



What counts? For whom? Cultural beacons and unexpected areas of programmatic impact



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ABSTRACT

The present article was motivated by our observations that (1) current methods for gathering data do not wholly capture program-related transformations, and (2) grassroots ways of knowing yield legitimate data and can enrich programmatic efforts and evaluations. Accordingly, our work seeks to leverage grassroots knowledge in order to both recognize and respect *cultural beacons* (CBs) – culturally embedded, user-defined aids for understanding program-related change. Simply, these inductively gathered, locally identified CBs illuminate *what* to measure and/or *how* to measure it. Our analysis of participatory evaluations from four international, social change interventions offers four sites for detecting CBs: material possessions, community landscape features, social behaviors, and community-inspired art. We examine the methodological and relational contexts that facilitate CB discovery, discuss unexpected areas of programmatic impact, and utilize lessons learned across projects to make suggestions for continued exploration of CBs in monitoring and evaluation design and practice.

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1. Introduction

A team of Western researchers was gathering data on a multi-year programmatic intervention on infant mortality in a developing country. Team members approached local leaders, government health workers, and clinics but could not obtain reliable longitudinal data on infant death or survival. As the research team despairingly discussed their conundrum outside of a village shop, a wise elder remarked: “Why not ask somebody to take you to the local cemeteries? We mark every grave with the birth and death year.”¹

While this story has a happy ending, the cause of its conflict begs a question: Why didn’t the headstone custom come up earlier in the research process? The answer, we believe, is that no matter how well designed, contemporary norms for evaluating social and

behavioral change interventions overlook and/or marginalize both collaboration and voice. Conducting field-based evaluations of social and behavior change interventions is difficult – very difficult. Investigators grapple with various philosophies, methods, and agendas as they negotiate (often conflicting) imperatives to research credibly, behave ethically, honor funders’ priorities, and protect stakeholder interests. Within this complex context, investigators often apply a deductive perspective, using tested instruments (e.g., statistical or comparative analysis) to examine data (e.g., pre-/post-test survey and focus group responses) from participants grouped based on certain markers (e.g., demographics, role in the project). While deductive approaches have their strengths, they also have weaknesses. Additionally, relying upon a singular perspective – any perspective – predicts omission. In the case of field-based evaluation, as illustrated in the opening story, this omission usually pertains to grassroots epistemologies, or ways of knowing.

Grassroots epistemologies are internalized through day-to-day experiences, insights, and observations. They can be tacit – somewhat intuitive, difficult to verbalize, and held within peer networks. Thus, investigators and practitioners often fail to collect, comprehend, and value data that are (1) culturally embedded – that is, so specific to a culture that they often seem “invisible” to

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¹ This story was narrated by a Save the Children official in a workshop attended by one of the present authors.

outsiders; and (2) user-defined – that is, stakeholders recognize the value/ascribe significance to these data themselves. We call such data “cultural beacons” (previously called “cultural scorecards” in Singhal & Durá, 2010 and Singhal et al., 2011). Cultural beacons (CBs), we suggest, can strengthen program evaluation by pointing to or illuminating culturally relevant data or tacit knowledge that requires local insight to be exposed. Much like a beam from a lighthouse, CBs can guide outsiders, helping them to negotiate unique and unexpected features of a landscape as well as establish moorings upon a solid base.

In the present article, we explore CBs in the context of program evaluation. We begin by suggesting that our “trained incapacities” preclude a holistic integration of deductive and inductive orientations toward data, rendering us blind to uncover CBs. We then explain what CBs *are*, including what they are *not*, elucidating how they differ from overlooked indicators, and we analyze the significance of twelve CBs we discovered in four unrelated program evaluations in Uganda, India, Perú, and Sénégal. We identify the sites and contexts in which CBs are commonly situated and suggest methodological and relational practices that facilitate the discovery of these CBs.

2. Researchers’ “trained incapacities”

The 20th century philosopher Kenneth Burke (1950, 1954/1984, 1969)² wrote extensively about the ways members of a society develop worldviews by participating in *symbolic* (discursive and material) processes. Drawing from Veblen (1914, p. 347) and Burke (1954/1984) explained how these worldviews lead to *trained incapacities* – the loss of ability to think beyond one’s training (p. 7). Similarly, Erving Goffman (1959) contended that totalitarian contexts like asylums and prisons subject patients and inmates to a process of “disculturation” in which they lose access to the practices, sensibilities, and identities associated with life outside of the institution. While the external control wielded by corporate, academic, and other institutions differs significantly from the asylums and prisons Goffman referenced, members of these institutions tend to experience a similar phenomenon. By adopting organizational narratives reflecting values and conventions, departmental actors internalize a strategic sense of identification with the institution (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Identification with an institution’s discourse and organizational practices creates and reinforces a sense of normalcy in the form of categories, rules, and knowledge so that experts are systematic in the ways that they order, understand, discipline, record, and experiment upon others (Foucault, 1965, 1972). These norms, which on one hand “organize” an institution into being, lead to “trained incapacities” or “occupational psychoses” (Burke, 1954/1984, pp. 7 and 49). They become partial and fossilized scripts on behaviors and values, articulating not only the proper way to think, act, and judge, but also foreclosing the possibility that any other way exists. This is likely what occurred in the story of the cemetery; the researchers’ training had blinded them to an unlikely cultural repository of user-generated data.

2.1. Social scientific research biases

Often, social scientific research training is informed by positivist understandings of which information deserves respect. Many social scientists consider knowledge that is expressed numerically, or quantitatively, to be the most credible (Conquergood, 2002; Lather, 1991) – ergo the saying “numbers don’t lie.” The prevailing tendency to quantify implicitly casts as inferior any knowledge that is

expressed linguistically, or qualitatively. Such a quantitative preference may reflect and exacerbate power differentials (Wilkins, 2011).

Similarly, social scientists who deeply value “objectivity” and its conventional wisdom maintain that preserving distance from research subjects is essential. Methodologies such as empirical observation are preferred over dialogic interpretation so that researchers do not identify too closely with participants and risk their “objective” gaze.

Lastly, many implicitly believe that knowledge value should be assessed according to its codification status, with codified (i.e., printed text) knowledge preferred over uncoded. As such, information gathered outside the scope of formal research and/or unpublished is usually repressed, disqualified, and/or dismissed. Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (2002) labeled this perspective that views unlettered knowledge as illegitimate “textocentric.” Similar to the term “ethnocentric,” this neologism describes the quality of evaluating other peoples’ communicative practices according to the standards of a text-based tradition.

Institutionalized perceptions of “what counts” tend to influence researchers’ training and subsequent practice, and then become trained incapacities that can narrow the scope and even limit the validity of program evaluation and assessment.

2.2. Design biases

Beyond the bias imparted during training, researchers also implement data collection methods that are bound by design bias. This is true of all methods, regardless of whether the data to which they relate are quantitative or qualitative; however, because scholarly tradition has tended to frame empirical research methods as (more) “objective,” it is worth examining how subjectivity can shape data collection.

Firstly, tools utilized in empirical research, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, require participants to express in words their ideas and feelings. This embattled translation process limits full participation and circumscribes participants’ range and depth of self-expression, often eclipsing tacit knowledge found in everyday experiences. The context of the assessment – often confined to a particular time and place – may leave out individuals who have other commitments and/or who prefer engaging in introspection differently (i.e., in alternative spaces and/or without time constraints). The content of the assessment also may limit the size of the sample and the quality of the data because engagement requires certain skills. For example, instruments that require reading and writing deny participation by individuals who do not have basic proficiency in reading or writing. Even when assessments are delivered orally, their language – often non-native, riddled with scholarly terms, and/or framed by deductive assumptions – may challenge individuals with different linguistic and/or rhetorical proficiencies. The process of assessment itself – entertaining critical questions and sharing personal truths with “outsiders” – may alienate individuals unaccustomed to such modes of discourse. Further, the nature of a topic, such as a culturally sensitive or taboo issue like human trafficking, gender violence, and sexual promiscuity, may cause discomfort and limit frank discussion. Finally, varying agendas influence interpretation in terms of whose expertise is utilized in sense-making – the investigators’ or the participants’. Social change practitioners increasingly have recognized that these metric-driven indicators of participant knowledge, attitude, and behavior change do not adequately or sufficiently gauge program effectiveness (Airihebuwa and Obregon, 2000; Byrne, 2008; Dutta & Basnyat, 2006; Dutta, 2008; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Saegert, Benitez, Eizenberg, Hsieh, & Lamb, 2004; Smith, 1999; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

² Burke was also known as a rhetorician and literary scholar.

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