By Whose Standards? Reflections on Empowerment Evaluation and Grassroots Groups

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ABSTRACT

Our recent work with grassroots organizations raises several questions about empowerment evaluation. Critics have focused on concerns such as lack of rigor and objectivity, but few have addressed deeper philosophical issues. One of these issues centers on evaluation standards. Empowered program stakeholders who set the research agenda in the empowerment model may have different ideas from those of the professional evaluator about the structure of inquiry and the use of evaluation. In some cases, the evaluator may question the ethics underlying their choices. One critical issue is
whether overarching standards for empowerment evaluation are needed, and if so, who defines them. A second issue focuses on whether there is harmony between the model’s twin goals of evaluation ownership and group advocacy, which we found to be incompatible in some situations. Many grassroots organizations who were concerned with group advocacy (e.g., receiving recognition, attracting funding) found it pragmatic to surrender evaluation ownership to the institutionally-based, professional evaluators, particularly when they anticipated favorable evaluation findings.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over who defines standards of inquiry was once reserved for anthropologists and a few philosophically-oriented researchers. Those who believed the external, “objective” researcher was best positioned to ferret out universally relevant topics and strategies were called eticists. As expected, the locus of power rested with the observer. Other researchers, called emicists, rejected the search for overarching standards, claiming that what was relevant grew out of the natives’ categories of meaning — meaning that may have been fixed within groups, but varied across cultures. Purportedly, the locus of power rested with the group under study (Pelto & Pelto, 1987). More recently, postmodernists have argued that norms and standards are continually transformed through historical, cultural, dialogical, and situational processes. The locus of power is contingent on context, and the search for universals is pointless. These three views suggest two common questions: Should overarching standards of inquiry apply, regardless of research framework, and if so, which actors determine them? In a more recent development, we have empowerment evaluation, and this model infuses these questions into evaluation practice. We encountered these issues (and others) when we introduced empowerment evaluation to 11 grassroots groups.

As a new genre in evaluation, the empowerment approach has sought to place evaluators and program stakeholders on an even plane. In practice, evaluators offer facilitation and ongoing training in research skills, while program stakeholders (e.g., staff, administrators, clients, volunteers) set the actual evaluation goals and identify their own program performance indicators. According to Fetterman (1996a), a chief proponent of the new genre, the empowerment approach involves five facets: (1) participant training, (2) evaluator facilitation, (3) direct advocacy on behalf of the program by the evaluator and others, (4) participant illumination (achieving new insights), and (5) participant liberation (release from pre-existing roles and constraints). Fetterman recommends the specific steps of self-assessment, setting goals, developing strategies, and documenting progress (1994, 1996a, 1996b). While some evaluation approaches, such as the interpretive framework (e.g., Guba & Lincoln 1989), have advocated for the importance of diverse stakeholder perspectives, only the empowerment model places evaluation standards — and the determination of when they have been met — in the hands of stakeholders. We use this forum to reflect on our experiences with grassroots groups that challenge certain assumptions about the empowerment evaluation approach, and to bring important questions to the forefront of the dialogue about this approach.

GRASSROOTS GROUPS AND EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION

We began to reflect on the significance of this essentially emic model while evaluating a Milwaukee demonstration project called Neighborhood Partners. Neighborhood Partners was a
community partnership program for alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) prevention, funded by the federal Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). The Milwaukee effort developed an approach to prevention that emphasized assistance to volunteer-based, grassroots groups. Over a period of five years, Neighborhood Partners’ community organizers gave technical assistance and direct resources to 60 member grassroots organizations, including block clubs, AODA support groups, ethnic associations, and youth clubs. Most of the groups were run by volunteers from lower socioeconomic classes and ethnic minorities.

Our agency, the Center for Health Policy and Program Evaluation (CHPPE) at the University of Wisconsin’s Medical School, contracted with Neighborhood Partners to conduct the local evaluation of the overall project. As the effort progressed, the program’s community organizers began to receive requests for evaluation assistance by member groups. We recognized that grassroots organizations were well-positioned for the empowerment evaluation model because they were rarely constrained by the prescriptions of funding agencies. The major funding sources for our groups were membership dues and charitable donations. This left the groups more free than most professionally-directed agencies in selecting the processes, indicators, methods, outcomes, and uses of evaluation.

Between 1994 and 1996, in carrying out this evaluation, we collaborated with 11 informal organizations. The evaluation strategies usually involved two stages. During the first stage we facilitated introductory training in evaluation (including cost effectiveness topics). Then the groups completed an organizational self-assessment of needs, strengths, and goal-consensus topics. The self-assessment usually included introductory evaluation training, stakeholder discussions, and a survey of organizational capacities. We had developed the survey specifically for this project through a collaborative effort with five diverse member groups. Activists from the five groups defined a wide range of organizational factors that they considered vital to the survival of grassroots organizations, and we incorporated them into one uniform instrument and interview guide. Among the factors were 33 specific capacities on organizational maintenance and program implementation, as well as the more activist capacities such as influencing internal members, the neighborhoods, local collaboratives, institutions, and the wider community. The survey and interview guide asked participants two questions about each of these specific capacities: (1) how do you rate your organization’s performance on this capacity? and (2) how important is this capacity to you personally? By including two parts to each question, participants were simultaneously able to assess both organizational performance and perceived need and/or preferences on a wide range of factors.

Findings served two purposes: (1) they helped Neighborhood Partners staff assess groups’ needs, and (2) they provided the grassroots organizations with feedback to use in any way they wished. Any group that completed the self-assessment received and reviewed a 15 to 20 page report under our letterhead. From this platform we initiated discussion on the next stage of the evaluation.

Stage two involved more specific evaluation issues. Here grassroots members selected topics they wanted to explore in detail. These topics ranged from evaluation of single events to researching long-term effects of social activism. Once the evaluation/research topics were developed, we helped the groups by training them in maintaining management records and collecting and analyzing data. At this point they were to assume responsibility for nearly all phases of their evaluation/research, including interpretation of findings. They understood that we would remain available for short-term consultation, but our presence would not figure prominently in their findings or in any written reports of these findings.
While groups usually gave us favorable feedback on the utility of stage one, some groups elected to forego stage two. Five of the 11 organizations never returned to evaluate actual program practice. Most of these organizations had favorable findings from the organizational assessment. At times the group leaders seemed to want extensive roles in evaluation, and at other times they chose to limit these roles. Many of the motivating factors we will discuss are not exclusive to either grassroots groups or the empowerment model, but tend to be more magnified in the grassroots/empowerment combination because of fewer constraints on the process. One of the chief motivating factors in continuing or ending the evaluation work was access to resources — particularly the availability of volunteer hours.

Evaluation Resources and Grassroots Groups

Most groups we assisted did not have the human resources or the available time to engage in the number of activities suggested by empowerment evaluation advocates (Fetterman, 1994, 1996a). None of our groups had more than 15 volunteers, and most relied on one to three leaders to manage the brunt of operational, programmatic, and activist duties. Some leaders frankly assessed their available energy and told us that evaluation was not as important to them as many other tasks.

The first empowerment evaluation we initiated as part of our overall Neighborhood Partners program evaluation was with the Lewis Circle Block Club. This multicultural group ran a block watch, a multi-faceted crime prevention program, a community fair, a local newsletter, and a food drive for the residents. We set up a meeting with the Club’s two key leaders — who told us in advance that we had better be prepared to present all our information in a “terse” fashion. We did, and during the meeting, one of the leaders explained their monthly meeting policy.

We like to keep our volunteers occupied by getting things done without a lot of wasted talk. We have these strict meeting rules. First, if you suggest it, you implement it. Second, you don’t get off the agenda. At every meeting we try to address one neighborhood problem. You stay on that topic until you have a decision. Third, every meeting begins exactly on time and ends exactly an hour later. If you get off the topic, expect to be cut off ... At our meetings we always end on time so we can have a social hour. We think that the social hour is just as important as the rest of our work.

With all the pressing concerns this group dealt with in their neighborhood, actual program evaluation never made it to the official agenda. We ended up conducting the organizational factor survey during the social hour, and interviewed key actors at later dates. While block club members expressed delight over getting a report on the organizational factor findings, they never found the time to “sandwich” in any other evaluation activities.

However, we did work with some groups where access to resources was not a central issue. In these situations, stakeholders’ evaluation choices were interesting. At times the choices challenged important assumptions of the empowerment model, including the compatibility of the empowerment and advocacy goals. At other times, issues centered on respective roles of the evaluator and stakeholders — all which suggest questions about who defines the standards, indicators, and uses of evaluation. In some cases the issue was actually “who defines who defines?”
Who Defines Who Defines?

Getting stakeholders involved in evaluation is particularly important for grassroots organizations because most deal with a wide range of community actors such as a general membership, board members, staff, volunteers, and the actual constituency the organization purports to represent. We found grassroots organizations both open and resistant to soliciting feedback from these strata.

An example of the former occurred when we assisted two of the Neighborhood Partners’ grassroots organizations that designed similar programs. The two organizations, Family Focus and the Latino Family Network, developed efforts to train neighborhood volunteers to educate central city families on preventive health practices. Various strata of stakeholders participated in planning an evaluation design for the programs. Participants wanted to know (1) if the needs of the central city families were met by the program, (2) if families were satisfied with the efforts of the volunteers, (3) if the volunteers were sufficiently empowered and honored in their work, and (4) if the program was actually having an impact on health knowledge and behavior in the targeted neighborhoods. Individuals from various sectors collaborated amicably in developing evaluation strategies and instruments to address the various questions they had posed. The process was expedited by the appearance of consensus among collaborating groups, and the elegant designs of the two programs (with very clear roles and objectives).

On the other hand, we sometimes encountered resistance to involving all stakeholders. When we worked with block clubs, we occasionally found neighborhood residents and groups who did not agree with the clubs’ foci. Some dissenters were not active in the block clubs because of time constraints, and others refused involvement because of ethnic tensions, personality conflicts, or opposition to particular policies. In one case, our attempts to bring in these voices created tension with block club leadership (a problem also cited by Stevenson, Mitchell & Florin, 1996). Because we failed to gain the strong support of these “gatekeepers,” we were never able to move beyond the early stages of the empowerment collaborative.

Variations in Evaluation Usage

We also encountered considerable variation in the ways that groups used evaluation. Because of the lack of constraints on grassroots organizations, groups wanted and used evaluation for a variety of traditional and nontraditional purposes. We categorize four for discussion here.

1. Grassroots groups may want evaluation to monitor program outcomes. Perhaps the most common use of evaluation — and one certainly assumed in most evaluation Requests for Proposals — is assessing program effectiveness. Two of our 11 grassroots groups actually asked to forego the organizational survey and move directly into program evaluation. One organization, called Tutoring Tots, provided educational and recreational services to first through third grade students and their families. Following the evaluation training sessions, we collaborated on a series of process studies on client satisfaction. Then the group decided to evaluate the effectiveness of their tutoring component, using a pre- and post-test design with a standardized instrument. Despite their empowerment training (and several research graduate degrees among the stakeholders), the group opted to contract with a professional evaluator to complete their study. When asked why, we were told that they were concerned about the “objectivity” of stakeholders implementing the evaluation.
In another case, a grassroots group was involved in multiple pursuits simultaneously, but did not know how these efforts affected the lives of those they served. The organization, called ABC (Activists for a Better Community), offered weekly workshops to individuals interested in self-help initiatives. Some of the workshops included interviewing/resume writing, starting a business, basic clerical skills, budgeting and consumer tips, social action, and getting back revoked driver’s licenses. Because a large share of their work ultimately involved referring clients to other organizations and institutions, ABC members knew little about the outcomes of their efforts. They were particularly interested in finding out if one group of clients had been able to retrieve their licenses, and if they were successful in getting stable employment. We began assisting them by suggesting ways they could develop a data collection/management system to render some of the needed information, follow hypothetical clients through the necessary steps to success (to determine process), and eventually suggested ideas for a client tracking and follow-up. Unfortunately, the group never carried out the process, in part because they rechanneled considerable energy into a crime prevention collaboration. Thus we do not know whether their fluid volunteer force was able to maintain the careful data collection, monitoring, and analysis necessary for trustworthy evaluation results.

Among other groups, evaluation became more a tool for self-advocacy than a means to monitor program effectiveness.

2. Grassroots groups want evaluation to attract funding. More than any one use, grassroots activists told us they hoped evaluation results would help them attract outside funding. Attracting funds is particularly difficult for grassroots groups because funding agencies often prefer professionally run organizations with stable staff and a history of grants management. Many are unwilling to take chances with the more fluid, volunteer-based groups. But a favorable evaluation report from professional and institutionally-based evaluators can help.

Several groups we assisted included copies of our evaluation reports with their materials when they submitted grants to funding agencies. The two with the most favorable findings got funded (although we have no way of knowing if the reports actually helped).

In another case we were able to advocate directly for funding an organization for which our efforts had yielded favorable findings. The organization, the Latino Men’s Support Group, had been particularly anxious to work with us on evaluation. The organization’s volunteers provided support for recovering substance abusers, ran a recreation center, offered activities for youth, and sponsored several widely-attended cultural events each year. We found the group remarkably stable. All of the men who founded the organization 16 years earlier were still integrally involved. But when we began collaborating on evaluation, the men seemed somewhat mystified by our efforts to coach them into defining their own evaluation questions (of course language barriers also played a role). One leader kept saying, “You are the professionals, do what you do.” Members appeared more comfortable when we produced a report on findings from the organizational assessment and qualitative data. The report portrayed a very responsible and reflexive group with a proven track record. The only negative finding was that their rate of growth had slowed. Our evaluation team and Neighborhood Partners staff were able to take these and other findings to organizers of a new multi-million dollar grant, and persuade them to fund this group as one of the neighborhood resource centers in the program. Unfortunately, this development also ended our work with the group. Somehow members mistook the outcome as a final verdict on their competence, and we were unsuccessful in con-
vicing them to continue the evaluation process — particularly to develop a system to monitor actual program impacts.

3. Grassroots groups may want to use evaluation to receive recognition for their work. Many of leaders of the grassroots groups said they hoped their evaluation reports would help others (including the media) recognize their work. When this motivation was operating, we sometimes found program participants downplaying their roles in the empowerment process.

In one example, we collaborated with a group of recovering substance abusers to evaluate several local efforts. The organization, Recovery!, delivered prevention messages to school and organizational gatherings, organized anti-drug marches, and helped integrate recovering people into other community circles. During the early stages of the training process, we helped assemble many of the group’s key actors to develop research questions and strategies. While grassroots representatives participated in all early planning stages, Recovery! leaders asked us to collect the actual data. Throughout the process they had persisted in crediting us with the full weight of the evaluation. After we integrated a very positive series of qualitative and quantitative findings into one report, we asked them to review it. Except for one spelling error, they only requested one sentence removed — a sentence that listed their members’ names as collaborators in the evaluation. We asked why, and they told us that they had always known their work was good, but they feared others would question the validity and objectivity of an evaluation in which they played a leading role. They saw little benefit in articulating their role in the research design if outsiders might perceive this as a simple self-assessment. In this case, they chose to relinquish their role as evaluation collaborator in favor of advocating for their programs.

4. Grassroots groups may want evaluation to help legitimize their program. Similar issues arise when groups want to legitimize their organization or program. Some grassroots activists want the trappings of professionalism associated with their efforts. In some cases, legitimation takes precedence over useful evaluative feedback or critical analysis. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) have argued, organizations often make decisions to incorporate formal structures into their external portrayals that reflect the expectations of their institutional environments, rather than relying on strategies that actually correspond to or objectively evaluate their activities.

Nearly every group we assisted mentioned some positive effects of having the University of Wisconsin’s name attached to their organization’s evaluation report. In one example, a leader from the previously mentioned Family Focus contacted us about collaborating with another program she helped create. Because this program was not a member of Neighborhood Partners, we had to negotiate a separate contract through the University. When personnel from the University center learned of the program’s limited resources, they suggested that the program contract with the lead evaluator as a private consultant. The consultant could then train program stakeholders to develop their own instruments and collect their own data — as had been done with the Family Focus effort. But when the evaluator presented this option to the program leader, she balked. The activist immediately phoned the University center director, claiming that she had nothing against the particular evaluator (who would be doing the project anyway), but really needed the University’s name to lend legitimacy to this program.
DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, informal groups were particularly good recipients of the empowerment evaluation model because their choices were not nearly as constrained as their formal counterparts. With fewer evaluation prescriptions from funding sources, grassroots organizations were freer to focus on the issues they considered most relevant. In our experiences with 11 grassroots groups, all but one were able to empower at least some of the more interested stakeholders to access evaluation skills and/or select evaluation goals, problems, methods, and uses. In many ways, the empowerment model served them efficiently. Most completed an initial self-assessment survey. Some groups used their evaluation training to monitor and assess ongoing program activities and their impacts on the wider community. However, a surprising number of groups wanted and used evaluation for purposes other than program assessment.

Critics of the empowerment approach have often focused on issues such as lack of rigor and objectivity, but few have addressed the deeper philosophical issues involved in empowerment evaluation. Few have asked whether overarching standards or prerequisites for empowerment evaluation are needed. For example, is an evaluation “good” if it succeeds in advancing the goals of an organization? Or must the evaluation also assess the effectiveness of services to the wider community? What strategies, methods, participants, interests, goals, and uses give an evaluation quality, and who defines these standards? The empowerment model urges the program stakeholders to set the evaluation agenda, with professional evaluators acting to facilitate the process. But a most fundamental problem occurs when the evaluator does not believe the full range of stakeholders are participating in this agenda. Another obstacle arises when stakeholders do not have the necessary resources or interest to insure proper monitoring of evaluation strategies. A third issue emerges when grassroots groups want and use evaluation for purposes other than assessing program effectiveness (when, for example, a group chooses only to measure its consensus on internal processes). In certain cases, the evaluator may actually play a role in executing agendas that s/he may find offensive. At this point, an eticist would surely argue for uniform standards in the empowerment genre, to be set by professionals in the field. These standards would undoubtedly include overarching evaluation prerequisites relating to resources (including interest in learning), democratic participation, inquiry strategies, and use of findings.

On the other hand, emicists or some postmodernists might claim that such overarching standards are just one more way to shift the balance of power away from program stakeholders and back to the professional evaluators. Some might even argue that professional evaluators are really culturally-bound creatures serving the interests of institutional elites, and that local stakeholders (no matter how imperfect) are still better positioned to define their own evaluation objectives. Others may maintain that different types of community programs require very different evaluation strategies (e.g., Leviton, 1994), thus prerequisites may lose their relevance. Still others will argue that the way groups use evaluation is the ultimate good (e.g., Patton, 1986).

But what do stakeholders really want? Our experience with the 11 grassroots groups demonstrates that the stakeholders may resist full evaluation ownership under certain circumstances, particularly when they anticipate favorable evaluation results. This finding suggests some incompatibility among the empowerment model’s goals. According to Fetterman (1994, 1996a), several practices fall under the empowerment evaluation framework. Among these are the processes of self-determination (where groups “own,” plan, and execute their respec-
tive evaluations), and advocacy (where activists and the evaluator use evaluation to gain status and material resources for the program). However, we learned that in the cases of informal organizations, the processes are sometimes contradictory. In terms of self-determination. Most of the groups we assisted seemed to appreciate the opportunity to define their own evaluation topics. But for groups who were more interested in advocating for their organizational interests, none verbalized enthusiasm for on-going self-evaluations. The groups who anticipated favorable evaluation findings, and needed to achieve work recognition, funding, or legitimation preferred to surrender evaluation ownership to the institutionally-based, professional evaluators. Some expressed doubt that self-evaluations would carry any weight with those they needed to influence. Other groups concerned with their volunteer workload also preferred to have us plan and implement their evaluations. Deciding to forego self-determination was sometimes a more rational choice for these groups than its opposite, however much the latter course may be urged by proponents of empowerment evaluation.

Are there middle grounds? Our discussion here is not intended to render judgment on the empowerment model, but to call attention to some of the deeper issues involved in empowerment evaluation — issues that might lead to refinements in the genre. Any reader recognizes that many of the problems we discussed are not exclusive to either grassroots groups or to the empowerment model. One of the values of this new approach is its potential to bring significant philosophical issues to the surface—issues that are sometimes obscured in other evaluation genres. By empowering someone other than ourselves to make important evaluation decisions, we have the opportunity to observe the implications of relative standards and at the same time assess our own assumptions on proper evaluation practices. Let the debates begin.

NOTES

1. Our purpose in writing the report was simply to give them a model for documenting their findings. In the beginning, we had not anticipated the use that the organizations would make of the reports.

2. The names of the grassroots groups have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

3. The issue of empowerment evaluation assisting autocratic actions of Machiavellian decision makers has also been debated in recent issues of *Evaluation Practice*, and early on in the development of the evaluation literature (Blanton & Alley 1974). See Stufflebeam (1994) and Fetterman (1995) for details on this and other current empowerment genre topics.

4. Lather (1986) states that when evaluators attempt to empower the researched, they need to become more systematic about data collection and designs. He suggests a number of steps to increase data trustworthiness.

5. Fetterman (1994, 1996a) responds that all evaluation genres are politically embedded (thus cannot be truly "objective"). For further commentary on problems of objectivity, see Moskowitz (1993). Objectivity is often less an issue in grassroots self-assessments, because the organizations are usually founded on self-help principles. Residents often join block clubs or ethnic associations because they want to achieve specific goals for their own group. They have vested interests in the actual accomplishments of the organization, not merely in the organization's capacity to stay viable (as may be the case among some professional groups). Furthermore, because most members are volunteers, an unfavorable assessment does not usually threaten anyone's livelihood.

REFERENCES


