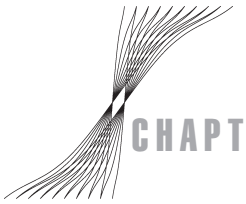

CHAPTER TWO

The Entry/Contracting Stage

SCENARIO 1

The Coordination Project

As a researcher with experience in the evaluation of collaborative efforts between human service organizations, you have been contacted by the associate director of the state's Office of Child Protective Services (OCPS). Nearly 2½ years ago, OCPS initiated a project to improve coordination and case management among a number of agencies that provide services to neglected and abused youth. OCPS would like an evaluator to assess the extent to which the project has enhanced working relationships among the agencies involved. You are now meeting with the associate director to discuss the project in greater detail before submitting a formal evaluation proposal.

During the meeting, the associate director communicates her desire to have evaluation data collected from a wide variety of agency representatives, including staff from OCPS. You express agreement and also indicate your belief that the opinions and perspectives of service *consumers* (e.g., children, parents, guardians, foster families) could shed much-needed light on certain aspects of the success of the coordination project.

To put it mildly, the associate director does not share your view. In her opinion, the incorporation of consumer input into the study would dilute the

evaluation's focus and generate, in her words, "a laundry list of complaints and issues that are, at best, only marginally relevant to the purpose of this evaluation. They'll simply use the data gathering as an opportunity to vent about anything and everything, no matter how you structure the interview or survey. This just isn't the time or place for a study of client concerns. Your evaluation resources should be devoted to gathering as much in-depth information from staff as you can. They're the ones who've lived with this project most intimately over the past 2 years."

Although there are many responses you could offer to the associate director, the intensity with which she has expressed her objections makes you question your ability to fashion an argument that she would find persuasive. Indeed, at this point there is little doubt in your mind that inclusion of a "consumer component" in your evaluation proposal would seriously diminish the proposal's chances of being accepted by the associate director. On the other hand, you are convinced that any evaluation of the coordination project that does *not* include a consumer perspective will be seriously limited. Would this limitation be so damaging that it would undermine the fundamental validity and usefulness of the evaluation? If the evaluation sponsor wants a study that is narrower in scope rather than broader, isn't that her right?

As you ponder these questions, you ask yourself, "What is my responsibility as an evaluator in this situation?"

COMMENTARY

Consumers, Culture, and Validity

Karen E. Kirkhart

The evaluand (i.e., focus of the evaluation) in this scenario is a state-level OCPS project to improve "coordination and case management" of services for neglected and abused youth. The project has been ongoing for 2½ years, which places it solidly into implementation, making the evaluation request timely and appropriate. The associate director of OCPS, the identified client of the evaluation, wants to examine project impact on the working relationships among the agencies involved, presumably focusing on line workers, supervisors, and administrators. She wishes to exclude consideration of project impact on clients of case management services.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The major ethical concerns raised here involve validity. Construct underrepresentation—operationalization that is too narrow, omitting important dimensions—is a core source of invalidity (Messick, 1995). This case is fundamentally about construct underrepresentation (failures of omission) from two specific but related foci: the omission of consumer perspectives and the omission of culture. Casting validity as an ethical issue is not a new idea; ethics and validity have been understood as related for decades (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1980). This case illustrates well how ethical and methodological issues intertwine, a linkage made explicit in the Guiding Principle of Systematic Inquiry.

Omitting consumer perspectives creates ethical challenges in this scenario because of both the nature of the evaluation questions posed and the fundamental nature of the evaluand.

Nature of the Evaluation Questions

First, consider the questions that frame the proposed study. Such an approach is wholly consistent with the premises of the Systematic Inquiry principle, which directs evaluators to "explore with the client the shortcomings and strengths both of the various evaluation ques-

tions and the various approaches that might be used for answering those questions" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle A-2).

The associate director frames the evaluation question in terms of the "working relationships among the agencies involved," narrowly operationalizing project outcomes in terms of enhanced interactions among staff and administration. Under this conceptualization, the focus of the evaluation is pure process, which includes immediate effects on staff members; that is, the impact that staff members have experienced during the operation of the coordination project itself. However, examining the logic behind service coordination reveals multiple constituencies impacted. The coordination project is designed to alter the behavior of staff members delivering services to neglected or abused youth and their caregivers within human service organizations. It affects service providers, who in turn affect consumers of services. The associate director is interested only in the impact on providers, arguing that the persons "who've lived with this project most intimately" are the staff of the participating agencies and programs. This is a questionable assumption; consumers have also had to live with the procedural changes, and nothing is more intimate than services that touch your family. Although it is certainly important to understand the intended impact of the project on providers' daily operations, it is also imperative to monitor its effects on those receiving OCPS services. Clearly, OCPS consumers—children, parents, guardians, foster families—are stakeholders in this evaluation; their systematic exclusion violates the principle of Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare, which calls for the inclusion of "relevant perspectives and interests of the full range of stakeholders" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle E-1).

Questions about the success of the coordination project are inextricably linked to both provider behavior *and* impact on the consumer. The process of service coordination may abound with interesting and important issues, such as cost savings, time efficiency, or implications for privacy within information management, but the scenario poses a broader question when it asks, "Has case management improved?" This means that examining the coordination process alone is insufficient. Without consumer input, one cannot conduct a valid evaluation of whether case management has been enhanced. To put it bluntly, one cannot claim to understand improvement (or lack thereof) in case management by studying only half the picture—staff perceptions—while omitting the perspective of impacted recipients of service. Such a nar-

row representation of improvement would produce misleading conclusions, violating the Integrity/Honesty principle (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle C-6). The principle of Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare similarly cautions against narrowness in advising evaluators to "consider not only the immediate operations and outcomes of whatever is being evaluated, but also its broad assumptions, implications and potential side effects" (Principle E-2).

A sponsor opting for a study of narrow scope is not necessarily unethical; no single evaluation tackles all potentially relevant questions regarding a given evaluand. However, the nature of the evaluand must inform decisions regarding scope. The evaluator cannot systematically ignore information or omit a perspective that creates a partial, biased understanding and undermines validity. Given the nature of this particular evaluand, omitting consumers would have exactly that effect.

Nature of the Evaluand

Suppose the associate director simply narrowed her evaluation question further, omitting reference to improvement of case management. Would that erase the ethical challenge in this scenario? I would argue no because of the concern for public good that infuses child protective services and is reinforced by the principle of Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare. Because the context of this coordination project is the protection of vulnerable populations, omitting them from consideration in the evaluation is not an ethical option for two reasons. First, the evaluation should be congruent with the mission of OCPS as a human service organization, which is consumer protection. A limited construal of project impact closes off consideration of possible harm to consumers. Without the ability to examine harm as an unintended outcome of the coordination project, the evaluation falls short of its Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare.

Second, an evaluation that omits the consumer perspective may itself exert harm by reinforcing the powerlessness of the neglected and abused youth. This is a potent consequence that should not be minimized. These youth have experienced powerlessness in their home situations and again in the system that removed them from perceived danger. The evaluation should not replicate this neglect by failing to consider their experience as a case that was "managed" under the coordination project. The attitude expressed by the associate director intensifies this concern, because it communicates distance from and

disrespect of the consumer, pointing to possible institutional discrimination. She expresses contempt for her clientele, portraying them as people with endless and presumably groundless complaints. This attitude is inconsistent with the principle of Respect for People, which directs evaluators to respect the "dignity and self-worth of . . . program participants [and] clients" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D).

Thus far, I have argued that excluding consumer perspectives poses a serious ethical issue and validity threat, but a second aspect of construct underrepresentation remains. Validity of evaluative conclusions is compromised by lack of attention to cultural context. These two concerns (consumer and cultural omissions) intersect, because the consumer population is arguably more diverse than the staff of OCPS. Omitting consumers, therefore, also limits the opportunity to represent cultural context accurately.

Fidelity to the component of the Competence principle involving cultural competence requires an understanding of cultural context. There are multiple layers of culture relevant to this case. Although the Competence principle approaches cultural diversity from the perspective of "culturally-different participants and stakeholders" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle B-2), culture at the broader organizational or systems level is also relevant to evaluating the coordination project.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture includes values, beliefs, history, and traditions that shape the local context of professional practice. Understanding these organizational variables is a prerequisite to valid inference and judgment concerning the coordination project. For example, what are the attitudes of staff members toward one another (both individually and collectively) and toward their consumer population? Do they share the associate director's contempt for consumers? Are there differences in attitude toward service recipients among the agencies being coordinated, and if so, whose values were elevated or suppressed in this project? What is the reward structure for recognizing meritorious performance among staff? How is power distributed among the agencies engaged in collaboration? Is there equity of workload and remuneration across member agencies? What is the history of stability versus restructuring among these agencies? Is there differential turnover in administration and staff across agencies? These and other markers

of organizational culture set the context for understanding working relationships among the agencies involved.

Organizational culture is also shaped by context beyond the boundaries of the agencies. The Respect for People principle demands a comprehensive understanding of important contextual elements of the evaluation (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D-1). In the coordination project, this includes legislative mandates and oversight, funding trends (expansion/reduction), mergers (or threats thereof), media coverage of incidents involving abused or neglected children, and the political context of OCPS services within the state. Elements of broader context that impact service delivery to consumers include changes in rules governing OCPS, demographic shifts in the population served, and increases/decreases in availability of placements or services.

Stakeholder Culture

The Respect for People principle is also explicit in addressing evaluators' responsibility to understand and respect differences among participants (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D-6). This refers to evaluation participants as well as program participants. In this instance, it would refer to the personal characteristics of the workers and administrators implementing the coordination project as well as of the youth and their families or guardians and the foster families with whom they are placed.

The diversity dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social class addressed in the Competence principle (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle B-2) are relevant to both providers and consumers in this scenario. Children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are subject to abuse and neglect but not at equal rates. The racial and ethnic distribution for the particular state in the scenario would need to be explored. For example, although national data suggest that one half of all child victims are White and one quarter are African American, an informal query of my local OCPS shows the proportion of Black and White families that are tracked is relatively equal. Race is also relevant among providers, with the majority of service providers (field staff and supervisors) being White. Boys and girls are abused at relatively equal rates, but within the OCPS workforce women sharply outnumber men. Most providers would be considered middle class, but their locations differ within this very broad category. Economic diversity among workers is reflected in the reward systems

and hierarchies of salary and benefits within these service organizations as well as in workers' families of origin, which may range from poverty level to upper socioeconomic status. Among consumers, economic diversity is skewed, and families living in poverty are overrepresented.

Additional provider diversity lies in professional training and experience. What are their levels of education, disciplines in which they were trained, and years of experience in OCPS? Professional discipline relates to workers' obligations to honor various professional standards on culture (e.g., National Association of Social Workers, 2001). One cannot answer with confidence key evaluation questions concerning working relationships among providers without considering such cultural components. How has the collaboration project changed or left unchanged the faces of the workforce with whom both staff and consumers interact daily? Did it increase or decrease staff turnover? Did it deepen stereotypes or erase them? Expand or narrow workforce diversity?

On the consumer side, other important diversity variables "pertinent to the evaluation context" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle B-2), singly and in interaction with one another, are family composition, sexual orientation, age, disability, education, and language spoken in the home. Family composition is a major consideration. Are caregivers in two-parent households treated with the same respect as single parents? Are same-sex parents being afforded the same respect and rights as heterosexual parents? How are extended families and nonbiological caregiver relationships treated? What are the economics of child protection: Who is supported and who is financially exploited? Age and physical or mental disability are relevant to both youth and their caregivers. What are the developmental and special needs of the children, and how well are these needs being met within the parameters of caregivers' age and abilities?

Culture reveals potential evaluation questions that are essential to valid inference and judgment concerning the coordination project. Does the coordinated system provide better access to appropriate translation, for example, or would a deaf family find it more difficult to communicate than under the prior model in which there was quite possibly greater worker specialization? If the new system is more efficient—defined as less time spent per family or more families served per time period—is this pace culturally congruent? The "inefficiencies" of the previous system may have permitted time for building relationships and trust, which have now been stripped from the coordinated

model. Has the coordinated model increased or decreased the likelihood that a family of color will be working with someone who looks like them or who understands their circumstances? Will they have ready access to someone who is fluent in their primary language? If worker and client are not equally bilingual, whose language prevails?

Omission of culture strips full understanding, limiting the evaluator's ability to explore certain questions and clouding the answers to others by restricting the variables considered. Because the validity of inferences and evaluative judgments in multicultural contexts rests on multiple justifications, validity is also subject to multiple threats when culture is disregarded (Kirkhart, 1995, 2005). Neglecting culture constrains the theoretical foundations of the evaluation, the questions asked, the sources of evidence deemed legitimate, and the methods used to gather and analyze data. It undermines accurate synthesis and interpretation.

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS NOT ADEQUATELY ADDRESSED BY THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Although the Guiding Principles are intended to stimulate professional self-examination and discussion, there is not a specific principle that encourages evaluator self-reflection. The Integrity/Honesty principle directs evaluators to be explicit about their own "interests and values" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle C-4), and the Competence principle notes that "cultural competence would be reflected in evaluators seeking awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions" (Principle B-2), but these issues merit greater attention and expansion. The Guiding Principles give insufficient attention to the need for evaluators to examine their own cultural position, agendas, and motivation.

Cultural characteristics that collectively map my personal location also position my work as an evaluator. I bring to this conversation my cultural identifications as a White, English-speaking, heterosexual, female academic. I am politically liberal and mature in years, a card-carrying member of both the American Civil Liberties Union and American Association of Retired Persons. I come from a working-class family of origin and was a first-generation college student. These and other dimensions that define me also position my potential evaluation of this program and my interaction with the associate director. They need to be recognized as they relate to this scenario in both direct

and indirect ways. For example, my academic training is jointly in social work and psychology, which gives me guidance on both ethics and cultural competence from two professional vantage points. The Guiding Principles are explicit in respecting such discipline-based standards. I am a wife and mother; the latter is especially relevant to my values regarding the protection of children. My group memberships give me lenses through which I view my professional and personal life experiences, just as the persons with whom I interact have their individual frames of reference (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeier, & Zenk, 1994).

The Coordination Project scenario raises the perennial question of whose agenda drives an evaluation. I notice my own reaction as evaluator to the associate director. I don't like this woman. Her manner strikes me as arrogant and inflexible. She wants to control the evaluation design, and she wants that design established concretely at the outset. I notice that this runs against my preference for emergent designs, in which elements can be added to follow leads that present themselves during the evaluation process. I also notice that, not only as an evaluator but as a social worker and community psychologist, I find her devaluing consumers offensive, and I wonder whether, consistent with her example, this attitude of disrespect permeates her workforce.

I must also scrutinize my own motivation with suspicion. Is my advocacy of consumer inclusion a knee-jerk, liberal reaction to the authoritarian style of the associate director? Am I getting drawn into a power struggle with her? Is my insistence on consumer inclusion itself well grounded in the best interests of the consumers? Or am I seeking to include them in ways that would place an additional burden on already overburdened family systems, potentially exploiting them to meet my own agenda? Consistent with the Respect for People principle, I see my overall position as respecting the dignity and self-worth of program clients; however, I have to be cognizant of the power differentials within this system and make sure that my advocacy of consumer inclusion is not, in fact, putting them at greater risk. Although the Respect for People principle addresses "risks, harms, and burdens that might befall those participating in the evaluation" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D-2), it does not address the ethics of inclusion as exploitation nor does it call upon me to reflect on my motivation. Consistent with this principle's emphasis on social equity in evaluation (Principle D-5), I would need to take special care to consider how the evaluation could benefit the consumers, not just how the consumers could benefit the evaluation.

WHAT I WOULD DO

Let's assume that I am still in conversation with the associate director. Despite the fact that her intensity makes me question my ability to change her mind, the Systematic Inquiry principle requires that I have such a discussion, exploring "the shortcomings and strengths both of the various evaluation questions and the various approaches that might be used" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle A-2). I would take her reactivity to my mentioning service consumers as a signal that I do not fully appreciate the background and context of this evaluation. I need to know more about the culture of the organization, the priorities of the woman with whom I'm speaking, and her vision of how this evaluation can assist her in her role as associate director. I would delve deeper into both the evaluand and the evaluation.

Background and Context of the Evaluand

I would begin by responding to her last comment that the staff have "lived with this project most intimately over the past 2 years." I would affirm the importance of understanding what this experience has been like, and because I am detecting some power issues between us, I would do it in a way that positions her as the "expert" (e.g., "You're right that understanding the day-to-day impact of this project is very important. What have these past 2 years been like from your perspective?"). I would follow her lead and listen for both information and affect here. Has this been a stressful 2 years? If so, what does that say about her attitude toward this evaluation? For example, does she see it as adding more stress or as an opportunity to showcase the results of the project? Does she communicate any ownership of the project? Does she spontaneously mention consumer reactions to the project? I would listen for implied evaluation questions that might be important to address, and I would also try to ascertain her views about the coordination project itself, including her investment in it.

I would explain that a solid understanding of project context is important for valid inference in any evaluation (and, yes, I would use the phrase "valid inference" rather than paraphrase because I understand from her introduction of the terms "interview or survey" that she wants me to know that she understands research). I would ask how she would characterize the culture of this organization. I would let her talk without interruption as much as possible, probing on such matters as the nature of "working relationships" within OCPS, diver-

sity of staff within the workforce, turnover of staff, and how change happens in this organization. Throughout her account, I am listening for any reference to recipients of services and noticing whether that comes from a deficit or strengths perspective. I recognize that I have already formed a snap judgment that she disrespects clients as whiners and complainers, and I need to listen for disconfirming information here.

I would try to get her story of the history of the relationships among the agencies involved. I assume that I've done my homework concerning public information about the agencies, their founding dates, missions, organizational structure, size, and so on, but I remain very much interested in her insider perspective on these groups, particularly if she has worked within this state system for a long time. (Note: If she has only recently arrived in the system, perhaps bringing the coordination project with her from another state, this presents a different but parallel set of questions, and it would require close inspection of similarities and differences between her prior context and the current one.) I am still listening for potentially relevant evaluation questions.

I would ask her to explain what she understands to be the scope of the working relationships of interest, and I would do so by asking for an example of what she envisions as a successful collaboration. I would listen carefully for success criteria implicitly embedded in her story and pay careful attention to how, if at all, she positions the consumer in this process. If she doesn't mention consumers, I make a mental note, but I don't pursue it at this time.

Background and Context of the Evaluation

It would be important to explore the history of evaluation within OCPS with respect to consumers in particular. The associate director asserts that this is not "the time or place for a study of client concerns," so I am curious whether such a study has been conducted in the past and, if so, with what consequences? Her comment that consumer surveys produce "a laundry list of complaints" suggests that data have been collected in the past that were not perceived as useful. I need to understand this history as well as what information she *has* previously found useful in her leadership role. That would lead me back to this evaluation. I would back up and try to ascertain in more detail its intended purpose.

To sort out the ethical issues more clearly, I want to know more about the influence she envisions this study having (Kirkhart, 2000). I would return to her role as an administrator and ask her to describe in her own words what she hopes to be able to learn from the evaluation and how she would use this information. I am assuming that she initiated the evaluation. If that's not the case, I would confirm whose idea it was to undertake the study, and I would seek to schedule a separate conversation with that person. I would probe the time frame within which these intended, results-based influences might unfold: What are the immediate needs for the information, and what uses does she envision flowing from that? How might the evaluation findings change the future operation of OCPS? I would also explore intended process-based influence (e.g., by asking how she expects staff to react to a request to participate in the evaluation). Is she hoping that the process of talking to a wide variety of agency representatives might change the system in a positive direction? Or that workers unhappy with the project would be mollified by having the opportunity to tell their story? To address unintended influences, I would ask if she has any concerns about undertaking this evaluation and whether she can envision any "bonus benefits" of doing so (i.e., positive influences that are beyond the overt purpose of the study itself) or ways in which it could "backfire" (i.e., negative impacts that might emerge).

Finally, I'd like to ascertain whom she sees as key stakeholders in this evaluation and work my way toward questions of potential interest to them. This project involves the coordination of several agencies; therefore, I would look for allies among the leadership of the involved organizations. Hopefully, there is a board or advisory council behind this project that has guided its implementation and could be consulted in shaping the evaluation. If she doesn't mention one, I would ask explicitly if there is a citizens' review board that is a stakeholder. I am listening for stakeholders she values who might show a greater interest in consumer inclusion than she does as a way to reintroduce this perspective. As a final strategy, I might refer to the mission statement of OCPS regarding the well-being of children and ask her how this evaluation could help her fulfill the mission of the office.

My Strategy

The intent of this line of questioning is twofold. First, I want to be sure that my understanding of context is solid so that I can avoid making

unwarranted assumptions about consumer position. Inclusion of consumers, particularly those whose circumstances make them vulnerable by definition, is not to be taken lightly or ritualistically. I need to understand how consumers of services are positioned in relation to this project, including the extent to which the project is visible to them. To avoid the bias of my own value stance, I need to explore evidence that might disconfirm my assumption that consumer input is critical to obtaining valid answers to the questions at hand. Second, I am seeking to lay out a fair representation of the evaluation questions that are of most concern to the associate director and key stakeholders, hoping that this will permit me to move into a discussion of sources of information that would be necessary and appropriate to gain valid understandings. (I would be clear to focus on sources of information and *not* on data collection strategies. This is partly to "slow her down," because she already leaped to assumptions of method when consumers were mentioned, and partly to get around any reactivity she may have to a particular strategy, e.g., strong opposition to yet another consumer survey.) I would then reintroduce consumers as an important source of information for answering the questions as she has framed them, expressing concern about my ability to answer them well if we are missing that perspective.

The client requests "as much in-depth information from staff as you can [gather]," which suggests that she values thoroughness and does not desire a superficial study. I would reinforce this sentiment and argue that she would gain a false sense of the credibility and validity of the study if I were to follow her directive. I would lay out the questions that can legitimately be answered from staff and administrative perspectives only and those that require broader input. I would be explicit about exactly where consumers fit in the information-gathering picture. I would show the limitations of a narrow view and be clear about what could and could not be concluded from such an evaluation. I would be explicit in indicating how credible answers to her evaluation questions require exploration of multiple perspectives on this collaborative project. I would also "make it personal" by arguing that incomplete data put her at risk as an administrator, limiting her ability to make well-informed decisions that support the mission of her office.

I would probably conclude by suggesting that I put her ideas concerning evaluation questions in writing and draft some design options for discussion. I would recommend that we schedule another meeting to make sure we're "on the same page" before I produce a full pro-

posal. I would explore her openness to my meeting with other key stakeholders to solicit evaluation questions of interest to them, but if she objects I would not push it at this point, knowing that I will build opportunities for such conversations into my evaluation design.

After listening respectfully to counterarguments, I would need to reflect carefully on what issues I consider open to negotiation. Because it appears that this client wants unambiguous control of the evaluation process up front, I must deal honestly with that restriction and not agree to anything that I would later try to finesse or get around. Consistent with the Respect for People principle, it is important that I be forthcoming about inclusion of the consumer perspective, and not try to sneak it into the design. Given my concerns about our differing value perspectives, I would also be careful to negotiate terms under which each party could dissolve the contract.

If the associate director declines to engage in further discussion and set another meeting, or if I cannot find the balance I seek by including consumers, it is not likely that I would continue to pursue this contract. My overarching ethical concerns remain. In this particular case and with this particular population, ignoring consumers of services legitimizes their position of powerlessness, sending exactly the wrong message to the OCPS system and producing incomplete and misleading findings. It is not in the best interests of the public good to proceed.

LESSONS LEARNED

If I could "turn back the clock" before the interaction described in this scenario, I would gather more background information on why the evaluation is being done and on the value perspectives of the client and key stakeholders. First, no mention is made of the rationale for the evaluation or what its anticipated or desired impact might be. Although I tried to address these issues in my conversation with the associate director, I should have done my homework more thoroughly in preparation. This information would set a broader context for the study from a systems perspective and flag potential covert agendas and possibilities of misuse that I should watch for (see the Integrity/Honesty principle; American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle C-5). Is the evaluation being conducted to support a reduction in the workforce? Is it part of a larger agenda to reduce state services to children and families? If consumers are not represented in this study, I

would be especially concerned that the evaluation results could negatively impact services from the perspective of their lived experience.

Second, before a personal meeting with the associate director, I would try to discern the values of key stakeholders, noting in particular the extent to which there is consensus with respect to consumers' role and place in the system. To make the evaluation congruent with the nature of the project, I would seek to design the study collaboratively. I would try to create a mechanism (e.g., an advisory committee to the evaluation) for representing the full range of perspectives on the project, and I would request a group meeting as a setting for discussing issues of design. Whether in the group context or in an individual meeting with the associate director, I would ascertain others' perspectives *before* presenting my own. In the scenario, I expressed my opinions first.

The values clash that occurred probably could not have been avoided, but it certainly represents a good check on assumptions of presumed similarity within the helping professions; we are not all "on the same page" with respect to consumers. Given my background and values, I would surely question the absence of a consumer role in the study; "Where are the consumers in this evaluation?" is a question I have always explored from my earliest familiarity with *consumers* as an element in Scriven's (1991) Key Evaluation Checklist. It is a litmus test, to be sure, and sometimes it leads to a clash of perspectives, but it speaks volumes about the program, its staff and leadership, and the potential location of the evaluation itself. I would avoid an evaluation that takes a deficit perspective on program consumers or, by omission, communicates disrespect for their experience. I think it is important to have these concerns on the table early, so I don't see it as a bad thing that these values were revealed in our conversation. (And I would be sure to communicate this to the associate director with phrases like, "This is very helpful to me, because I want to understand your perspective," and so on.) But if she did not mention consumers as a stakeholder audience of interest to her, I still would have introduced the topic and we'd be off and running, probably in pretty much the same direction as the scenario depicts.

Cultural Competence

Although the case focuses our attention on consumers, cultural competence involves more than just primary inclusion of direct consumers in an evaluation (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2005; Madison, 1992;

Thompson-Robinson, Hopson, & SenGupta, 2004). Cultural competence involves the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of persons doing evaluation, and it interacts with many of the Guiding Principles beyond its explicit mention in the Competence principle. A quick scan reveals the infusion of cultural competence throughout the Guiding Principles.

Knowledge

Cultural competence values historical knowledge, including relevant local history as well as understanding broader historical and political contexts (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D-1). In this scenario, prerequisites to competent performance (Principle B-1) would include knowledge of child welfare policy and practices and of organizational development and management in order to address culture on both institutional and societal levels.

Skills

The accuracy and credibility called for by Systematic Inquiry (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle A-1) require skills in methods of investigation that are congruent with the culture of the evaluand and the communities that house it; in this case, the evaluand is collaborative and systemic, suggesting that the evaluation should be similarly positioned. Evaluators must be able to make transparent the culturally bound values and assumptions that shape the conceptualization of their work and the interpretation of findings (Principle A-3). Cultural competence includes the ability to listen openly and communicate respectfully with diverse audiences (Principle C-1) and to persist in difficult conversations about values (Principle C-4).

Attitudes

Cultural competence requires an attitude of respect for the evaluand and its diverse consumers, providers, and other stakeholders (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle D-6). It includes a commitment to fostering social equity (Principle D-5), designing an evaluation that gives *back* to those who participate in the evaluation—staff, supervisors and (it is hoped) consumers—and to the broader community and society (Principle E-5). It challenges evaluators to remain vigilant for possible unintended negative consequences of their work, such as

unwittingly perpetuating institutional discrimination or leaving participants vulnerable to harm (Principle D-3), which is a definite possibility in this case. The culturally competent evaluator must engage in self-examination (Principle B-2) and be willing to be molded by what is revealed (Principle B-4). He or she must also be willing to disengage if conflicts of interest between client needs and the obligations of the Guiding Principles cannot be resolved (Principle E-4).

CONCLUSION

This exercise has been revealing. The Guiding Principles hold up well to the scrutiny of case application, and they achieve their goal of providing moral grounding for evaluation practice. They speak to specific points and present a framework for addressing crosscutting issues such as cultural competence. The case itself illustrates how easily culture can be overlooked. Evaluators face the challenge of seeing what's *not* presented and following relevant leads to bring missing pieces into clearer focus. It also offers a vivid illustration of the very human dynamics that shape the parameters of an evaluation, defining whose voices are amplified and whose are suppressed. Validity hangs in the balance.

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COMMENTARY

Whose Evaluation Is It, Anyway?

David M. Chavis

In my view, this case involves balancing personal values with professional standards for systematic inquiry. Often we are faced with the challenge of proposing or planning evaluations that can provide technically adequate information despite their limitations but that might not be conducted in a manner consistent with our values. The primary ethical question is whether the study of the coordination project is seriously limited by the absence of a consumer component. The potential client has asked the evaluator to determine "the extent to which the project has enhanced working relationships among the agencies involved." Some evaluators will believe that having consumer input is essential for a credible evaluation of this type. Others, including myself, believe that a technically sound investigation of agency relationships can be done without consumer input. We probably would all agree that a more thorough evaluation would include consumer perceptions and assess how agency relationships affect the quality of services. However, that "better evaluation" is not what is being requested. The question the evaluator has to ponder is whether requiring consumer input is a personal value or a methodological necessity, and is it consistent with professional ethics?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES?

The Guiding Principles for Evaluators point to areas for evaluators to consider in managing their professional behavior. The application of the first two Guiding Principles—Systematic Inquiry and Competence—challenges the evaluator to determine what sources of information are essential to competently conduct systematic inquiry into the questions presented by the client. The evaluator has to determine whether the Guiding Principles are being addressed in an acceptable manner. It is important for the evaluator to identify his or her own acceptable levels and to identify appropriate practices related to these principles.

If the evaluator believes that consumer input is essential to produce a quality evaluation in this case, then the evaluator is compelled

to take action. On the other hand, if consumer input is a personal value based on the evaluator's sense of social justice or other issues not related to methodological quality and technical matters, I think the evaluator's responsibilities are different, and another approach is called for.

Thus, if the evaluator believes that the absence of consumer input would lead to "misleading evaluative information or conclusions," according to the Integrity/Honesty principle, the evaluator has "the responsibility to communicate their concerns and the reasons for them" (American Evaluation Association, 2004, Principle C-6). The Guiding Principles encourage evaluators to decline conducting a study if these concerns cannot be adequately addressed. In this way, the integrity and honesty of the evaluation are protected.

At other times, evaluators may find themselves in situations that challenge their sense of social justice or equality, even though a proposed design might be satisfactory on conventional technical grounds. They may believe that certain improvements in the evaluation's design (e.g., including consumer input) would enhance the evaluation and make it more worthwhile. In the scenario, for example, the evaluator needs to decide whether data from consumers are crucial for an adequate evaluation in terms of his or her own "guiding principles" and personal standards. If they are seen as crucial, then I believe that the evaluator is ethically obligated not to accept this assignment or contract if his or her best efforts to persuade the potential client do not succeed.

WHAT IS NOT COVERED BY THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES?

The Guiding Principles do not fully address the prerogative of clients to ensure that the evaluation meets their needs and to adjust the scope of the work as they see fit within ethical and technical boundaries. Clients have every right, and in many cases the obligation to their own organization, to reduce the scope or focus of the evaluation as they deem appropriate.

I have found myself in this situation many times. I can get very excited about the possibilities of answering additional questions or examining questions deeper or further than the client may have originally envisioned. I have also learned that this is often a very shortsighted view of the evaluation process. In my personal practice and as part of our overall organizational culture, meeting and exceeding cli-

ent expectations is a core value that helps us achieve excellence in our work. I have found that I can simultaneously be client driven and practice evaluation ethically. To do this requires not only an understanding of my own ethics and values but also that I consider the motivation and values of my client. Most of all it requires the assumption of respect for a client's decision-making authority and intentions, unless proven otherwise. Although the Guiding Principles do address the general issue of respect for all stakeholders (e.g., respondents), the need for particular respect for the evaluator's *clients* is not as clearly delineated.

Underlying this case is the assumption that the associate director does not want information from consumers. Indeed, evaluators often believe that we value truth more than our clients. But in situations like the coordination project, we need to look for the truth in what the client or others are saying. Perhaps the associate director has had past experience with your evaluation work or with studies conducted by another evaluator. That experience may have led to her opinion about consumer input. Or she may have had no experience with evaluations that have provided useful information about consumer perspectives. Maybe she wants to focus the evaluation somewhat narrowly in order to get the most for her agency's limited money. These are important possibilities to explore.

WHAT CAN AN EVALUATOR DO?

In many ways, producing a successful evaluation is all about building good relationships as part of a learning process. If I were the evaluator in this situation, I would accept the assignment as an ethically and technically acceptable evaluation plan, provided that what is being requested could be developed and implemented with the resources that were available. I would use my interactions with the associate director in this evaluation as an opportunity to better understand her concerns over consumer input. I would build a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. It would be essential that the final product of this assignment demonstrate that both positive and negative information can result in useful recommendations. If the associate director truly fears receiving negative feedback from consumers, having constructive and comfortable discussions of critical information *now* would make it easier to incorporate consumer views into future evaluation efforts.

Before submission of the final report, I would meet with the associate director to reflect on the study's findings. We generally require this in all of our evaluation contracts. At that time, we would discuss the evaluation's results, lessons learned, implications for action, and future learning or evaluation opportunities. At this point, it may be appropriate to raise the question of the system's readiness to explore the impact of the intervention on consumers. If I have been able to conserve resources during the evaluation (i.e., if I have money left in the evaluation budget), this might increase the likelihood of such a follow-up study occurring, because having adequate funds to address the associate director's questions was a concern of hers. This assumes, of course, that I have succeeded in establishing a strong relationship with my client based on respect and mutual learning, not just compatible personalities. Such a bond is conducive to the ethical practice of evaluation not only in the case of the coordination project but in other situations as well.

A relationship with leadership based on learning is needed to generate an organizational culture change in which evaluation is used to improve capacity (e.g., knowledge and skills). This begins with the evaluator, through relationship development, discovering what challenges or needs the associate director is facing and how evaluation might help address them. Often, addressing these issues may not be an explicit part of my contract but something I try to make happen nonetheless. Perhaps it is a need for immediate information on program success, or appropriately sharing information on misconceptions about the program, that is causing tensions. In one evaluation I conducted, it was staff concerns about dwindling client participation that led to collecting information from consumers.

Demonstrating the practical value of evaluation is one of the most important tasks for an evaluator looking to build a relationship based on learning that can make a difference. In this sense, evaluators must be opportunists, helping clients use findings to enhance their knowledge, problem-solving capacity, and legitimate interests.

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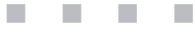

WHAT IF . . . ?

. . . a recent feature article in a local newspaper had reported anecdotal data indicating that parents and foster families were pleased with how the coordination project was working?

. . . the associate director has a national reputation as an expert on interagency collaboration and is viewed as a "rising star" within the statewide human services hierarchy?

. . . the associate director argues that a study of consumer perceptions would be much more valuable if it were conducted after an evaluation of the staff's experiences with the coordination project?

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Coordination Project

In characterizing the results of a study of evaluators' views of ethical issues, Morris and Jacobs (2000) noted that "to those who would like to see evaluators 'speak with one voice' on ethical matters . . . the bad news is that one voice does not exist" (p. 402). Much the same can be said when reflecting on the analyses of Kirkhart and Chavis. The starting point for both commentators is roughly the same: Is it possible to conduct a valid, methodologically sound evaluation of the coordination project—one that satisfies the Guiding Principles for Evaluators—without including consumer perspectives? It is their *answers* to this question that markedly differ.

Chavis is optimistic that a respectable study can be performed; Kirkhart is not. Chavis emphasizes the right of the evaluation client to determine the focus of the research. Although he believes that the evaluation might be *improved* by the incorporation of a consumer component, he does not see such a component as essential to the investigation. Perceiving it as essential would, in Chavis's opinion, be a product of the evaluator's *personal values* being applied to the situation. The evaluator could certainly choose to walk away from the proposed study if this were the case, but it would be personal values, rather than the Guiding Principles, that are driving the decision.

Put simply, Kirkhart disagrees. Given the nature of the coordination project, she believes that the Guiding Principles require that consumer perspectives be gathered as part of the evaluation. She presents her argument in great detail and links her analysis to the evaluator's responsibility for designing a study that takes into account the culture of the system being researched, a system that includes, at the very least, both service providers *and* consumers. Kirkhart acknowledges that her own background and values are likely contributors to her response to the case, but it is the Guiding Principles that she sees as providing the foundation for her analysis.

So, who is right? Do the Guiding Principles require the consumer-inclusive approach that Kirkhart advocates, or do they leave room, in this instance, for a client-driven evaluation that omits consumer views? Is this just a vivid example of how the abstract quality of professional standards can result in situations in which, as Rossi (1995) puts it, "members will be able to claim conformity [to such standards] no matter what they do" (p. 59)? What verdict do you see the Guiding Principles rendering on The Coordination Project case?

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SCENARIO 2

Just Say No?

The school system for which you serve as an internal evaluator has recently revised its curriculum to incorporate concepts from the "intelligent design" literature into selected science courses at various grade levels. Conventional evolutionary theory continues to be taught in these courses, but it is now presented as just one of several ways of explaining how organisms evolve that students can choose from in the marketplace of ideas. The superintendent wants you to evaluate the impact of this curriculum revision on students' knowledge of, and attitudes toward, conventional evolutionary theory, concepts of intelligent design, and the general nature of scientific inquiry.

Your initial reaction to this assignment can best be described as "conflicted." It is your firm belief that the topic of intelligent design does *not* belong in science courses. You have not come to this conclusion lightly. You have reviewed with care the arguments pro and con on the issue, and the verdict of the scientific community seems virtually unanimous: Science courses are not the place where intelligent design should be taught, given that this school of thought operates outside of the rules of hypothesis testing, evidence, and proof that govern scientific inquiry. Thus, to evaluate the impact of intelligent design in science courses bestows legitimacy, implicitly if not explicitly, on an educational practice that is fundamentally ill-conceived. Indeed, as an evaluator you see yourself as a member of the scientific community, and you do not wish your work to contribute to a climate in which intelligent design is seen as simply another intervention in the field of education whose effects need to be investigated. Such an outcome would, in your mind, shift attention away from the core problem that intelligent design's presence in science courses represents. To borrow a metaphor from the legal system, attention would be focused on the "fruit of the poisoned tree" rather than on the tree itself.

On the other hand, your resistance to evaluating this curriculum revision is making you feel a bit like those pharmacists who refuse to fill prescriptions for medications they object to on religious grounds—and you don't like that feeling. The community's democratically elected school board supports the intelligent design initiative, and surveys indicate a high level of support for the idea in the community as a whole. Don't these stakeholders have a right to expect that data will be gathered about the curriculum revision? Couldn't such data lead to a more informed discussion of the appropriateness of intelligent design in science courses? If you balk at conducting the evaluation, could you be accused

of displaying the same sort of nonscientific attitude that, in your view, intelligent design reflects?

The superintendent is meeting with you tomorrow morning to discuss the evaluation. What are you going to say to her?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways, if any, are the Guiding Principles for Evaluators relevant to this case?

2. Is the pharmacist analogy an appropriate one to apply here? Why or why not?

3. Would it make a difference if you were the sole internal evaluator working in the school system versus being one member of a team of internal evaluators? What if there were funds available to hire an external evaluator for this project? Would you lobby for the superintendent to do that?

4. Would refusing to conduct the evaluation represent an empty, symbolic gesture that does more harm than good to the reputation of the school system's evaluation unit?

5. Is having more data about a program always better than having fewer data?

6. What if your input as an evaluator had been solicited during the stage at which the intelligent design curriculum revision was being planned? What would have been your response?

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