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## ARTICLES

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# Community-Based Program Research: Context, Program Readiness, and Evaluation Usefulness

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**ABSTRACT.** At first glance, the worlds of program professionals and evaluators may seem quite separate. However, there are common issues whose resolution will enhance both program development and research on programs. Program professionals and evaluators have a great deal to learn from each other. As that learning occurs, both program delivery

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and evaluation research will benefit. Both are concerned about matters of validity, whether it pertains to the nature of the program intervention itself or to the nature of the assessment of the program intervention. To reinforce the development of program evaluation in partnership, this paper discusses key points about evaluation research relevant to both program professionals and researchers. These include the contextual influences on a program, the “readiness” of a program for evaluation, and whether the evaluation research “works” for the program. Underlying our discussion is a call for the development of partnerships around research on programs. In that light, this article elaborates the process steps that should be taken to build program evaluation partnerships, including a discussion of what evaluators and program professionals need to know about each other, and their respective values, interests, and professional perspectives. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Community-based programs, evaluation research, collaboration, program development, partnerships

### INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, there are a multitude of programs designed to improve the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. Funding organizations typically require that community-based initiatives have an evaluation component and, in part, renewed funding is usually based on what the evaluation research findings indicate about these programs. Although, in theory, it appears that evaluation research is a natural complement to program delivery, program development and service delivery tend to work at cross-purposes with program evaluation (Myers-Walls, 2000). According to Telfair and Mulvihill (2000), evaluators and program professionals may have basic differences in emphasis and direction that lead to a poor fit between them. On the one hand, program professionals may feel that evaluation research is an obstacle to their work and a required activity that must be endured. The term “diverted” may even be used in discussing resources earmarked for evaluation of programs (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 1999).

On the other hand, evaluators may feel that their work would progress more effectively if only the program and its personnel would not get in their way. Nonetheless, the worlds of programs and research are intertwined.

According to Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey (1999, p. 20), "Program evaluation is the use of social research procedures to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs that is adapted to their political and organization environments and designed to inform social action in ways that improve social conditions." Thus, the contribution that evaluation research can make to the resilience of individuals, families, and their communities is enhanced as evaluators become conversant about programs and program contexts. The contribution that programs can make to their communities is enhanced the more that program professionals take advantage of insights and the "lessons learned" that come from evaluation research. Program professionals and evaluators have a great deal to gain from a successful collaborative evaluation (Huebner, 2000; Telfair, 1999) and both possess expertise that may not naturally reside with the other. Consequently, their partnership represents an opportunity to improve their respective work.

This paper discusses the nexus between the evaluation research and program delivery worlds (Huebner, 2000; Myers-Walls, 2000; Telfair, 1999; Telfair & Leviton, 1999). We draw attention to pivotal issues that face both program professionals and evaluators and which influence the quality of a program and of research on that program. We argue that context must be accounted for, that evaluability must precede evaluation, and that evaluation research must serve the program. Our discussion revolves around three main questions: (1) What are the contextual influences on program development and evaluation research efforts? (2) Is the program ready for evaluation? (3) Does the evaluation research "work" for the program? While these are only a few of the important questions for program professionals and for evaluators, they are matters that can easily undermine effective evaluation research and therefore reduce the effectiveness of program development. Our focus is consistent with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) "fourth generation" evaluation model, an approach that places high value on consensus, negotiation, cooperation, and empowerment, and that assumes resultant processes and products are more valid. The issues that we discuss cut across Telfair and Mulvihill's (2000) integrated model of community-based evaluation, wherein they discuss prerequisites, characteristics, phases, and outcomes of community-based evaluation.

### CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES

Evaluators and program professionals alike are confronted with contextual realities that cause them to change their work in various ways. All too often program professionals and evaluators are not intentional about understanding and accounting for context. Both have a role to enact when it comes to understanding the range of contexts that impinge on programs because each has an expertise to contribute (Huebner & Betts, 1999). Contextual thinking and analysis are important because neither programs nor evaluation research initiatives can ever escape their surroundings. In fact, context should be a principal concern of evaluation research (Telfair & Mulvihill, 2000).

Program and research efforts are never insulated from a host of environmental influences—political, economic, demographic, and geographic factors—that have a direct bearing on program intents and activities. They may include, for example, a change in community sentiment over what “causes” should be addressed, a diversion in funds to projects that are seen as benefiting more citizens, or the construction of a highway that changes the geography of neighborhoods. Very often, these are factors which the program may have very little or no power to influence. These “uncontrollables” must be recognized by program professionals and by evaluators so that they are not mistaken for program limitations.

Aside from political, economic, and other external contexts, there are multiple contexts within the program as well. Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, and Weiss (1995) use the terms “broad-based,” “multi-dimensional,” “interactive,” and “multi-system” to describe community initiatives. Green, Mulvey, Fisher, and Woratschek (1996) use the term “multi-faceted” to describe community support programs that are fluid and emergent. Various researchers point out how these multiple contexts pertain to current-day comprehensive programs (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, & Weiss, 1995; Green, Mulvey, Fisher, & Woratschek, 1996). In many communities, there is interaction across systems, as well as interactions between levels within systems (Small & Supple, 2001). One result of acknowledging these multiple contexts is more uncertainty concerning exactly what to measure and how to measure it within and between those systems. Since programs don’t simply succeed or fail, knowing outcomes does not necessarily provide insight into what brought a program and its participants to that point. Discussing these issues enables program professionals and evaluators to come to terms with the community as it has been and as it might be. Consequently, this supports

thinking in a community and program life course manner, one that accounts for history, for current events, and for the future.

Because context is so pivotal for program professionals and for those who evaluate programs, the partnership they develop should include an early discussion and analysis of context. This discussion should be guided by these key questions:

- What do we know about the community in which the program will be located? Did the reputation of a community or its inhabitants drive the decision to locate one or more programs there? Did the residents in the community request particular programs? The early success of a program may be partially due to how well it is connected with or driven by the community.
- Is what we know about the community informed by data collected by some agency or organization, or is it based on anecdotes? How we know often provides a clue about the validity of what we think we know.
- How do we describe the community? The picture formed in the minds of both program professionals and of evaluators of the community and its members will determine what is provided and whether or not the community is seen as problem-ridden or having important resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).
- Who are the programs serving? The assumptions that we have about the people in communities that we are trying to serve can be quite destructive and ultimately undermine goodwill and potentially good programs. This is an important issue for both program professionals and evaluators because both need to have a clear sense of the people who are seen as benefiting from the program.
- Over the past several years how has this community changed, if at all? Over the next several years are particular changes expected? Changes do not have to be cataclysmic in order to have an impact. A highway that divides a community is quite obvious but an increasing proportion of older adults in a neighborhood may not be because it tends to happen gradually. Government plans for housing revitalization or the infusion of new employment opportunities can serve as catalysts to a re-formed community and, for example, could bring an influx of young families into the neighborhoods. Having knowledge of past change and a sense of future change can equip program professionals and evaluators with insight into what programs have to account for, as they are implemented.

### **PROGRAM READINESS FOR EVALUATION**

Whereas context takes us mainly toward external program factors, the question of evaluability takes us deeply inside the program. Whether or not a program is ready for evaluation is of concern for both evaluators and program professionals. Unfortunately, however, many organizations rush headlong into evaluation rather than into an evaluability assessment. Determining whether a program is ready to be evaluated involves having clearly defined program goals and objectives, assessing whether the program model can be evaluated (including knowing that relevant program data can be obtained), and having buy-in from program professionals on how the evaluation information will be used (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). Evaluability assessment enables program professionals and evaluators to have a better sense that the program can be assessed in a valid and meaningful way, and also clarifies the likelihood that the evaluation results are likely to contribute to program development and success (Wholey, 1994).

Determining whether a program is ready to be evaluated should be a focus of the program/research partnership. Although funders may exert pressure to see results, program professionals may want to demonstrate positive changes that result from their programs, and evaluators may want to unleash their research design, but accelerating the evaluation research process is not likely to serve the program well. Premature evaluation can cast doubt on programs that are making important differences in a community or may have the potential to do so in the future. Our discussion here relates more to impact research (expectations about change that can be attributable to a program), rather than to process research (expectations and assumptions about how a program is supposed to operate, including program activities). However, the pressure is typically not so much to conduct process evaluation but rather to show definitive program merit, which requires impact-oriented evaluation. It is this pressure that must be resisted by both program professionals and evaluators. The practice of giving a program time to be in place as planned prior to deciding if it makes a difference, seems obvious. Often, however, this does not occur. Chen (2002) notes that program maturity is essential prior to conducting an evaluation; otherwise, it is difficult to discover any substantive program effects.

While there are many elements of evaluability, two essential ones are specifying desired program results and understanding the intervention. Program definition is a significant early part of the evaluation (Jacobs, 1988). In order to define a program, the general program purpose, the

specific program results, and program characteristics must be described. The key element, however, is the focus on desired program results (Orthner & Bowen, in press). Determining the desired program results may be accomplished independently by program staff but it will be better served if it is done collaboratively with those evaluating the program. A plan should be developed that includes the general, overall program purpose (for example, preparing children for greater school success), specific desired results (for example, a 30% improvement in reading scores), and program characteristics (for example, the activities that will support the desired result such as providing a reading mentor for three hours per week for four months). It is important to determine if the activities that are being conducted lead to the specific desired results. It is also critical that these activities be a logical extension of the desired program results, which in turn reflect the program purpose. Oftentimes, these activities match the program's desired results but just as often this match is uninvestigated and so the degree of match is unknown. Whether a program is "ready" to be evaluated in part depends on how clearly results have been defined and how well program activities are matched to the results. Program activities become important only when they are linked to desired results (Orthner & Bowen, in press). Moreover, if the evaluation is "off-time" with the development and maturation of a program, it is less likely that positive program effects will be discovered, and conversely more likely that a program will be determined as a failure. It is only when a product is off the drawing board and fully assembled that it can be evaluated.

Since a major goal of evaluation research is to address merit (Scriven, 1991), understanding the actual intervention that the program provides is a significant matter. This understanding is a key element in knowing when a program should be evaluated. If the intervention is not defined and understood, then the focus of the evaluation research is difficult to determine. Program professionals have no hope of achieving their desired program goals if they cannot articulate them. While programs may purport to accomplish great and grand things for people and their communities, program professionals must be clear about the nature of their interventions and realistic about what their interventions actually may accomplish. This can only occur if there is a systematic analysis of the intervention, and a resulting sense of what can be expected because of that intervention. For example, if the main focus in a program is mentoring, there should be a sense of what is expected to make a difference. Is it the relationship that develops between the mentor and the student, the amount of time they spend together, whether the

student is experiencing greater school success while being mentored, or the fact that an adult is focusing attention on an at-risk youth?

Questions that should be asked by program professionals and their evaluation research partners as they pertain to program evaluability include:

- Is the program fully active and, if so, for how long? These questions draw us back to an historical view of the program in that it is important to gauge the length of time a program has had to address its purpose, and to work toward its desired results. A partially functioning program is much less likely to reach its desired results.
- Are desired program results specific and clear enough so that they can be assessed? It is easy to mistakenly define activities as results, yet the distinction is significant for establishing program merit. For example, increased reading scores are results whereas asking children to read particular books under the supervision of a mentor is an activity.
- Are program activities consistent with the program purpose and its desired results? Program professionals and evaluators must discuss the logical connections between their desired results and what activities typify the program. Is the level of intervention strong enough to reach the desired results? If there is a suspicion that the match between the activities and the results is poor, then the activities should be reevaluated.
- What is the program intervention? Which dimensions of what occurs in the program are related to particular changes that are anticipated? Is the understanding of the intervention clear and does it seem that results from the intervention can be observed? These are key questions because at some point in the life of a prevention or intervention program there must be attributions from program dynamics to program results.
- Can the program be evaluated and its merit supported or not supported? This final question is pivotal because not everything can be evaluated, even though everything can be researched. If the program has lost its way, if its desired results have become blurred, and if its activities are haphazard, then it is not a good candidate for impact evaluation. As a part of the evaluability assessment it may be decided that particular kinds of process and monitoring research need to be conducted so that ongoing adjustments can be made while a program develops to the point where it ought to make a difference. At this point a systematic examination can be validly

conducted in which attribution can or cannot be made to the program.

### ***MAKING EVALUATION RESEARCH “WORK”***

As matters of context are addressed and as the relationships between program development, evaluability, and evaluation are made clear, the program/research partnership should be planning how the evaluation research will “work” for the program and for the community. One reason that program professionals may resist evaluation is because their experience with evaluation has been one that has not been supportive of their program development and implementation efforts. Another aspect of negative evaluation experiences includes the very practical matter of evaluators producing reports that are not user-friendly—that is, reports that are clearly linked with what program professionals can do with their programs (Backer, 2000). The challenge is to make evaluation research “work” for programs.

Evaluation research should be considered an ongoing learning process that permeates all dimensions of an organization (Gray, 1993). Indeed, one potential result of an evaluation research program is broad-based organizational learning and participation. The essential characteristics of a learning approach to evaluation research include contextual sensitivity, evaluation as a routine activity, and participation of program and community stakeholders (Torres, 2002). Too often, however, evaluation is seen solely as research (in the most abstract of terms) rather than an informed approach to the improvement of management processes and learning procedures. Evaluation research involves the process of asking questions, gathering data to answer the questions, and then making decisions based on those answers. Consequently it is a highly applied activity whose outcomes should be consistent with what the organization needs to improve its programs. By adopting an organizational learning mindset, evaluation research can “work” for the organization. Evaluation should serve as a tool for the organization to assess its progress and to learn ways that better achieve the organization’s mission (Huebner, 2000; Telfair & Leviton, 1999). The information gathered through evaluation research can then help the organization know if it is accomplishing what it intends to accomplish. A learning organization approach is also developmental in that it is oriented toward continuous improvement (Patton, 1996). This developmental approach can be viewed as a cycle of interaction between the program and evaluation research, and includes initial program planning,

program implementation and intervention, evaluation, specifying lessons learned, and second-level program planning which either confirms the initial planning/implementation or institutes changes (Johnson, 1993).

Another manner in which the evaluation research process “works” for the program is through its own interventive character. In process evaluations in particular, the evaluation itself is a desired intervention in that it may become a powerful tool in achieving program goals (Perloff, 1979). Programs may change as evaluators “take the pulse” of program policies and practices, and, as evaluations unfold, program people respond in ways that accommodate those evaluations. Even the contents of a survey provide cues about what programs could be doing, and scheduled site visits provide a signal that certain program activities need to be accelerated or decelerated. It is important to come to terms with the interventive nature of evaluation research because it will occur whether or not it is recognized. Once recognized and accepted, evaluation interventions can be accounted for in the course of tracking what happens in programs.

Important questions related to usefulness of the evaluation research for program professionals and evaluators to address include:

- Are the questions that evaluators want to answer and the questions that program professionals want answered by the research complementary? Ideally the research will inform program professionals and evaluators equally well.
- Can the evaluation information clearly address important program questions and be translated into a set of “lessons learned”? For evaluation research to achieve its own goal of addressing program merit and to inform future program development, evaluators, and program professionals should know *a priori* that the evaluation is appropriately designed. We believe that program-oriented research must produce a set of “lessons learned” that can be parlayed into program initiatives.
- Are program professionals willing to pay attention to evaluation research results, even if those results cause the program to be viewed differently? This question and the one that follows are directed at the sentiments that program professionals and evaluators have with regard to letting the other into their world. For this question, it is a matter of program professionals being open to having a favorite program or a favorite approach challenged by evaluation results.

- Is the evaluator willing to listen to the advice of program professionals on designing the study, on interpreting the research results, and on how the results are reported? For this question, it is a matter of evaluators being open to having their favorite designs, measures, and approaches challenged by what program professionals know about the program environment and about program participants. Evaluators must also understand and comply with the desired vehicle for reporting the results so that they can be most useful to program professionals.
- In what manner is the evaluation research likely to become an intervention? As the program is implemented and the evaluation component is planned, it is instructive to explore what this intervention might be; attention may even be given to planning the evaluation as a type of intervention geared toward meeting program purposes and desired results.

## ***DISCUSSION***

There is a larger arena in which our questions of context, evaluability, and research relevance fit. As a first step, program professionals and evaluators should discuss and agree on the purpose of the evaluation project so that a common understanding of the evaluation process can be developed (Cockerill, Myers, & Allman, 2000; Donaldson, 2001). Once the program professional and evaluator reach this understanding they can cooperatively develop a strategic plan and structure for the evaluation (Benjamin, 1996). This entails the evaluator informing the program professional of the evaluation approaches that may be available, including the advantages and limits of each approach (Donaldson, 2001). It also entails the program professional informing the evaluator about the realities of the program, including its goals and activities and personnel that are available to assist in the evaluation. They can then jointly determine which evaluation method provides the best fit with program goals, available resources, and with day-to-day program operations. Evaluators and program professionals should then develop a clear and concise protocol that clearly states each of their responsibilities and participation in the evaluation process, so that both program goals and evaluation goals are more likely to be achieved. This early planning process of collaborative decision-making sets a tone that can carry through the entire evaluation effort. For example, as the evaluation progresses, evaluators and program professionals should be dis-

cussing the status of both program implementation and the implementation of the evaluation. There can be implementation failures in both program delivery and in evaluation (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). A partnership-oriented working relationship can assist in avoiding implementation failure, or at the least can provide a valid mechanism for adjusting for implementation failure. Overall, a productive partnership is one that values partnership goals, in addition to whatever goals individuals may have. A primary partnership value for evaluators and program professionals to embrace is that it is mainly through collaboration that an evaluation will achieve the promise of validly assessing program process and effects, and will be ultimately useful to program professionals. Questions of context, evaluability, and utility of the evaluation are more readily addressed when this value is shared.

Before evaluators and program professionals can be expected to work in partnership, it is important to admit that the process that occurs around, within, and between program development and evaluation research can sometimes seem like a tension between opposing elements. Yet that tension can be minimized and used to improve both programs and evaluation research. This requires that those from the evaluation world have a better understanding of those whose mission it is to build and deliver programs that make a difference in people's lives.

- Evaluators assume that what they are interested in will stand still long enough to be scrutinized. Moreover, it is assumed that what evaluators wish to observe will have defined borders and be easily visible. Evaluators must recognize that programs lend themselves toward fuzziness rather than textbook clarity because it is difficult to precisely quantify an intervention that is occurring in a fluid environment. Who can say what the exact "dosage" is of a program that is delivered in various ways by various people to various customers?
- Evaluators must be mindful that program professionals care most about delivering their program to those for whom it is designed. If program changes need to be made midstream, those changes may be made with little consideration given to the evaluation plan. Program professionals care relatively more about what works and less about what can be consistently and systematically researched. Evaluators must be prepared to shift their designs and methods accordingly while at the same time working with program professionals for the purpose of keeping goals focused as much as possible.

- It is common for evaluation reports to be read by few; their results, therefore, are used by even fewer. Evaluation approaches should be in response to an agreed-upon set of program purposes and results and, as such, evaluation results must be tied into program needs from the beginning. What distinguishes evaluation research from research in general is its focus on generating results that examine and enable programs, rather than the production of information for its own sake.

From the program professional's point of view, tension often comes into play because it is unclear how research is a program development tool and facilitator. Research is often seen as either unrelated to, or diverting resources from, delivering programs, yet it can be a powerful ally for sustaining programs. Given this, there are several points program developers need to keep in mind about evaluators.

- Because there are substantial pressures on program professionals to field their program as quickly as possible to address community issues, it may seem that the demands of research are obstructive. Program planners should recognize that their goals are not at odds with those of evaluators. Good evaluation research requires that program results be defined, that methods to achieve those goals be articulated, and that there is a match between what is expected of a program and what is actually done in that program. These requirements are extremely helpful to program planning and implementation.
- While the process of gathering data may seem daunting and inconvenient to program professionals, it should be recognized that the information evaluation research generates can become significant for the process of justifying programs and for soliciting funds and community support.
- Because of the rapidity with which programs develop and change, there is always a need for some "handles" that will help in knowing how to effectively manage them. Evaluation information can meet this need and can provide community professionals with a road map for fine-tuning their programs. A primary goal and outcome of program research is the documentation of "lessons learned" about program characteristics, implementation, liabilities, and benefits. Such information can be invaluable for both replication and future program planning.

### CONCLUSION

The contribution that evaluation research can make to the resilience of individuals, families, and their communities is enhanced as evaluators become conversant about programs and program contexts. The contribution that programs can make to their communities is enhanced the more that program professionals take advantage of insights and the “lessons learned” that come from evaluation research. This paper has suggested sets of questions that should not only enhance program evaluation partnerships but which also are pivotal to success in evaluation research and in program development. Because program professionals and evaluators possess expertise that may not naturally reside with the other, their partnership represents an opportunity to improve their respective work.

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