


Critical studies in public policy evaluation: main contributions to the field

Estudos críticos em avaliação de políticas públicas: principais contribuições para o campo

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is, from a bibliographic review, to systematize the main contributions of authors of the Brazilian evaluation field that are aligned with what, for analytical purposes, we call "field of critical studies in public policy evaluation". The authors selected for the analysis are characterized by their criticism to the positivist definition commonly given to evaluation, denounce the disassociation between values and techniques, the idea of evaluators as neutral subjects, and the conception that the best evaluation methods are those inspired by the Natural Sciences, considered "gold standard". In this sense, they propose theoretical approaches and analytical methods that consider (1) the need for the subjects involved in the construction of the evaluation to make explicit their value matrixes and (2) the importance of replacing manuals with pre-defined methodologies using multiple methods and instruments, according to what the evaluative research asks for. At the end, we explore the "in-depth evaluation" method that favors an interpretative approach, using research tools from anthropology, as an alternative for the field of public policies evaluation.

Keywords: Public policies; critical evaluation; counter-hegemonic evaluation; critical studies.

Resumo: O intuito deste artigo é, a partir de um balanço bibliográfico, sistematizar as principais contribuições de autores do campo de avaliação brasileiro que se alinham ao que, para efeitos analíticos, denominamos "campo de estudos críticos em avaliação de políticas públicas". Os autores selecionados para a análise se caracterizam pela crítica à definição positivista comumente dada à avaliação, denunciam a desassociação entre valores e técnicas, a ideia de avaliadores como sujeitos neutros, e a concepção de que os melhores métodos avaliativos são aqueles inspirados nas Ciências Naturais, considerados "padrão-ouro". Nesse sentido, propõem abordagens teóricas e métodos analíticos que

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consideram (1) a necessidade de os sujeitos envolvidos na construção da avaliação explicitarem suas matrizes de valor e (2) a importância de se substituir manuais com metodologias pré-definidas pela utilização de múltiplos métodos e instrumentos, segundo o que pede a pesquisa avaliativa. Ao final, explora-se o método de “avaliação em profundidade” que privilegia uma abordagem interpretativa, com uso de ferramentas de pesquisa da Antropologia, como alternativa para o campo da avaliação de políticas públicas.

Palavras-chave: Políticas públicas; avaliação crítica; avaliação contra-hegemônica; estudos críticos.

1. Introduction

This article presents the main contributions to the field of public policy evaluation based on the analysis of Brazilian authors who are characterized by adopting a counter-hegemonic theoretical-analytical stance, referred to here as the "field of critical evaluation studies". We suggest that understanding this field and its critique enables it to be strengthened and enhanced, collaborating more comprehensively with the reflection on evaluation practice and its meanings for the field of evaluation. Because, as Boullosa (2020) argues about the field of evaluation, the increase in critical studies has the potential to give rise to a movement of search for "positionality" by evaluators.

We adopted the notion of field from Bourdieu's (2004) perspective of the scientific field, for which the field is a relatively autonomous space, endowed with its own laws to which the actors who are part of it are subject. The field is always a field of forces, marked by struggles to preserve or transform it. The actors' practices are built in relation to its structure, as they internalize the field and incorporate its rules into their own practice. We understand that the field of public policy (Farah, 2016) and the field of evaluation are currently consolidated in Brazil and are permeated by disputes and conflicts over their meanings and practices. What we have observed from the practice and debate sparked by the authors we have listed in this article is the formation of a critical evaluation field that seeks to put a strain on entrenched meanings that are not subject to reflection, and therefore to the exercise of criticism.

The field of public policy evaluation in Brazil began to expand especially in the 1990s, in a scenario where the Brazilian state adopted a reformist agenda (Faria, 2005). This reform had a managerialist bias, with an emphasis on "[...] results and the de-responsibilization/devolution/privatization of the provision of social goods and services [...]" (Faria, 2005, p. 99). Evaluations in this period took center stage precisely because it was hoped that they would,

[...] guarantee the credibility of the reform process and the political sustainability of the guidelines for deregulation and reducing the size of government [...], and that [...] transparency in public management and user/client satisfaction could be fostered (Faria, 2005, p. 100).

According to Jannuzzi (2020, p. 40), this liberal logic of the 1990s persecuted Public Administration and "ended up shaping the field with a strong technical-formal-positivist bias and guided by economic criteria". The importance given to evaluation during this period was also due to Brazil's economic dependence on international funding agencies, which began to demand monitoring and evaluation systems for the projects they funded (Rodrigues, 2008). In this way, manuals in the field of Evaluation produced by these institutions ended up forming "[...] the heads and minds of a significant part of the epistemic and practical community in Ibero-American countries [...]" (Jannuzzi, 2020, p. 41). This mentality translates into the idea of evaluation as an instrument in the final stage of the public policy cycle, with a normative bias and prioritizing technical aspects, as well as an emphasis on its managerial role (Faria, 2005).

In this sense, a positivist conception was created that persists to this day in the field, where it is believed that public policy evaluations should be neutral, impartial, and based on the "unsuspected" precepts contained in the manuals produced by international agencies (Jannuzzi, 2016). From this perspective, the evaluator is,

[...] understood more than as a subject with a tendency towards neutral positionality [...], but [...] as someone who promotes the separation between politics and public policies, advocating for a management that is neutral (Boullosa, Oliveira, Araújo & Gussi, 2021a, p. 09).

In this conception, evaluation is understood as an objective, orderly phenomenon, capable of measuring results, efficacy, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability on some object of public policy, program and/or project (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 04). From a methodological and epistemological point of view, this strand is also characterized by the "[...] top-down paradigm of state action, on a macro scale for empirical investigations, with the clear primacy of the scientific-experimental method" (Boullosa, 2020, p. 15).

However, some authors have challenged these notions about evaluation, with critical studies on evaluation growing especially since 2010 (Boullosa, Peres, & Bessa, 2021b). The authors selected for the analysis in this article are characterized by their criticism of the positivist definition commonly given to evaluation and for denouncing: the disassociation between values and techniques; the idea of evaluators as neutral

subjects, and the conception that the best evaluation methods are those inspired by the Natural Sciences, considered the "gold standard". In this sense, they propose theoretical approaches and analytical methods that consider (1) the need for the subjects involved in the evaluation practice to make their value matrices explicit and (2) the importance of replacing manuals with pre-defined methodologies with the use of multiple methods and instruments, in a movement that claims a process of antimanualization of the evaluation field.

For the purposes of this article, it is understood that adopting a theoretical-analytical perspective aligned with critique implies a reflexive attitude, capable of elaborating a critique that is immanent to the context - aware that the critique elaborated results from that same context - while at the same time pointing beyond what is established. In other words, it is the task of criticism to reconstruct the justificatory narratives that organize and constitutes the actual order, seeking to demonstrate their contradictions. The authors who will be analyzed and who provide the basis for this reflection seek precisely to tension the meanings of evaluative practice, exposing it to the exercise of criticism by adopting a pluralistic and relational approach, as well as pointing to alternative methods that are built on a reflective evaluative practice.

In the first part of this article, we present the main arguments and approaches developed from the perspective of critical evaluation as opposed to the rational-positivist view, especially those related to the political character of evaluation and those related to the evaluative-deontological dimensions. Then, we discuss the methodology used in public policy evaluations and some alternatives proposed by authors from the critical field to overcome the problems generated by the positivist heritage. Finally, the final considerations.

2. Deontological dimensions of evaluation

Evaluation is not just a rational, technical, and procedural activity aimed at producing "neutral" and scientifically proven results. It is necessary to think about the evaluation of public policies beyond its technical aspect and problematize "[...] how evaluations influence (or not) the implementation, (dis)continuity and innovation of public policies" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 03). It is not a simple task to present a single definition, (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 03). It is not a simple task to present a single definition of evaluation, considering that "the evaluation of public policies is a polysemic concept, which articulates different theoretical references and methodological approaches

from various areas of knowledge" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 04). However, it is possible to identify the main contributions to the constitution of the field of critical evaluation studies in Brazil.

The idea of evaluation as "[...] a systemic, pragmatic, aseptic and exclusively technical activity" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 03) has been questioned by some authors in the field of critical evaluation studies, breaking with a rational-positivist tradition. As Jannuzzi (2020) points out, this hegemonic evaluation logic does not seem to be leading to more effective public policies.

As mentioned above, Faria (2005) already drew attention to the political dimension of public policy evaluation when he discussed how evaluation in the 1990s was instituted as an administrative instrument put at the service of state reform, giving it a managerialist tone and oblivious to political disputes. For the author, evaluation is not limited to its instrumental use, that is, it is not restricted to supporting decision-makers, but can be used, for example, to educate local program technicians, to "[...] mobilize support for the position that decision-makers already have on the changes needed in the policy or program" (Faria, 2005, p. 103).

In this way, the authors analyzed in this article indicate the need to discuss the deontological dimension, and at the same time politicize the idea of the field and evaluation. Initially, we would like to point out that the discussion about the deontological dimension of evaluations is centered around the need to think about the role of the analyst and the meanings of their analyses (Boullosa et al., 2021b). As Boullosa et al. (2021a) argue, the field of evaluation has been marked by little reflexivity, not imposing positionality on evaluators, not requiring them to position themselves on and in the field itself. Reflexivity is understood as

[...] the capacity for (self-)critical interpretation of the individual and social values defended, the theoretical and methodological understandings, the experiences lived and the formation of the identities of the evaluators in the development of their activities (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 02).

Reflexivity would precede positionality, which is in the existentiality of each being, and is given by identities and by a sensitive understanding of the social markers of vulnerabilities and oppressions experienced daily. In this sense, the authors draw attention to the importance and need to think from which positions "[...] evidence and arguments around evaluative studies are produced and reproduced" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 02).

Unlike the hegemonic tradition's aseptic notion of evaluators, Boullosa et al. (2021a) and Boullosa et al. (2021b) consider them to be political subjects who are part of the policy process and must problematize their own value matrices to assume positions. According to the authors, the lack of "reflection-in-action" leads to the impoverishment of the field, since only the exercise of reflexivity can guarantee a critical positioning of the actors. Only in this way is it possible to think while acting in public policy processes, the exercise of reflexivity is what allows past experiences to inform and transform the future, enriching its quality (Boullosa et al., 2021b, p. 324).

Thus, according to Boullosa et al. (2021b, p. 325) evaluators, instead of thinking of themselves as subjects who only provide accurate data for politicians or policy makers, should see themselves as "[...] inserted in critical learning processes, in which they would play the role of facilitators of dialogue; producers of arguments and evidence that support public debate; advisors".

Along these lines, Bollousa (2020), Boullosa et al. (2021a), Jannuzzi (2020) and De Mario et al. (2016) point to the pedagogical dimension of the evaluation process. The authors adopt a perspective of evaluation as a producer of evaluative knowledge to support the improvement and management of programs, from their design to the analysis of their impact. In this understanding, "[...] knowledge is normative, subjective, socially constructed and, most importantly, implicitly anchored in active value structures" (Boullosa, 2020, p. 25). This perspective rejects the idea of evaluation as an instrument whose purpose is only to analyze results or simply produce data for accountability.

De Mario et al. (2016), by analyzing the process of producing accountability data for Public Ombudsman Offices, highlight how the pedagogical dimension of evaluation operates in practice and emphasize its potential because it is a process that considers the different aspects and voices of the various actors - from citizens to policy executors - included in the production of public policies relevant to the scope of the body's work. The accountability model adopted by the Public Ombudsman's Offices is configured as an endogenous evaluation process (De Mario, 2018), which enables the development of an epistemic diagnosis and a continuous evaluation of public policies, based on substantive criteria, and guided by the promotion of social justice (De Mario et al., 2016, p.59).

Based on the understanding that fact and value are inseparable dimensions of "doing science", authors from the critical field argue that techniques and values are inseparable from the evaluation process. Evaluating necessarily involves a value

judgment. Even if a given evaluation is considered neutral, there is always a framework of values that underlies it and validates it. In this sense, it is essential that the methodological design of the evaluation is anchored in a framework of values made explicit by the evaluation team (Boullosa, 2020). Thus, "[...] evaluation must articulate and reveal meanings, concepts, values, intentions and practices" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 02), as well as "[...] revealing the matrix of values that underlies and structures the entire process" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 10).

Therefore, contrary to the discourse based on the rational-positivist tradition, there is no neutral, value-free, or depoliticized evaluation of public policies (Boullosa, 2020, Boullosa et al., 2021a). This paradigm shift took a few decades and went through a number of schools of thought. Boullosa et al. (2021b) describe the path taken by the social sciences on the notion of evaluating public policies, from a rational-positivist perspective to a critical (or post-positivist) perspective. It is within this horizon of explaining the value framework that Boullosa et al. (2021a) argue that these values should consider the construction of a democratic society and the promotion of processes to make invisible subjects visible. Similarly, Jannuzzi (2020) points to the importance of evaluation being driven by public values of democratization and the institutionalization of rights. Jannuzzi (2011) and Laisner and De Mario (2014) also point out that the goal of evaluation is to transform the quality of life of the beneficiaries of the programs being evaluated, which means looking for programs guided by issues of justice and concerned with promoting social justice.

Considering this logic of evaluation based on the idea of promoting a fairer society, De Mario (2016) proposes that, in addition to analyses and evaluations concerned with the institutional processes and procedures (and their effectiveness) adopted for the process of producing a policy, it is necessary for the analysis and evaluation of public policies to consider the values that justify and legitimize the policy. Thus, for the author, it is necessary for the evaluator to question,

[...] what conceptions of justice are expressed in the design of the policy, what procedures should ideally be adopted given the objectives of the policy and the intended results, whether these procedures are transparent and known to all, whether they really provide the fairest result - given the objectives of the policy - and whether the results achieved are consistent with what is understood to be fair (De Mario, 2016, p. 11).

Questioning the values supported by the policy makes it possible to adopt a substantive evaluative perspective that is concerned with ideas and values and the role of the actors involved in understanding the process of producing a public policy and its results, it is a perspective based on the notion that public policies contain values supported by society and removes the analytical emphasis from institutional processes, procedures and efficiency, understanding the institution's performance from the context and disputes over political projects that mark the role of the actors directly or indirectly involved with the public policy being evaluated or analyzed (De Mario, 2016).

Another important discussion on the values that underpin public policy evaluations is carried out by Jannuzzi (2016). According to the author, economic efficiency, procedural efficacy, and social effectiveness are the three values in dispute in the field of evaluation in contemporary Brazil. The first is preferred by those who advocate a less protagonist state, with its activities delegated to the markets, while procedural effectiveness concerns legal compliance with the administrative act, and is the value that guides audits, assessments, opinions, and recommendations. Social effectiveness is the value that aims to guarantee social rights and better living conditions for citizens, which also promotes a fairer and more socially cohesive society (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 132). The author argues that,

[...] although all are republican values intrinsic to democratic societies, the primacy of one over the others is conditioned by the underlying conception of Social Justice and the way to achieve it; in turn, this conception points to the evaluation model to be used which, in the end, provides evidence that reinforces or not the worldviews and public policy choices made (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 127).

It is in this sense that the author defends social effectiveness as the maximum value to be sought in the evaluation design of policies and programs. Economic efficiency and procedural effectiveness would then be "[...] means-criteria, applied to processes and activities, not the ultimate values of Policies" (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 136). Thus, for Jannuzzi,

[...] as advocated by the 1988 Constitution and several other current normative documents that establish National Policies and International Treaties, values such as equity, justice, social well-being and, in time, environmental sustainability are the final criteria to inspire the Evaluations (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 137).

Laisner and De Mario (2014) propose that the practice of evaluation should be participatory, that it should take place continuously, right from the formulation of the policy and that it should be adopted as an endogenous practice - not just external to the

institution responsible for producing the public policy. The authors emphasize its potential as an instrument of social control, since evaluation provides data and information that is fundamental for ensuring transparency, accountability in public management and public debate with civil society.

For this to happen, it is necessary for civil society to have spaces for participation at different moments in political life and government bodies, which should no longer be a bureaucratic procedure, but one of effective participation. According to the authors, these spaces "[...] also give a voice to new actors and issues, give visibility to conflict, allowing divergent interests and opinions to be recognized, and provide their participants with access to information, knowledge and power" (Laisner & De Mario, 2014, p. 625).

The participation of civil society enables an evaluation practice that is committed to producing data not only for managers and technicians, but also for social control. From this perspective, evaluation is seen as a democratic requirement, not restricted to technocratic spaces. It is a question of adopting an epistemic approach which, by considering the substantive aspects of what citizens and civil servants say, allows for the development of an evaluation model anchored in the process of policy legitimacy. For this reason, De Mario, Laisner & Granja (2016) emphasize the importance of publicizing the evaluation process and its criteria, which would ensure greater involvement by society.

De Mario et al. (2016, p. 58) also see the politicized participation of the population as an exercise in citizenship, capable of enabling the construction of a new culture of political participation. According to the authors, participation depends on

[...] of a set of skills of society and its pressure mechanisms, which we know that society itself often does not count on, which means that, above all, this evaluation paradigm, as an exercise of citizenship, must be based on a new culture of political participation, a new configuration of relations between society and the State, which we understand can be learned, if well constituted as an institutional practice.

Laisner & De Mario (2014, p. 625) also state that it is essential that the ethical debate on the manager's responsibilities towards society be incorporated into public policy, considering the impact of policy on social relations, on people's lives and on relationships that are built between these and public policies. It is in this way, according to the authors, that the dimensions of evaluation as social control and as a management

instrument intertwine, as the manager has data and information available to improve public policy.

3. Methodological dimension of evaluations

Just like the meanings and deontological dimension of evaluation, for authors in the field of critical studies in evaluation, the methodological dimension also needs to be questioned. Boullosa et al. (2021a) argue that the instruments used in evaluative research should not be naturalized, taken as obvious or neutral. In the same logic as the criticism of the supposed neutrality of evaluations, the authors also question the idea of “politically neutral” research methods.

Jannuzzi (2016, p. 125) points out that the questions to investigate and the methodological choices are related to the values shared by those involved in the design and evaluation of public policies. Data and indicators are the result of political choices that determine which aspects should be observed and with which methods. In this sense, “[...] facts become research choices and scientific truths become scientific interpretations directly linked to who observes, how they observe and from where they observe the object of analysis” (Boullosa et al., 2021b, p. 319, [authors’ emphasis]).

As Jannuzzi (2011) points out, there is a myth in the field of public policy evaluation: that the most appropriate and legitimate methods are those inspired by the natural sciences, considered the “gold standard” in evaluation research (generally experimental or quasi-experimental). Those who believe this,

[...] “advocate that good and scientific Public Policy is that produced in econometric laboratories, far from the subjective choices of managers or suspicious pressures from the public potentially favored or excluded from government benefits” (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 122).

Jannuzzi (2020, p.57) points out that from this perspective, arguments are made that the use of techniques confers neutrality on the interpretation of evaluation research data, or that the complexity of the quantitative model can replace “the ‘sociological imagination’ of the researcher. However, the author argues that “there is no a priori universal method, more legitimate or with greater ‘scientific status’ for any and all evaluation research, just as there is no single procedure for academic research” (Jannuzzi, 2011, p. 270). He also rejects the idea that there is one method that is the “gold standard”, as the best method is the one that responds to the demands required, while respecting the decision-making timeframe in public management. (Jannuzzi, 2020, p. 55).

The author denounces the fallacy contained in the idea that an uncritical use of applied research techniques is possible, drawing attention to the fact that there is a certain fetishization of technique in the hegemonic field of evaluation, “[...] to the detriment of the methodological transparency, ethical smoothness and republican responsibility that program evaluations – even more than academic works – should have” (Jannuzzi, 2016, p. 120).

Thus, in some studies, it can be seen, the method determines what you want to answer, considering that the choice of the object to be analyzed is made by the possibility of applying methods that confer a supposed clarity and “aesthetic beauty” to the study. In addition, for the author, there is an overvaluation of impact evaluations in the field and a neglect of those of a more formative nature (Jannuzzi, 2011), the former being reinforced by multilateral institutions which, in general, only put resources into research evaluations that seek to analyze results and are willing to follow certain standards (Jannuzzi, 2016). In this sense, the use of certain evaluation models has been reinforced, to the detriment of research methods capable of answering relevant questions for the improvement of the policy or program being evaluated.

The use of "technique for technique's sake" is also observed in the choice of indicators. Guimarães and Jannuzzi (2005) discuss the oversizing of synthetic indicators (summary measures), such as the Human Development Index (HDI). According to the authors, in the field of evaluation, indicators seem to take the place of the concepts that originated them, in other words, concepts are replaced by the measures created to operationalize them. One of the consequences of this phenomenon is that it reinforces the tendency to think of indicators as if they existed by themselves, free of ideological values, “[...] as if their construction did not involve the theoretical orientations and methodological choices of their proponents” (Guimarães & Jannuzzi, 2005, p. 77). In addition, Jannuzzi (2016) points out that the combination of measures in the construction of these indicators does not always have a clear conceptual framework. According to the author, there is a compulsion for “precise” measures to assess the impact of programs, leaving efforts to obtain context and process indicators in the background.

Thus, Jannuzzi (2005) argues that the choice of indicators for evaluating public policies should be based on a critical assessment of a series of properties, and not simply on the tradition of their use. In other words, the choice of indicators needs to follow a

logic and not obey universalist evaluation models. It is from this perspective that Jannuzzi (2011, p. 254) discusses the problem of using very standardized evaluation models,

"[...] without the due 'customization' that they should have depending on the stage of maturity of the programs - or the moments of the 'life cycle' in which they find themselves - or, even, of conducting them without a prior analysis of the degree of evaluability of the programs [...]"

Along the same lines, Rodrigues (2008, p. 10) criticizes the adoption of universal assessment models that are usually applied to particular contexts, disregarding their local and situational specificities. A similar issue is pointed out by Boullosa et al. (2021a, p. 06), who point to a trend towards homogenization of assessment practices, approaches, and models, considered by manuals and booklets to be "good assessment practices". According to these authors, this trend is legitimized by the so-called "evaluation market", where evaluators produce and reproduce knowledge based on methodologies supported by supposed neutrality, leading to the impoverishment of the debate in the field.

The authors present some ways to circumvent the methodological standardization present in the field. Boullosa et al. (2021a, p. 06) put forward the idea of "antimanualization" of public policy evaluation, as a way of placing the normative-evaluative dimension at the center of the organization of the methodological dimension. For the authors, "by critically positioning ourselves on our own repertoire and practices, we will be better able to start decolonizing our own evaluation design processes that are more adherent to the Brazilian context" (Boullosa et al., 2021a, p. 06).

Boullosa (2020), Boullosa et al. (2021b) and Jannuzzi (2011) suggest adopting a multiplicity of methods, instruments, and analytical paths, which would move evaluators away from the "imprisoning formal logic" and towards "informal logics of practical reason" (Boullosa et al., 2021b, p. 323). Along these lines, Jannuzzi (2011, p. 272) points out the importance of employing "methodological pluralism, mixed evaluative approaches, triangulation of investigative approaches and complementarity of techniques", and the "[...] capacity for improvisation and technical malleability in the face of the complexity of the object of study".

In this way, the authors from the field of critical evaluation studies contribute to the importance of not sticking to certain techniques but using them according to the needs of the evaluation research. However, it is not a question of considering qualitative and quantitative approaches as mutually exclusive, but as complementary (Jannuzzi, 2011). According to the authors, it is necessary to prioritize methods and instruments that can

answer questions relevant to the improvement of social programs, rather than those that appear to be more scientific.

3.1 In-depth evaluation

Among the alternatives proposed by authors in the field of critical evaluation studies, we would highlight in-depth evaluation, an anthropological approach developed by Lea Rodrigues (2008, 2011, 2016), whose refinement includes contributions from authors such as Gussi (2008), who introduced the notion of trajectory, and Gonçalves (2008) and Gonçalves and Santos (2010), who affirm the need to build sociocultural indicators.

This approach is based on the premise that the knowledge produced has multiple dimensions and is built from different types of information. In this sense, Rodrigues (2008, p.11) points out that the evaluation should not only consider the issues that were the guiding principle of the policy, but that it should refuse to adopt universal models so that the specificities of each situation and the places affected by the policy are not disregarded.

In in-depth evaluation, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity are conditions for evaluative research, which must be extensive, detailed, dense, broad, and multidimensional. Favoring the interpretative approach, Rodrigues (2008) defends the importance of the social sciences, especially anthropology for the field of public policy studies.

The author highlights four areas of analysis for an in-depth evaluation: a) the content of the program, paying attention to its formulation, its conceptual bases (paradigms that guide it) and its internal coherence; b) the socio-economic, political and legal context in which the policy was formulated; c) the institutional trajectory, with a view to analyzing the "degree of coherence/dispersion of the program throughout its transit through the institutional channels" (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 12); d) the temporal spectrum of the program. 12); d) the temporal and territorial spectrum of the program, seeking to compare the objectives of the policy with local specificities and their historicity.

We highlight the notion of trajectory adopted by the approach. According to Gussi and Oliveira (2015, p. 17), trajectory is understood on the basis of Bourdieu's (1989) comprehensive sociology, for which one must consider both the positions of subjects (and institutions) in a given historical and social context, and the interpretations of these

positions, allowing their trajectories to be constructed from their own representations. In this way, it is possible to understand the social context in which the subjects are inserted from their narratives and life stories, as well as the representations they formulate (Gussi & Oliveira, 2015). In this sense, the authors' methodological proposal transposes this idea of trajectory to thinking about a policy/program. For Gussi and Oliveira (2015, p. 17),

[...] the idea is that the policy/program does not have a single meaning and is subject to re-significations, according to their different positions in the various institutional spaces (or outside of them) that they traverse, in other words, according to their movements in the institution or in the community that is the target of this policy or program.

According to the authors, based on a relativistic stance, a "dense description" should be made, as proposed by Geertz (2008), of the program's trajectory, understanding its meanings. This means that the evaluator needs to understand how the subjects involved conceive the policy and understand its results, based on their own cultural references. By adopting an ethnographic perspective, the analysis focuses on the dimension of the collective institutional trajectory of policies and programs, understood as a becoming, in constant transformation, caused by forces and intentions that are internal and external to it (Gussi & Oliveira, 2015). Regarding transformations, as Rodrigues (2008) points out, it is crucial to understand the moments in which what was initially planned is interrupted or redirected, causing breaks in the continuity of the flow between policy conception and action.

According to Gussi and Oliveira (2015, p. 15), the analytical dimension of in-depth evaluation should consider,

[...] the new configurations of contemporary patterns of state intervention; the interplay of social interests, in the context of power relations; the cultural universe, where the different subjects involved in this policy move and constitute themselves; and the public agendas and political actions of the different subjects.

Associated with the analytical dimension, the methodological dimension from the perspective of in-depth evaluation, "[...] does not obey a priori models, but rather constitutes a procedural construction of the researcher evaluator, who makes his methodological choices throughout the evaluation process" (Gussi & Oliveira, 2015, p. 16).

4. Final considerations

The aim of this article was to contribute to the systematization of the field of critical evaluation studies, and at the same time to contribute to the debate and the strengthening of this field by affirming the importance and the need for evaluators and researchers in the field of evaluation in Brazil to assume positionality.

We start from the assumption that the exercise of criticism imposes on us the task of adopting a reflexive stance, capable of questioning not only the narratives constructed about the field of evaluation and the established order, but also "your own action" as an agent in the field. In this context, the evaluation process and the procedures adopted should not be restricted to the public affirmation of a gold standard technique that would justify the results obtained, since there is no neutrality. The criteria adopted in the choice of parameters and analytical categories must be made public, highlighting the intentionality and position of the evaluator as an agent who takes on the responsibility of assigning value and interfering in the trajectory and destiny of a public policy or program. A political act.

In other words, as the authors analyzed here point out, adopting a critical stance that guides the debate and evaluation practice contributes to the necessary publicizing of the ethical debate that involves not only the relationship between public managers and civil society, but also the evaluator's own actions as a political subject. In this sense, the assumption of the political dimension of the evaluator's practice and of the evaluation process are fundamental to its democratization. The main contributions of the field of critical evaluation studies include the strengthening of the debate on the political dimension of public policies in the field of public policy, associated with the critique of the positivist perspective of evaluation. Another important discussion in this field deals with the relationship between techniques and values and the need to make them explicit in the evaluation process (Boullosa 2020, Boullosa et al., 2021a). Its authors also generally argue that these values should take into account the construction of a fairer and more democratic society (Boullosa et al., 2021b, Jannuzzi, 2020, Laisner & De Mario, 2014). The deontological dimension of evaluations is a fundamental point of discussion in the field of public policy evaluation. Boullosa et al. (2021a) and Boullosa et al. (2021b) think of evaluators as political subjects who must problematize their own conceptions of the world. For the authors, it is not possible for analysts to be devoid of values, so they must consider them in their analysis. In this sense, the notions of reflexivity and

positionality are central to the debate. Evaluation is thought of here as a producer of knowledge (Boullosa, 2020, Boullosa et al., 2021a, Jannuzzi, 2020), and in this way, evaluators are perceived more as advisors and facilitators of dialogue than producers of "hard data".

With regard to the values underlying public policy and evaluative practice, De Mario (2016) contributes to this debate with the possibility of analyzing public policies that take into account issues of justice, taking as a reference the normative debate of Rawlsian theories of justice. Jannuzzi (2016) also points out how economic efficiency, procedural effectiveness and social effectiveness are the three values in dispute in contemporary Brazil. The author concludes that the first two should be considered criteria-means, while social effectiveness should be the goal of a public policy. Evaluation is also thought of from a participatory perspective and the adoption of an epistemic approach, which allows it to be thought of as an instrument of social control (Laisner & De Mario, 2014), making it a democratic requirement (De Mario et al., 2016).

About the methodological dimension of public policy evaluations, Jannuzzi (2016), Boullosa et al. (2021a) and Boullosa et al. (2021b) discuss the need to problematize evaluation instruments, not considering them neutral and exempt. From this perspective, the authors argue that the use of data and indicators is the result of choices imbricated with values. Jannuzzi (2011, 2016, 2020) also questions the existence of a single method that is the "gold standard" in evaluation research, considering that the best method is the one that produces evidence according to the given research context. In this sense, the author (2016) points to the uncritical use of research methods, especially those inspired by the natural sciences, in order to supposedly make the research more scientific. This use of "technique for technique's sake" is also observed in the choice of indicators, as Guimarães and Januzzi (2005) point out when discussing the misuse of synthetic indicators. In this logic, Boullosa et al. (2021a), Jannuzzi (2011) and Rodrigues (2008) criticize the adoption of universal research models, in other words, standardized models that disregard the unique issues of policies and programs.

Some solutions to the methodological problems pointed out are presented. Boullosa et al. (2021a) advocate an "antimanualization" of the field, where epistemological normativity should guide the methodological dimension. Boullosa (2020), Boullosa et al. (2021b) and Jannuzzi (2011) suggest the adoption of multiple methods and instruments, avoiding a single path of analysis, with the more appropriate

use of a methodological pluralism that considers quantitative and qualitative techniques. For the authors, it is necessary to choose methodologies that respond to relevant research problems, and not those that simply seem "more scientific".

We believe that the alternative that establishes an evaluation practice consistent with the critical perspective of evaluation is the method developed by Lea Rodrigues (2008, 2011, 2016), whose refinement included proposals by authors such as Gussi (2008), Gonçalves (2008) and Gonçalves and Santos (2010). In proposing "in-depth evaluation", the authors favor an interpretive approach with a comprehensive analysis of the policy, covering the content of the program, the context in which it was formulated, its institutional trajectory, and its temporal and territorial spectrum. In in-depth evaluation, the methodology must be developed by the researcher throughout the evaluation process.

Finally, we would like to point out that in-depth evaluation has been worked on and applied in evaluations carried out by students linked to the master's degree in Public Policy Evaluation (MAPP) at the Federal University of Ceará (UFC) (Gussi, 2019). This enriching experience contributes to the refinement of the theoretical-methodological field of public policy evaluation, and especially to the political debate on the meanings of evaluative practice, as demanded by the field of critical evaluation studies. Its results show that it is possible to put pressure on the field of public policy evaluation and work on developing evaluations that contribute to the construction of other epistemologies and methodologies that allow for the democratization of evaluation practice in Brazil.

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