaluation process takes into account the requirements of critical evaluation. Fourthly, based on the case example, we review the challenges and possibilities of the Mirror method as an approach for critical evaluation in social work. Finally, consideration is given to how to integrate critical evaluation into daily social work practice.

By critical evaluation we refer to critically-oriented evaluation approaches, such as empowering evaluation (Adams, 2003), empowerment evaluation (Dullea & Mullender, 1999), emancipatory qualitative evaluation (Whitmore, 2001), transformative evaluation (Mertens, 2009), transformative participatory evaluation (Brisolara, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), feminist evaluation (Humphries, 1999), and evaluation directed by social constructivism (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). These evaluation methods are directed by critical social theories, according to which, peoples' understanding is formed in certain social, political, and economic contexts. As used in critical evaluation, critical social theories reveal how dimensions of oppression generate and maintain certain practices and understanding. The core issue of critical evaluation is to give voice to people who have been pushed to the margins (Mertens, 2009, p. 298). Critical evaluation can produce transformation and political emancipation. Even though a critical orientation is extensively accepted in social work, the approach is not widely applied in social work research and evaluation (for example see Strier, 2007).

Evaluation research can be classified in several ways. Classifications can be done based on the evaluation's form (e.g. summative - formative) or the purpose (e.g. evaluation for accountability - evaluation for development - evaluation for knowledge). These classifications are not necessarily essential when it comes to critical evaluation; rather, it is more relevant to study the epistemological, ontological, and methodological framework of the evaluation (Kazi, 1999, 2000; Shaw, 1999). Both Kazi and Shaw regard critical evaluation as a stance among other kinds of evaluations. According to Kazi (2000, p. 762–763) “interpretivist approaches” have included critical theory (e.g. Everitt & Hardiker, 1996), feminist evaluation (e.g. Humphries, 1999), and social constructionism (e.g. Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). Further classifications of interpretivist approaches have sought to include evidence-based practice and reflective inquiry (Shaw, 1999, p. 16) or empirical practice, pragmatism, and scientific realism (Kazi, 1999, p. 59) or, as he later put it, empirical practice, pragmatism, or methodological pluralism and the post-positivist approach (Kazi, 2000, p. 756–757).

Some theorists seek to distinguish critical evaluation from constructivist evaluation, arguing that they have different theoretical backgrounds (Everitt & Hardiker, 1996, p. 98) and different epistemological and ontological frameworks (Kazi, 2000, p. 762–763). However, some social constructivist approaches will include “subtle realism” and concepts from critical theories (for example see Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Stufflebeam, 2008) and this is why we see them as applicable to critical evaluation.

Justifications for carrying out an evaluation often arise from sources other than social work itself. Demands for efficiency and accountability emerge from managerial and economic

concerns, which are rarely connected to social work ethics or values. The rationale for the critical evaluation of social work arises from social work itself but also from ongoing challenges in society (also see Mertens, 2009, p. 3). Ethical justifications for social work and the values connected to them are seeing important. In addition, the need to develop a more critical framework for social work arises from social work itself (Kivipelto, 2006).

In Finland, evaluators, researchers, developers, social workers, or other authorities are the main actors carrying out evaluations. Nevertheless, there are also increasingly reverse examples, where clients are strongly involved to the evaluation (one such example includes Högnabba, 2008). There is growing evidence of the success of using participatory research approaches, including some with emancipatory potential (Postle, Beresford, & Hardy, 2008, p. 255). According to the critical orientation, an evaluation process should involve those who are labeled as the marginalized, disenfranchised, and least powerful - those who traditionally have been ignored (Mertens, 1999, p. 12; Whitmore et al., 2006, p. 352).

Effectiveness means the capability to produce an effect by doing "right" things, i.e., setting the right targets to achieve an overall goal (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000, p. 54). By effects (or outcomes) is meant the actual consequences of social work (working method, instrument or means). Efficacy is then getting things done, i.e. meeting targets. There is also a need to broaden the concept of effectiveness evaluation in social work at a time when new public management, accountability, and administrative requirements are driving social work in directions that are alien and may even be unethical (Satka, 2011).

The Politics of Evaluation

According to Taylor and Balloch (2005) evaluation is inherently a political activity (also see Preskill, 2004, p. 346–347; House, 1993, p. 9 & 29). Evaluation provides evidence of the effectiveness of policies and programmes (Taylor & Balloch, 2005). Service providers use evaluation to present their work favorably to their audiences (O'Brien, Payne, Nolan, & Ingleton, 2010). All too often evaluation emphasizes the knowledge provided by professionals and other authorities and bypasses the views of service users (Mertens, 2009, p. 67). Only professionally produced knowledge is valued in the field of evaluation (Beresford, 2005). Evaluation is located within political and cultural context where, for instance, independence is almost unattainable (Clarke, 2008).

Critical evaluation responds to these challenges by rejecting the possibility of value neutrality in evaluation. Critical evaluators address the issue of whose interests the evaluation serves and to what purposes (Greene, 2006, p. 118–119). Critical evaluation is openly political: it operates on behalf of disempowered and marginalized groups. The use of critical theories can reveal how dimensions of power come to have an influence and how those oppressed are left without a voice and resources. Such applications of critical theories should lead to very concrete actions, such as, influencing the distribution of resources (Gray, Plath, & Webb, 2009, p. 64).

Critical Evaluation Theories and Methods

According to Everitt and Hardiker (1996), critical evaluation is cautious about giving in to 'the temptation' to treat any claims as truth and to regarding the scientific method as having replaced the essential process of deciding about "the good". Critical evaluation needs considerable and total commitment to the ethics, values, and politics involved exclusively in critical theories. Modern critical theories – for example, anti-theories (anti-oppressive, -racist, etc.), empowering approaches, and feminist theories – can give quite exact indicators for critical evaluation. Postmodern critical theories, like postmodern feminism, Foucauldian theory, and postmodern critical theories, have led to evaluating how social work promotes fair and equal speech and interactive situations and discourses (see Mertens, 2009, pp. 14–15& 63–66). According to Briskman, Pease, and Allan (2009, p. 5), most critical theorists are concerned with emancipator education that enables people to see the links between their experiences and the material conditions and dominant ideologies in society.

Critical theory can both inform social work as well as bridge the gap between evaluation results and societal transformation by enabling the design of inclusive evaluations. Critical evaluation should be based on recognizing the power inequities that are inherent in our society and determining their impact on the program or activity under examination (Mertens, 1999, p. 2, 7). It is useful to know whose interests are served by an activity. While in revealing the power structures, one might ask whose interests are not served by what is being done. Critical evaluation tries to grasp the different effects of the truths being claimed.

Critical evaluation does not have a specific set of methods or practices of its own (Mertens, 2009, p. 59; Whitmore et al., 2006, p. 350). The purpose, objective, and theoretical background are guiding selection of methods and procedures. An evaluation process should be transparent and accepted by all participants. Critical evaluation specifies what kind of knowledge we need, and how and for what purposes the information is to be produced. The justifications for the evaluation are analyzed and specified along with participants. Appropriate theories and methods are selected and data collected and documented. The results are compiled, analyzed, and dealt with by the participants. Conclusions are then drawn and practices are developed accordingly.

Critical evaluation methods are usually cooperative, participatory, and dialogical, especially when drawing on postmodern theories (Whitmore et al., 2006, p. 349–352; Fook, 2003, p. 127). Traditional research methods (e.g. questionnaire or interview) are also used, especially when the theoretical background draws from modern theories. We also consider the importance of integrating the evaluation into daily social work, which is characteristic to the critical evaluation (Everitt & Hardiker, 1996; Mertens, 2009).

Need for Critical Evaluation in Finnish Social Work

Finnish social welfare is based on the Nordic welfare state model. Its cornerstones are extensive public responsibility and funding through taxation. Central government plays a strong guiding role in setting the basic principles of social welfare and in monitoring their implementation. The actual provision of social welfare is carried out at the local level, in municipalities. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health prepares the legislation governing the

organization and financing of social care and health care, and monitors its implementation (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2006, p. 4–5).

Social work education is provided in six universities (Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Itä-Suomi, Lapland, Tampere, and Turku). It is possible to complete a Bachelor's, Master's, professional licentiate, and doctoral degree in social work. The status as a qualified social worker is regulated by the Act on Qualification Requirements for Social Welfare Professionals 272/2005 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2005; Lähteinen, 2006).

Those who have graduated with a Master's degree in social work at the university level are qualified to work as social workers. In Finland, universities of applied sciences are also able to provide Master's level degrees in social welfare services, though graduates are not qualified to work as social workers (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2005). Social workers are typically employed in client-centered work, in administration, and in development work in social and health care, while some social workers can also take up positions in social work education (SOSNET, 2012). A social worker can usually be contacted at the municipal social office or, depending on the size of the municipality, at a regional social welfare office.

Under the obligations of social welfare, social assistance is a 'last-resort' financial assistance received in situations where the income and assets of an individual or family are insufficient to cover the essential expenses of everyday life. In social case work, social workers give clients advice and guidance, discuss clients' problems with them, and within the official networks, organize other support measures to promote and maintain the safety and coping of the individual and the family. In addition to case work with individuals, social work is increasingly being conducted at the community level. The purpose of community work is to prevent the emergence of social problems in communities. It also improves participation and involves people in the development of their communities. Community work helps individuals and groups contribute to the welfare of their communities. In addition, social work education prepares graduates for managing, developing, and doing research on welfare services (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2006, p. 9–10).

Research-based social science education should guide students towards developing critical thinking. The educational course content is based on reflection and critical analysis of existing professional practices, administrative policies, and critical approaches (SOSNET, 2012), while the critical thinking should also include a critical awareness of one's own values, ideologies, and history. The content thus contains an understanding of how these structures influence understanding and meaning construction. Critical thinking should be a mixture of learning through dialogue, experiences of practice, feedback, creativity, and ethical reasoning (Gibbons & Gray, 2004, p. 36). By dialogue we mean a process where interaction and the exchange of experiences and ideas are made possible (Abma & Widdershoven, 2005). According to Widdershoven (2001) dialogue implies consensus, based upon shared meanings and oriented towards reaching agreement. We agree with him that dialogue also implies disagreement, in the form of a conflict between different, rival stories. The change is possible through learning and mutual understanding. There are similarities between dialogical and narrative approach. However, in narrative research the focus is more on individual life-stories. Narrative methods can also be applied as an individual treatment method (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010).

Even though social work education in universities is characterized by criticality, some students feel it to be quite traditional (Tapola-Haapala, 2011, p. 82). In addition, professional social work in Finland is not particularly oriented to being critical or transformative (Kivipelto, 2004). Social work is directed by legislation, norms, and juridical elements (Nummela, 2011, p. 147& 149). Even though it is accepted that clients' problems are born out of social and structural conditions, social work targets mainly the individual level and client problems (Juhila, 2008, p. 61). For example, social workers in Finland support various attributions on the causes of poverty, but compared to other Nordic countries, Finnish social workers lean more towards individual attributions (Blomberg, Kallio, & Kroll, 2010). The reason might also be that bringing up issues of power, discrimination, and oppression is not a comfortable process. People may be unwilling to entertain the notion that the program or activity is structured in such a way as to perpetuate the status quo (Mertens, 1999, p. 8). Individual and psychological knowledge might feel more relevant in practical situations than knowledge arising from the arena of social science research (Tapola-Haapala, 2011, p. 174–175). Some social workers feel they cannot achieve those professional goals that are important to them because of the external circumstances of the work (Tapola-Haapala, 2011).

Social work orientations are essential when it comes to understanding the different justifications of social work evaluation. If evaluation should promote better practices, then justifications should arise from social work ethics, values, and its political purposes. This is also the starting point in the Mirror method.

Case Example: The Mirror Method

The Mirror method originated from a desire to harness tacit knowledge for developing self-evaluation methods in social work (Yliruka, 2000). The original developmental context for the method was a municipal social office, where social workers worked with adult clients, with some 100 clients per social worker. Social work was delivered mainly through benefit provision. Social workers worked "behind closed doors": professional autonomy was the norm, with little professional discussion within an organization. Weekly case meetings were focused on questions about living allowance and administrative issues (Yliruka, 2011, p. 11).

Meanwhile, social workers were interested in doing social work in a more holistic way, while at the same time, the social department was reorganizing its work on living allowance applications and so the time and opportunity for developing social work was available. The professional interest in developing an evaluation method for use in work settings was strong. The central aim was to develop a continuous evaluation method and to "learn through living". Since its first developmental phase, the Mirror method has been adapted to several different sectors in social work, such as child protection, social work in schools, and in Probation Services (Yliruka, 2011, p. 11).

The theoretical basis of the Mirror method draws on the ideas of Ian Shaw (1999, p. 20) on reflective evaluation, which emphasizes two interlinked statements: (a) knowledge arises from action and exists for action; and (b) knowledge is tested in real-life situations. In terms of the relationship between knowledge and action and the social worker, two further things can be said:

(a) the social worker should know what he/she knows, which means trying to also grasp their tacit knowledge; and (b) a social worker should act reflectively (Yliruka, 2011, p. 11–14).

The motivation for this development was derived from the urge to improve reflective expertise in social work and to identify how best to generate practice-based social work evidence in order to respond to the effectiveness requirements set for it (e.g. Macdonald, 1998). In the methodological research and the development process, theoretical support was sought from debates on networked, open, collective, and innovative expertise (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Fook, 2002; Hakkarainen, 2000; Hakkarainen, Paavola, & Lipponen, 2003; Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2004; Nowotny, 2000; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Saaristo, 2000; Tynjälä, Nuutinen, Eteläpelto, Kirjonen, & Remes, 1997) and from theories on knowledge formation and learning communities (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2003; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

The Mirror method (Mannerström, Nurhonen, Mustonen, & Yliruka, 2005; Yliruka, 2006) involves the use of forms designed to support several elements: the documentation of one's own work and self-evaluation, common peer evaluation meetings, follow-up of the work's progress, and the concluding assumptions on effectiveness. The themes included in the forms are open rather than based on indicators. The objective of such open themes is to activate the social worker to analyze and conceptualize their social work. The themes encourage the social worker to see him/herself as an actor who is able to ask her/himself each time what is the best way to deal with the task.

The Mirror-method is used to analyze and evaluate client work situations involving factors that are burdensome or worrisome for the employee (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Mirror process supports the social work process.

According to Yliruka (2011, p. 12), the reflective self and peer evaluation process of Mirror consists of four steps:

1. Self-evaluation of the social worker's own work and preparation for the peer evaluation meeting;
2. Peer evaluation discussion within the social work team and the assessment of further work;
3. Follow-up in formative or summative evaluation meetings; and
4. Drawing conclusions: includes the team's conclusions on the boundary conditions for social work and on specific themes requiring monitoring or improvement.

In Step 1, a social worker begins the Mirror process by selecting the client case he/she wishes to analyze through self-evaluation and for which he/she desires peer group support. Throughout this article, *case* refers to the employee's self-evaluation of his/her own work with the client, not to the client. The essential object of scrutiny is the social worker's own way of conducting client work. Then, the social worker reviews the information related to the case and prepares a free format description of the client's situation to serve as material for the peer evaluation. Other material can also be used, such as notes, plans, and other client work documents. At this stage, the Mirror Hall form guides self-evaluation (Yliruka, 2011, p. 12).

The name of the form, Mirror Hall, refers to reviewing one's own work from various approaches in a certain context. The Mirror model seeks to inspire the social worker to express his/her own operational theory and to articulate their tacit knowledge as far as possible (Polanyi, 1983; Yliruka, 2000) and in a holistic manner. Social worker explores the relationship between goals, means, and the factors that affect one's personal and professional work (cognitive, technical, emotional and moral elements) as well as exploring contextual influences, structural factors, and edge conditions. The idea is to reveal thinking and assumptions that are not evidently written up in the official records (Yliruka, 2011, p. 14).

When using the Mirror Hall self-evaluation form, according to Yliruka (2011, p. 14), the social worker reviews several elements:

1. Any opportunities and obstacles for change in the client's life situation;
2. The established internal and external factors;
3. Resources and risks;
4. Social work targets;
5. Working method choices;
6. Assumed impacts on working methods;
7. The employee's experience of interaction with the client;
8. His/her expertise-orientation in the client relationship;
9. His/her role as a social worker in the client relationship; and
10. Assumptions on how the situation may be influenced by factors related to self (gender, values, attitudes), previous experiences, or the current situation of the client relationship under review or structural factors facilitating or hindering client work (such as the service system, established social work practices, legislation and resources).

The social worker also evaluates the influence of context on the client relationship and the professional concern for the client's situation on a scale of 1 to 4. Finally, the opportunities to utilize one's own professional competences in the client case are evaluated (Yliruka, 2011, p. 14).

Step 2 of the reflective self and peer evaluation process involves a peer evaluation meeting in which the social worker explains the themes he/she has entered into the self-evaluation form, while the others listens without interrupting. The evaluating peers are encouraged to participate in an internal dialogue (Bakhtin, 1991) using the Internal Mirror form. While listening, the peers jot down questions, thoughts, and feelings, as well as work-related suggestions and tips on related reading, such as research knowledge or insightful literature. The form is designed to steer the peers towards providing positive and genuine feedback for the employee whose work is being evaluated. In the peer evaluation discussion, each peer has a turn to speak. The themes included in the Mirror Hall form are considered and subjected to an evaluative debate. The self-evaluating social worker collects all work-related suggestions for further processing. (Yliruka, 2011, p.14–15.)

Step 3 comprises common formative evaluation meetings for monitoring how the case has progressed since the first peer evaluation. Questions asked in the Rear View Mirror Form include: Which social work process-related suggestions were or were not implemented and have there been any changes in the employee's interpretation of the client situation or working possibilities? Additionally, the social worker assesses what he/she has learned during the process. (Yliruka, 2011, p. 15.) The metaphorical name of the form - rear view mirror – refers to the task of this phase: to look behind – as using rear view mirror in the car - what has been happening and to learn from it.

Step 4 is the concluding part of the reflective self and peer evaluation process. The team draws their common conclusions on the boundary conditions for conducting social work and on specific themes that require follow-up or improvement. They also make effectiveness assumptions. The Prism form is the support tool for this step (Yliruka, 2011, p. 15).

There are also recent developments in the Mirror method (Väyrynen, 2010) that are promising. Even though it has been stressed that the Mirror process complements the continuous evaluation of the social work process with the client, one social work team has wanted to emphasize the client's viewpoint by creating a new form. The Client's Mirror has been recently developed in child protection. The Client Mirror consists of similar themes to those found in the Mirror Hall, with the social worker using the client's evaluation as material in the self-evaluation phase. The first experiences of this development show that it provides the client with a voice and gives important information to be included in the Mirror process but also as a separate way to obtain information from clients (Väyrynen, 2010, p. 5–6).

The Challenge of Promoting Criticality in Social Work

Following the Mirror method's steps, we assume that it can promote critical thinking among social workers. Still, there are some remaining questions; for example, do social workers' perspectives of meaning change or is the validity of previously learned presuppositions

questioned? It should also regard more, whether the evaluation generates emancipatory insights (Mezirow, 1995, p. 28–30, 375). Critical reflection is difficult to achieve when operating practices fail to include systematic work practices, documentation, and evidence (gathered in various ways) concerning the functionality of professional social work.

In the Mirror model, critical thinking is generated by peer group work, by documenting one's own work and by monitoring the progress of client processes, with a form of monitoring that is based on gathering evidence. Utilizing evidence in the evaluation process prevents a self-defensive, rhetorical evaluation. Social workers make conclusions about what seems to be important in a good social work process.

If we scrutinize the Mirror against the criteria of critical evaluation, it is seen to be a:

1. Dialogical approach: The model supports dialogical processes among social workers. The peer evaluation discussion is structured in such a way that it enhances the dialogical process by, for example, separating talking and listening, by enforcing positive feedback, by guiding towards a use of language that emphasizes “me-talk” instead of “you-talk”. These instructions are written in the Mirror forms and in the Mirror-handbook.
2. It has an empowering effect: Social workers have found that the process gives them a voice to talk about social work and to work more effectively. However, the process is quite sensitive. The peer evaluation discussions require a social worker to be prepared to share his/her knowledge and ideas and to set her/himself up for criticism. That is why the empowering effect depends on an atmosphere of trust. While at the same time, the Mirror peer evaluation process may also facilitate the creation of a supportive atmosphere. A literature review of international research concerning working conditions in social welfare (Meltti & Kara, 2009) indicates that clients who require intense efforts in social work may negatively influence employees' job satisfaction. On the other hand, enabling a change in a client's life has been found to be a strong individual driver of job satisfaction and motivation.
3. In the Mirror process, the empowerment of a social worker is often interconnected with transformation processes, a clarification or change of the objective of social work, and peer support (Yliruka, 2009, p. 181).
4. The model is integrated into daily social work. This means that the model can be integrated in the regular social work team meetings, which are very common in social welfare organizations (Karvinen-Niinikoski, Salonen, Meltti, Yliruka, & Tapola, 2005, p. 60). It also means that evaluation is not seen as a self-contained phase of practice – as a way of fracturing the social work process – but as a task in every phase.
5. The critical potential of social work lies within understanding the social context and its meaning as part of the individual experience (both of the social worker and client). The Mirror handbook (Yliruka, 2006) emphasizes the importance to social work of the idea of the person-in-situation. This means that social work is not focused on the personal characteristics of an individual client; rather, it is important to understand the client's situation as a whole and to ask in what kind of social situation she/he is living in. The Mirror model is based also on the idea of a holistic perspective. It means that you should always take into consideration the different aspects of a client's life. This prevents an

- individualizing of problems or on the other hand considering all the problems to be due to structural problems.
6. The development process of the method has been an open innovation process (Chesbrough, 2003). Instead of attempting to create a ready-made and binding method, the Mirror pilot project set out to produce a method that could be adapted according to the operating environment's requirements and would be open for development and to input and ideas from various actors (Yliruka, Koivisto, & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009).
 7. The process combines individual support and knowledge into a process of collective knowledge creation. It enhances reflection on three levels (Engeström, 2004, p. 97–98), where the third level of reflection (see Figure 2) focuses on the questions of the common goal of the work: What is this work we are doing? What are we trying to achieve? What brings about problems and how can we organize our work wisely? In this way, it deals with a broad concept of effectiveness. The focus of knowledge creation in the Mirror process can also be social reporting.

Figure 2. Mirror combines individual and collective knowledge creation.

Some elements in the use of the Mirror method are critical to enhancing learning and collective knowledge creation: (a) the team has to be interested in oral and written reflection; (b) the team has to work dialogically and (c) the team members have to discern the operating environment as being multidimensional. Furthermore, producing collective meanings and knowledge work has to be acknowledged as a part of everyday social work. The management has to support this kind of reflective evaluation as an everyday task (Yliruka, 2011, p. 25–26).

Conclusions

In critical evaluation, information should be collected not only from professionals or official statistics, but also from service users and people living in the region. The Mirror model enables social workers to determine what they really need to evaluate, and then to plan and implement an evaluation around their conclusions. It is also possible to reflect on social justice and human rights questions when they arise from the dialogical process. Critical theories should direct the process more if it is trying to give voice to those who have been pushed to society's margins. Additionally, how the Mirror method can work as a catalyst for consciousness rising, for equality, empowerment, and social justice, needs to be studied more in concrete situations. Researching the Mirror method's potential to produce transformation and political emancipation requires time.

Reliability and validity are important aspects in all evaluation research. In the Mirror model, reliability is ensured by having open and appropriate documentation. The process is made visible and conceptualized through the involvement of participants (see Yin, 2003). When it comes to the validity of participatory and dialogical evaluations, Donna Mertens (2009, p. 61–62) has questioned the leading interpretation of validity. Validity also implies different choices that serve different purposes: If we choose to prioritize workers' views, the validity should be seen differently than if we are interested in the voices of marginalized groups. The task of critical evaluation is to also make these choices and the consequences of these choices visible.

In summary, critical evaluation assumes that all produced information is partial and supports or challenges certain knowledge and power structures. The Mirror method promotes an awareness of evaluation's role in society as an information producer and thus fosters the principles of critical evaluation.

The success of critical evaluation can be seen in many ways; for example, if the participants' self-esteem has increased or their personal relationships have improved. This on its own is not enough; however, we have many examples of how empowering projects can be misleading and harnessed for neo-liberal purposes (Mertens, 2009, p. 327; Mirafteb, 2004). A heightened self-awareness is necessary for personal transformation and critical subjectivity (Mertens, 2009, p. 76). In the end though, the notion of empowerment is rendered meaningless unless it attempts to confront and combat the wider structures and processes which reproduce inequality (Lupton & Nixon, 1999, p. 18–19).

Owning the service evaluation is a key part of empowerment because it means that those who fund and manage services will be required to listen to the voice of those who have traditionally been silenced (Dullea & Mullender, 1999, p. 96; Whitmore et al., 2006, p. 352). Evaluation should also challenge oppression and enable changes in the direction of equality (Everitt & Hardiker, 1996, p. 158). As such, critical evaluation is by no means an easy task. It requires further planning and co-operation with evaluators and researchers as well as the involvement of all stakeholders.

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