

Positionality vs. Reflexivity

What's the Difference?

Alissa L. Jones, M.A., Doctoral Student- Evaluation Studies

UNIVERSITY
OF MINNESOTA
Driven to DiscoverSM

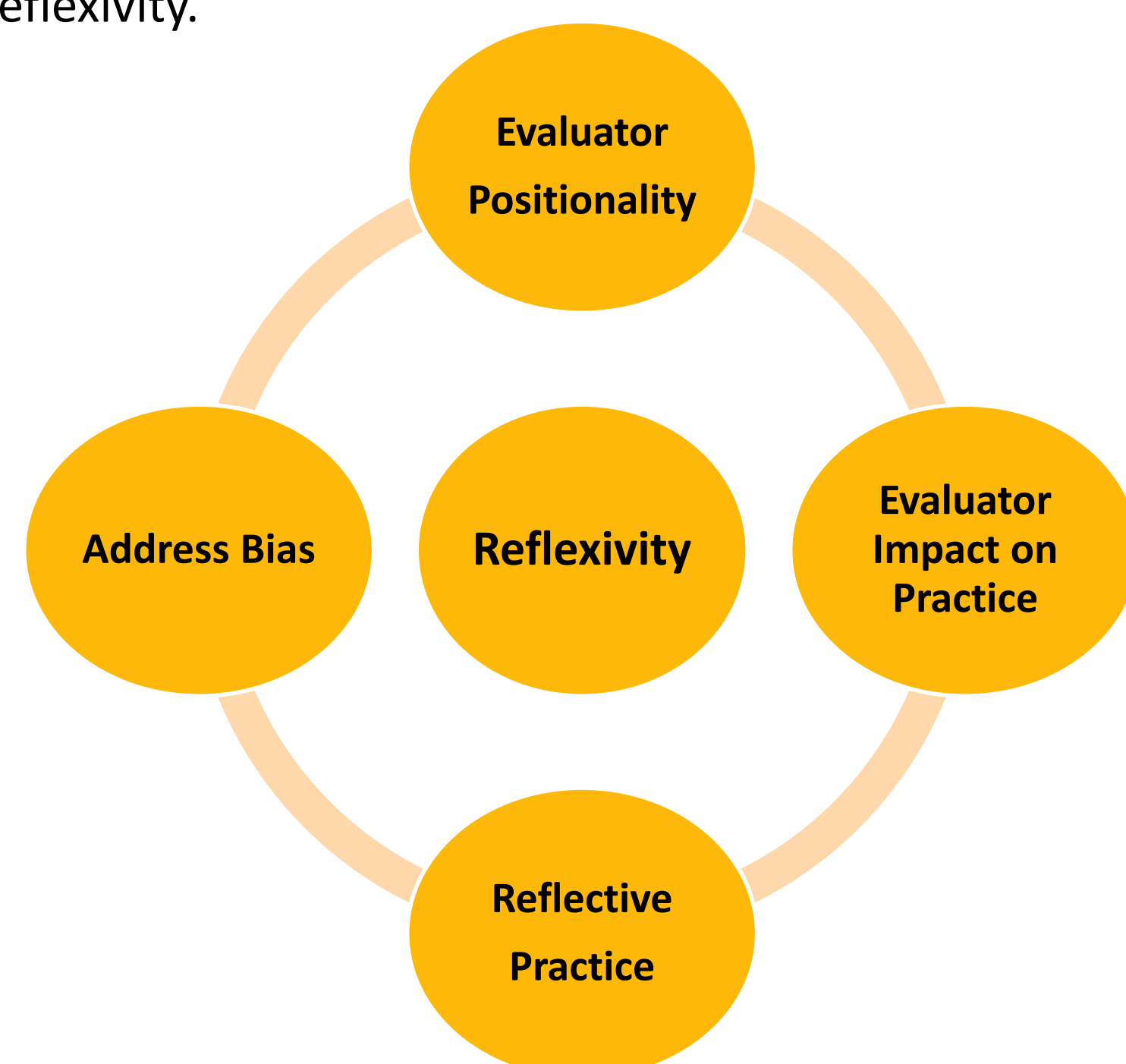


Organizational Leadership,
Policy, and Development

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The AEA's *Guiding Principles* (2018) and *Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation* (2011) allude to the importance of reflexivity in evaluator practice and suggest evaluators assess and reflect on one's own privilege and position within their evaluation context in order to provide ethical, unbiased, and culturally responsive evaluation. However, there is limited empirical research and a lack of contextualization of what reflexivity is in American Evaluation Association's (AEA) sponsored journals. How are positionality and reflexivity explicitly defined? And what is the relationship between the two terms? *Positionality* encompasses an individual's identities (race, gender, sex, age, etc.), lived experience, society, historical movements, and will change over time and depending on context (Alcoff, 1988; Bartlett, 1990; Haraway, 1988). It is dynamic, unique to each individual, and based on multi-layered characteristics. In contrast, *reflexivity* in evaluation includes recognizing the evaluator's positionality as well as addressing one's bias, impact on practice, and incorporation of reflective practice (Williams, 2005). In essence, positionality is a subcomponent of reflexivity.

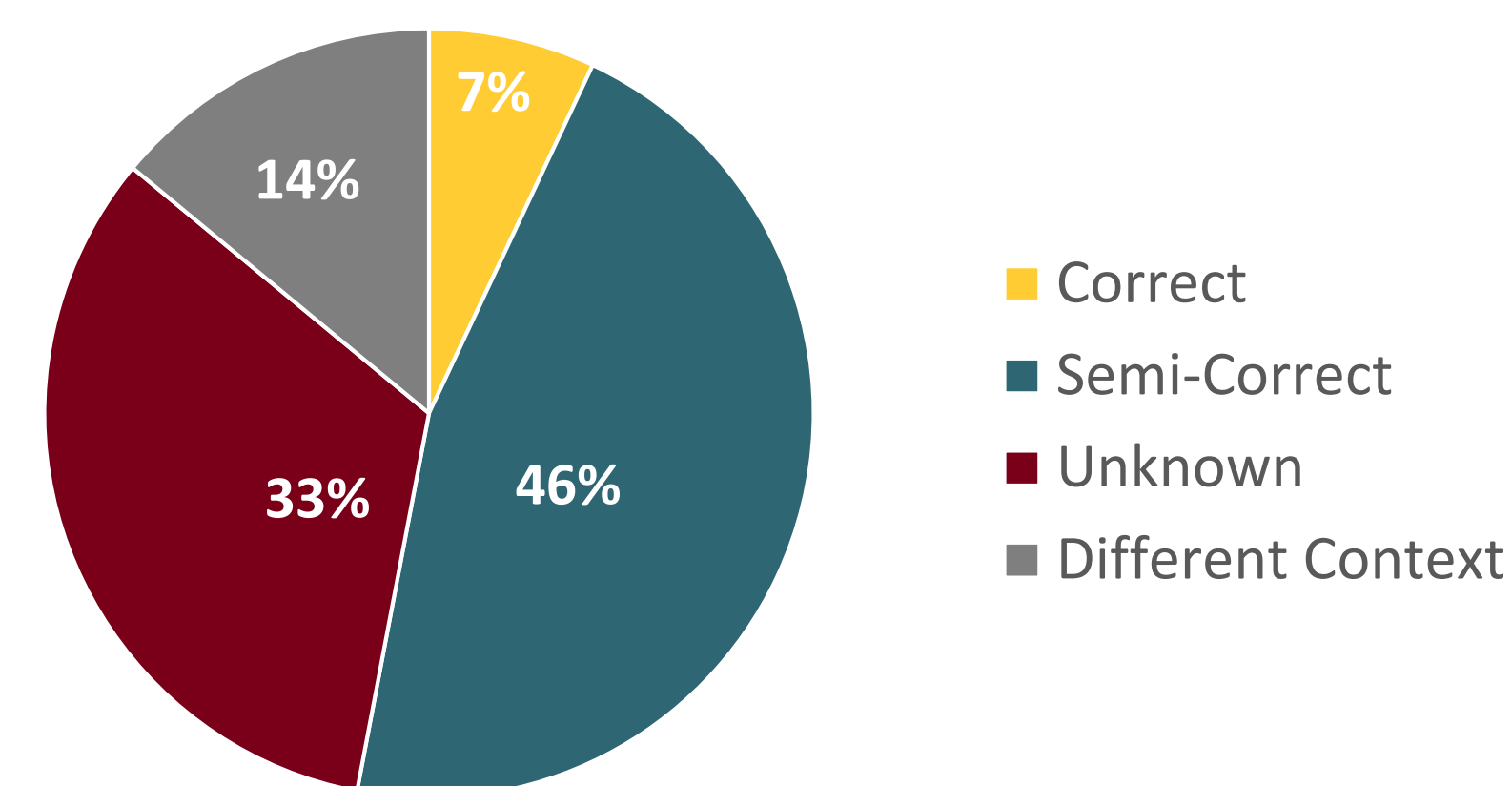


Analysis

Implied Definition Exercise

The implied definition exercise indicated three articles (7%) contextualized reflexivity based on all four components of William's (2005) definition and were coded as Correct. Twenty articles (46%) were Semi-Correct and partially contextualized reflexivity by including one component (N=14) or two components (N=6). In fourteen articles (33%), the use of the term lacked context and articles were coded as Unknown. Lastly, six articles (14%) indicated a use of reflexivity other than the focus of this paper and were coded as Different Context.

Distribution of Articles Based on Implied Definition Exercise



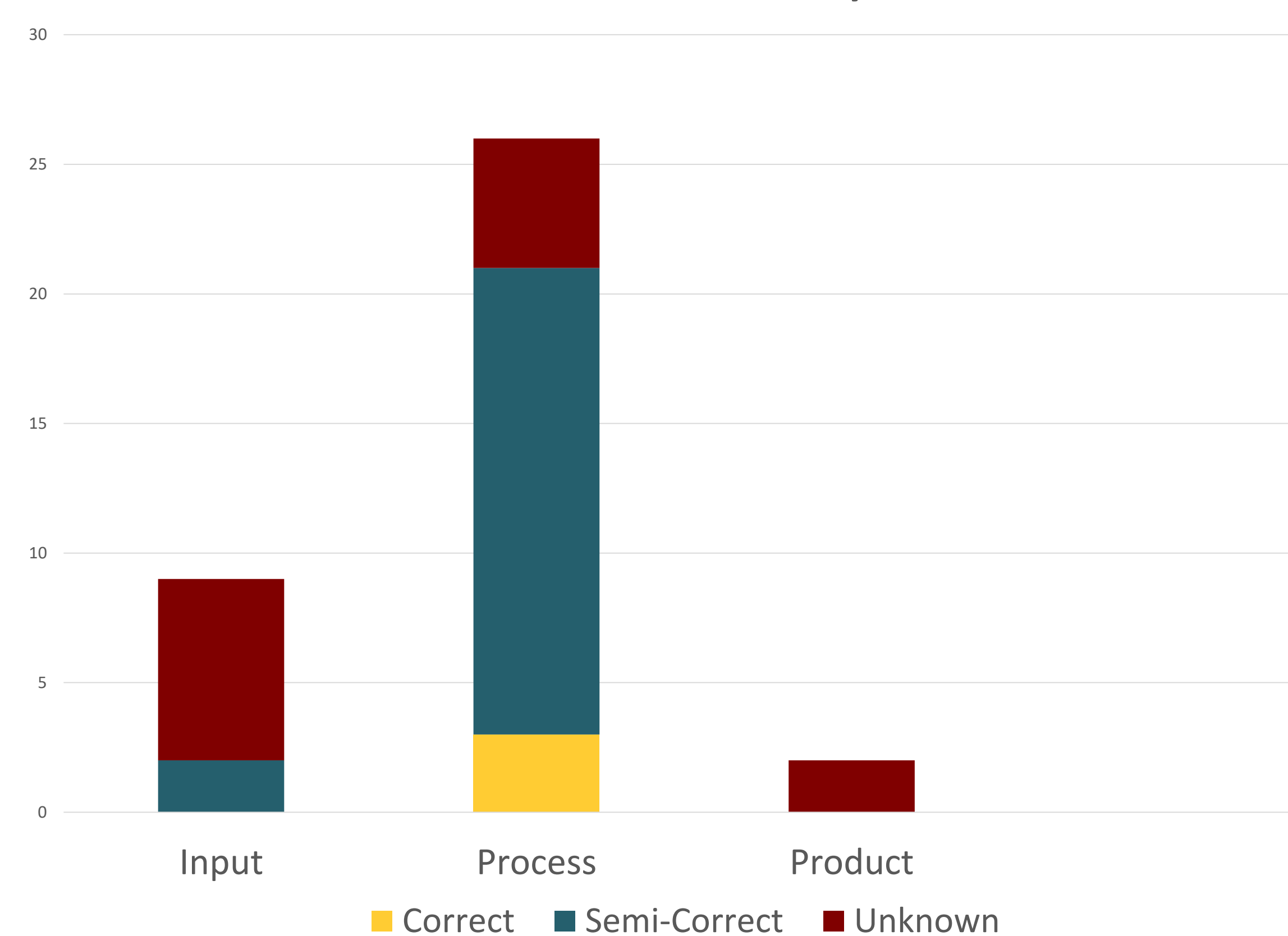
The reflexivity components identified in the Correct and Semi-Correct articles (N=23) were distributed as follows:

Reflexivity Components Reflected in Correct and Semi-Correct Articles			
Reflective Practice	Evaluator Positionality	Evaluator Impact on Practice	Address Bias
21	7	6	3

CIPP Taxonomy Exercise

The Correct articles (N=3) were all coded as Process. Semi-Correct articles (N=20) were coded as Process (N=18) or Input (N=2). The Unknown articles fell into various areas of the CIPP model: Input (N=7), Process (N=5), and Product (N=2). The Different Context articles were not included in this exercise as they clearly were not utilizing reflexivity in the same context.

Distribution of Articles based on CIPP Taxonomy Exercise



Conclusions

This literature review aimed to assess the relationship between positionality and reflexivity through an Implied Definition exercise and the contextualization of reflexivity utilizing a CIPP Taxonomy exercise. As demonstrated by the results, the usage of reflexivity in AEA-sponsored journals is vague and imprecise. Firstly, the Implied Definition exercise indicated all four components of William's (2005) definition were present in only 3 articles. In addition, only seven articles contained the Evaluator Positionality component. If positionality is a core component of reflexivity, then it is assumed more articles would include this contextualization. Lastly, the high percentage of Unknown articles attests to the fact that there is a lack of clarity regarding the use of reflexivity in the literature.

In the CIPP Taxonomy exercise, reflexivity was expected to appear primarily in the Process category because it is the act of self-reflection associated with a specific evaluand process or situation. Articles coded as Correct were all placed in Process while Semi-Correct articles had all but two articles in Process. The Unknown articles were dispersed across the three categories. The results indicate that as the number of implied definitions codes decreased, the number of articles coded as Input and Product increased. This exercise illustrates and supports the claim that evaluation literature lacks a clear, concise, consistent definition and usage of reflexivity.

Furthermore, it is important to note only one article was based on empirical research on reflexivity (van Draanen, 2017). Van Draanen (2017) presents a model for reflexivity in practice; however, it does not include empirical data on how reflexivity impacts outcomes or improves evaluation practice. Empirical research to test the claim that reflexivity truly does reduce bias and increase cultural competency and ethical practice in evaluation is needed. Moreover, it is critical for all evaluators to have a clear understanding of reflexivity in order to appropriately apply the concept in practice and conduct research on how reflexivity adds value to evaluation practice and outcomes.

Limitations: There are four limitations to this article review: 1) coding was completed by one individual, 2) lack of rigor in statistical analysis, 3) assumption of author's understanding of reflexivity usage, and 4) the researcher's positionality. Since there was only one researcher analyzing the data, it can be assumed additional coders would contribute to increased validity and trustworthiness. Basic analysis was utilized in this exercise and as such more nuanced statistical analysis may be able to interpret relationships between the variables. In addition, an assumption was made that authors that did not contextualize the use of reflexivity (articles coded as Unknown) may not be utilizing it correctly as there was a lack of evidence demonstrating aspects of William's (2005) definition. Lastly, the researcher recognizes their own positionality and how it may have impacted the results.

References

- Alcoff, L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs*, 13(3), 405-436.
- American Evaluation Association. (2011). *Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation*.
- American Evaluation Association. (2018). *American Evaluation Association guiding principles for evaluators*
- Bartlett, K. T. (1990). Feminist legal methods. *Harvard Law Review*, 103(4), 829-888.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Stufflebeam, D. L. (2001). Evaluation models. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2001(89), 7-98.
- Van Draanen, J. (2017). Introducing reflexivity to evaluation practice: An in-depth case study. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 38(3), 360-375.
- Williams, D. D. (2005) Reflexivity. In S. Mathison (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of evaluation* (p. 369). Sage Publications.

Methods

The purpose of this literature review was to analyze the relationship of positionality and reflexivity as well as the contextualization of reflexivity in AEA-sponsored journal articles. A Boolean search was conducted using "reflex*" and captured three terms: reflexivity, reflexive, and reflexively (N=84). Next, the search was limited to 2010 – April 2020 and book reviews, editor's notes, panel discussions, and publication notices were eliminated. Analysis was conducted on the implied definition of reflexivity and a taxonomy exercise of the remaining articles (N=43).

Implied Definition Exercise: The categories were deductively identified based on William's (2005) definition above. If an article contained all four components, it was coded as Correct. If the article did not include all 4 components, it was coded as Semi-Correct. Articles that did not contain any components were coded as Unknown (i.e., insufficient context to assign categories) or Different Context (i.e., a clear indication that usage of reflexivity was different from the William's definition of the term).

CIPP Taxonomy Exercise: Categories were deductively identified based on Stufflebeam's (2001) evaluation model: Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP). *Context* identifies the general topic of the article. Then Input, Process and Product highlight at what point of the evaluation process reflexivity occurs. *Input* guides attitudes, behaviors, decisions and values and occurs prior to engaging with an evaluand. *Process* includes the actions or activities associated with the evaluand. Lastly, *Product* identifies results, reporting, outputs, and outcomes following the evaluation process.