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Nonparticipant to Participant

A Methodological Perspective on Evaluator Ethics

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Evaluators of human services initiatives are often confronted with the prospect of altering their methodological choices during the course of an evaluation. Usually, this need emerges from circumstances that challenge the ability to carry out the evaluation, such as access to respondents, the attrition of participants, the availability of resources, and constraints on time. The present scenario provides an opportunity to examine potential ethical challenges associated with a shift from one methodological approach to another, as the evaluator adjusts the extent of his participation in the program. At the core of this examination is a realization of how the change in method, from nonparticipant observer to participant observer, affects the evaluation and what set of standards and principles guides the evaluator's response as he proceeds. It is clear that this scenario exposes a set of thorny ethical issues for the role of the evaluator in relation to the program, particularly those issues associated with power, control, and influence. This response, however, addresses the less obvious considerations of the principles that guide an evaluator's conduct in the event of a decision to alter the methodological approach.

Smith's (2002) eloquent meta-analysis of past ethical challenges responses in the *American Journal of Evaluation* suggested that there has been some question as to what represents an ethical predicament in evaluation and that methodological problems do not necessarily constitute moral problems. However, Morris (1998) argued that "issues of methodology and design *can* have significant ethical implications for an evaluator's work" (p. 381). Taking this perspective, it is not clear what ethical conflicts, if any, face the evaluator in the current case as he ponders the methodological path on which to travel. Within this particular context, the dilemma to step off of the current path is one of method; the dilemma of what happens after stepping off the path is one of ethics. At issue here, as Morris highlighted, is how the decision to alter the method has ethical implications for the evaluator's work and ultimately affects the quality of the evaluation.

On the surface, at least, it appears that the evaluator's decision to fully engage as a participant in the program was not driven by methodological considerations. Instead, the shift in method was the result of an interest by both the client and the evaluator in having the evaluator assume a more active, participatory role in the program. Regardless of the means by which the change occurred, as the evaluator proceeds with the evaluation in the participant observer role, important implications for the evaluation arise stemming from the shift in method. Rather than argu-

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ing for or against the merits of the evaluator's decision, this examination of methodological considerations that emerge in this scenario focuses on the ethical next steps for the evaluator. In this commentary, I discuss the ethical tensions that are created by the methodological switch, including issues associated with the relationship between the evaluator and the client, the expectations for the evaluation on the part of the participants, and the methods used to establish that the evaluation findings are credible.

Key Method Considerations

The change in method from nonparticipant observer to participant observer can be subtle, especially to stakeholders who are not evaluators. Although the two methodological strategies are distinguished by their assumptions about the position of an evaluator and his or her relationship to the object of interest, the stakeholders in this scenario might have difficulty recognizing the potential impacts of the shift upon the evaluation. It is critical for an evaluator to understand the distinctions, because a failure to identify, communicate, and account for differences could lead others to view the evaluator as incompetent, inexperienced, unethical, or, worse, a combination of all three (Smith, 2002). This commentary on the "To Participate or Not to Participate" scenario discusses the ethical tensions that are created by the methodological switch, including issues associated with the relationship between the evaluator and the client, the expectations for the evaluation on the part of the participants, and the methods used to establish that the evaluation findings are credible.

The degree of distance, both in terms of the evaluator's relationship to the object of interest and the perception of stakeholders regarding that relationship, is a key consideration in the methodological shift. Consistent with a nonparticipant observation approach, the evaluator in this scenario initially sought to remain as unobtrusive as possible as he recorded the committee's behavior and activities. In situations in which the evaluator interacted with the client and stakeholders in the expected role as evaluator (i.e., observations, in-depth interviews), his behavior and actions communicated his intent to maintain a nonparticipatory position and established a set of tacit roles for both the evaluator and stakeholders. Whether the expectations for evaluator and stakeholder behavior in relation to the method were implicit or explicit matters little. The evaluator needs to be cognizant of the expected behaviors and roles individuals assume in data gathering based on the particular method being used, as well as how changes alter those expectations.

In this case, the evaluator established an approach whereby data collection through nonparticipant observations was separated from data collection through interviewing. Stakeholders were engaged in a data-gathering process, functioning in roles consistent with the nonparticipant method. The shift from nonparticipant observer to participant observer changes the data collection process, in which informal interviewing and observation of behavior are occurring jointly, in a dynamically recursive process. Consequently, stakeholders may become confused as they seek to understand their revised role and what information is considered "in bounds" or "out of bounds" in the context of the evaluation. The movement of the evaluator from nonparticipant to participant observer is likely to raise concerns, voiced or not, about how information shared previously in confidence will be used over the course of the evaluation. Given the contentious nature of the interactions between the committee members, the evaluator's knowledge of individual stakeholder perceptions of the program could easily place him in a politically precarious situation, of which he should be mindful.

Commensurate with a specific observational approach, the evaluator assumes a particular meaning-making role relevant to that social context. Evaluators conducting nonparticipant observations do so with a detached perspective whereby the emphasis is on watching rather

than taking part in the social milieu. This removed point of view enables evaluators to focus on specific situations and occurrences rather than attempting to immerse themselves in the entire context. Inferences as to what is occurring are based on the observable behavior, with less attention to intent, attitudes, emotions, or thoughts. The shift in method in this case emphasizes the need for the evaluator to attend to the subtle changes in the axiological and ontological assumptions that underpin both nonparticipant and participant observation methods.

In an attempt to reconstruct the realities of informants in qualitative inquiry, the evaluator negotiates meanings and interpretations with human data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This reconstruction and negotiation process is operationalized differently for the two methods as a function of their axiological orientations. As a nonparticipant observer, the evaluator filters and interprets reality as he witnesses actions and behaviors. Alternatively, in a participant observation approach, reality is coconstructed with others, as the evaluator becomes an accepted part of the context under study. Thus, as a participant, the evaluator's behavior, attitudes, and emotions play a more prominent role in shaping the understanding of actions and events included in the evaluation. Although the degree to which the actions of the evaluator influence behavior in the setting is likely to wane over time, initial reactivity is a consideration. As a participant observer, the evaluator needs to widen his perspective to more explicitly monitor how much and in what ways he is influencing the phenomenon he is observing. A failure of the evaluator to shift perspective and focus could lead to an inappropriate analysis of the data collected in the evaluation through the introduction of unaccounted-for and unchecked bias.

Finally, the recognition that a nonparticipant observational approach does not take as long or is as labor intensive as a participant observer approach highlights investment considerations related to the method of choice. Because the evaluator needs to be accepted as a part of the context under study to ensure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon, extensive work over an extended period of time is required. Thus, a corresponding increase in time, energy, and commitment would likely need to occur. The increase in investment not only has workload implications for the evaluator but also puts the client in a potentially compromising position of needing to allocate additional resources to meet the demands of the approach. The inability of the client to meet the potential increase in the resource burden could affect the quality of the evaluation by limiting the ability to collect the necessary observational data.

Changes in the methodological approach will undoubtedly affect the originally negotiated expectations held by the client and evaluator. As Patton (1986) suggested, for those adopting qualitative evaluation strategies, the ideal is to negotiate and adopt the level of participation that will produce the most meaningful data about the program given the participant characteristics, the nature of interactions and relationships, and the overall context of the program. Assuming that the evaluator clearly articulated the specifics of the approach, as well as what is likely to emerge from such an approach, in the original negotiation, a change in method would affect the original agreement, even if the clients and stakeholders perceive the change to be minor. Moreover, a failure to inform the client of the new requirements brought about by the methodological shift could result in the contribution to the belief on the part of the client that the resources, scope, and expectations of the new methodological approach remain unchanged. A potential conflict could arise, because the demands of a participant observation method might be well beyond the ability (or interest) of the client to support. Thus, the evaluation's time frame and commitment originally agreed on would need to be renegotiated.

What Can Be Done?

Rossi (1995) argued that the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995) are purposefully vague so as to

be relevant to a broad range of evaluation practitioners. Similarly, House (1995) indicated that the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* provide a starting point for discussion of how evaluators might seek to conform to accepted professional standards of conduct rather than a definitive statement of practice. Because of the wide range of methodological approaches used by evaluators, neither the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* nor *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994) offers much guidance when discussing the ethical issues related to methodological choices. They are, however, useful as a backdrop in the following discussion of how the evaluator in the scenario could respond ethically to the shift from nonparticipant to participant observation.

Apply Principles and Standards

Both the guiding principle on systematic inquiry (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995) and the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's (1994) accuracy standard emphasize the need to maintain high technical standards and underscore the importance of the awareness of the methodological differences relevant to an evaluation. Similarly, Chelimsky (1995) recognized that attempts to discredit evaluation findings have often focused on methods, evaluator skills, and objectivity with respect to the object under study. Thus, as the evaluator moves forward with the evaluation in a participant observer role, he should carefully document and describe the details of the shift in method, making transparent his understanding of the issues related to the methodological shift, as well as demonstrating his understanding of the methodological technique. The evaluator should explain, in ways that are technically and contextually sensitive, the shortcomings and strengths of the new methodological choice, including how the new set of assumptions will affect the type of data collected, the interpretation of the data collected, and the conclusions that are drawn from the data. These steps should help the evaluator avoid misrepresenting the procedures, data, or findings and help ensure that results emerge from sound methodological practice. It is critical that the evaluator recognize that the responsibility to discuss and clarify these matters rests solely with him, not with the client. The inability of the evaluator to fully explore this issue could contribute to a misalignment in the method-expectation match and affect the quality of the evaluation.

The competence principle states that evaluators "should possess the education, abilities, and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation" and "practice within the limits of their professional training and competence" (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995, p. 22). Although Rossi (1995) pointed out the lack of clarity as to what is competence in evaluation, critical reflection by the evaluator is necessary in the event of a methodological shift. If the evaluator (or the client for that matter) has concerns as to whether he is competent in participant observation, he should "seek to gain the competence directly through the assistance of others who possess the required expertise" (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995, p. 23). The evaluator in this scenario could engage a colleague with experience in participant observations to provide guidance and coaching through the course of the evaluation. Establishing an appropriate level of technical support could provide an ideal context for the evaluator to improve his competencies to provide the highest level of performance in this and future evaluations. Competence is also necessary to establish evaluator credibility (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation Standard U2), which can facilitate the acceptance of the evaluation findings by program stakeholders.

In keeping with the principles of integrity and honesty, the evaluator should renegotiate with clients and stakeholders relevant points associated with the methodological shift. A new agree-

ment needs to be reached as to the costs, tasks, limitations, and expectations about the likely results. Moreover, the evaluator should take care to “record all changes made in the originally negotiated project plans and the reasons why the changes were made” (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995, p. 23). Although the committee insisted on the evaluator’s participation, clearly, the evaluator already had an interest in the program beyond that of the evaluation. It is important that the evaluator be explicit about how his investment in and commitment to the program, and consequently his interest in the evaluation, changes with the methodological shift. This attention is necessary to protect against distortions caused by personal feelings and biases (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation Standard A11).

The guiding principle of respect for people admonishes evaluators to “respect the security, dignity, and self-worth of respondents, program participants, clients, and other evaluation stakeholders” (American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 1995, p. 24). To adhere to this principle, the evaluator in this scenario will likely need to reiterate his intent to maintain the confidentiality of the interview data in the context of the methodological shift. Emphasis on respecting and protecting the rights and welfare of subjects in the evaluation (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation Standard P3) communicates to clients and stakeholders the sensitivity of the evaluator to the information management issues affected by the shift in method.

Strengthen the Approach

Ultimately, in qualitative inquiry, an evaluator seeks believability on the basis of coherence, insight, instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991), and trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). One of the ways in which the evaluator in this scenario could help minimize ethical problems associated with a shift in method is to emphasize quality as outlined for qualitative inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Thus, in the pursuit of quality, the evaluator might protect against distortions and biases based on his newly emerging presence through prolonged engagement in the context being studied. He could use techniques such as triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks to enhance the likelihood that the findings are an accurate reflection of the experiences of the participants and the context of the inquiry. Furthermore, the evaluator could establish dependability and confirmability audit trails to record key evaluation processes and ensure that conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations are grounded in defensible data. When resources dictate, the evaluator in this scenario might suggest an audit or metaevaluation to assess the quality of the evaluation; provide guidance for improving methods and approaches; and maintain credibility with clients, stakeholders, and other evaluators (House, 1987; Stufflebeam, 2001). Although rigorously applied methods do not resolve what House (1995) saw as the methodological fallacy of competently executed methods alone solving ethical problems, they can help the evaluator maintain high technical standards, demonstrate competence in the approach, and manage objectivity throughout. Using specific strategies in support of the guiding principles and standards, the evaluator could not only maintain a high level of ethical behavior but also exhibit transparency in the methodological approach.

Anticipate

Although the next steps suggested above are in response to the shift in method borne out of a decision to enter the evaluation as a participant observer, it might also be useful to consider how evaluators could be proactive about such situations. Given the frequency that shifts between

nonparticipant and participant observer roles might actually occur in evaluation practice, it might behoove evaluators in their negotiations to highlight at the outset the potential tension between the two methodological approaches. Anticipating the possibility of such a shift, the implications for the evaluation could be discussed. For example, the evaluator might use a case example of a situation similar to this to illustrate the possible issues associated with a shift in method. It is within this context that the strengths and limitations of the two methods, anticipated roles and expectations shaped by each method, and the potential effects of a change in method on the interpretation of the evaluative findings could be explored. Extending this suggestion further, these discussions might need to include the limits of participation consistent with the method of choice and specific ways the evaluator will seek to maintain those limits throughout the course of the evaluation. All things considered, evaluators need to be aware when shifts in methods are in conflict with originally negotiated limits, in particular when they potentially alter expectations of clients and stakeholders and the conclusions that may be reached as a part of the evaluation process.

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