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Reflecting on evaluation research: Intersections of academy, community, and identity

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Abstract

Communicative evaluation is a type of community-engaged scholarship that encourages collaboration between stakeholders and evaluators as they develop an action plan about a social problem. However, extant research has failed to adequately explore issues of power and identity encountered by communication evaluators in the field. Doing so could enrich assessment processes and outcomes to develop more nuanced theory and practice. Thus, we reflexively develop and integrate our personal stories and experiences of conducting communication evaluation research to highlight four dialectic identity tensions: (a) insider/outsider; (b) expert/novice; (c) program sustainer/impeder; and (d) researcher/friend. By displaying these tensions, we reveal potential opportunities for new insights that could offer pragmatic applications more attuned to the people and contexts of evaluation research. These tensions highlight the need for critical reflection in the pursuit of program sustainability and offer points for transformation. We conclude with pragmatic recommendations for engaging reflexivity in communication evaluation research.

Communicative evaluation is a type of engaged scholarship that brings together stakeholders and evaluators to develop a community-based analysis of a social problem with a goal of transformation (Ryan, 2004). Yet, evaluators often must balance research ideals with what is possible given community constraints such as participation, funding, and staff. This balance requires judgment rather than strict adherence to any set of rules (McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006). Previous research has noted how this balance can be complicated by diverse stakeholder interests in communicative evaluation research contexts. However, this research has not considered the blurring of boundaries along multiple identity dimensions that reveal the power dilemmas of engaged scholarship (for exceptions, see Brisolaro & Seigart, 2007; Fetterman et al, 1996). Instead, recommendations typically include bracketing researcher experiences that may threaten the validity of the evaluation (Wholey et al., 2004).

However, reflection is arguably a crucial component of engaged evaluation research that can lead to the development of more collaborative theory and practice (Brisolaro & Seigart, 2007). Guba and Lincoln (1989) add that assertions about objective evaluation processes and bracketing of researchers' identities are contested. Moreover, failing to investigate identity issues that emerge when conducting evaluation research can have negative consequences pertaining to decision-making processes, communication procedures, and program sustainability (Abma, 2006). In short, we contend that reflexivity has the potential to transcend the power dilemmas of engaged evaluation (Blomley, 1994).

Toward this end, we reflexively analyze our experiences working on a communicative evaluation of an intergenerational learning program, referred to as the CAPE program. Our analysis reveals four dialectic identity tensions: (a) insider/outsider; (b) expert/novice; (c) program sustainer/impeder; and (d) researcher/friend. In the following pages, we explore communication evaluation challenges and the need for reflexivity. We then discuss the CAPE program evaluation as a case for analyzing the proposed identity tensions. We conclude by articulating our conceptual contributions and pragmatic recommendations.

Communication Evaluation Research Challenges

Communication evaluation is different from traditional forms of evaluation research. Traditional evaluation positions the evaluator as an outside expert and privileges the evaluator's scientific knowledge (Ryan, 2004). In contrast, communicative evaluation positions the evaluation context as a site of conversation with the goal of mutual understanding, collective agreement among multiple stakeholders, and social transformation (Barker, 2004; Brooks-LaRaviere et al., 2009; Habermas, 1996; Niemi & Kemmis, 1999). In this way, communicative evaluation resembles Barker's (2004) conceptualization of "community partnerships" as a form of engaged scholarship in which public participation and deliberation are components but the main focus is on social transformation.

Communication evaluation research challenges emerge when evaluators are expected to provide expert, objective feedback to stakeholders and prevent subjective identity experiences and community circumstances from influencing evaluation processes and outcomes (Abma, 2006; Ryan, 2004). These challenges pertain most to issues of power and authority. First, evaluators must address who has authority over the evaluation. For example, Brooks-LaRaviere et al. (2009) describe an evaluation in which community stakeholders decided to release an evaluation report without the consent of the evaluators. The authors conclude that it is necessary to resolve "questions of authority with respect to responsibility for setting and following through on evaluation goals" (Brooks-LaRaviere et al., 2009, p. 391).

Second, evaluators must navigate the interests of multiple stakeholders, including their own. Guba and Lincoln (1989) explain that evaluation findings are "literally *created* through an interactive process that *includes* the evaluator ... as well as the many stakeholders that are put at some risk by the evaluation" (p. 8, emphasis in original). To address this tension, Ryan (2004) proposes the use of accessible language in and widespread distribution of evaluation reports so that stakeholders perceive their voices are heard.

Third, the nature of the relationship between evaluators and community members can pose a challenge. Brooks-LaRaviere et al. (2009) explain, "prior positive or negative interactions between community evaluator and participants" can lead to questions about research bias, integrity, and the validity of findings. At the same time, these relationships can help facilitate data collection. For example, Ryan (2004) describes an evaluation project where community staff conducted research interviews. Although community staff lacked technical interview expertise, "as insiders, their cultural expertise is not questioned, particularly on cultural dimensions that may elude the 'outside' evaluator" (Ryan, 2004, p. 453).

Combined, these challenges illuminate the political and power dimensions of engaged scholarship. However, research has yet to articulate how these power dilemmas can facilitate or hinder engagement. By power dilemmas, we mean considerations of how community partners assign authority to researchers and how researchers negotiate their power.

Reflexivity offers a starting point to investigate these issues. In the following section, we elaborate on the reflexive methodology that guided our study design and analysis.

A Reflexive Methodology

Reflexivity is the postmodern tool that highlights the multiple, and often contradictory, identities embodied by researchers at particular moments in time and across contexts (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Reflexivity is “the conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210). Reflexive research is presented in a way that makes clear the researcher’s positions, values, and experiences in an effort to reveal their influence on research design and analysis (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001).

How researcher identities influence the meanings of social phenomena and how researchers manage multiple roles in the field have fascinated scholars across disciplines as objectivity has become a problematic ideal (i.e., Denzin, 1997; Fine, 1998). For instance, action research scholars have well-developed approaches for incorporating reflexivity into university-community partnerships. In these cases, reflection is an on-going part of the process that involves all stakeholders and is used to strengthen both the research and outcomes (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In our case, we propose a *post-research reflection interview* that invites researchers to consider identity constructions and intersections. In exploring our multiple identities from our journeys in the field as evaluators, these interviews attempt to expose intersections of academy, community, and identity and “explore how experience, discourse, and self-understandings collide” with larger practical considerations of evaluation research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. xvi). Moreover, the interview process itself becomes an opportunity to engage reflexivity and invoke particular identities around academy and community (Alvesson, 2003).

In specific, our research reflection begins with in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with each member of the research team. The interviews and analysis took place towards the end of the CAPE Care evaluation. The interviews were conducted by the fourth author who was not involved with the CAPE evaluation but who does have expertise in reflexivity and qualitative methodology. For this post-research interview process, having a third party interviewer ensured interview questions and probes that problematized the taken-for-granted interpretations of the research team. Sample questions asked us to describe our role on the evaluation project, our relationship with the community members, our expectations for the evaluation, and how we negotiated the evaluation challenges. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed, and yielded 44 pages of single-spaced text.

To analyze the empirical material generated by the interviews, we used a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each author went through all interview transcripts line by line. With a focus on identity and reflection, we read and reread our transcripts to develop open codes in response to questions like: What did we find challenging about this project? How did we address those challenges? What did we find rewarding? How did our thinking change over time? Sample codes included role conflict, program consistency, friendship, authority, and expertise. Each author engaged in memoing to tie different concepts together and show relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because coding and analysis are iterative processes, coding was ongoing. We coded and memoed individually, then met to compare codes, memos, and preliminary analyses, then separated again and came back together again until we reached agreement. We collapsed these categories into dialectic tensions as a “form of resistance to traditional static categories,” as a challenge to “fixed binary poles,” and to articulate the multiplicities of our experiences (Putnam et al., 2011, p. 36).

These interviews offered an opportunity to engage reflexivity and to generate partial accounts of our experiences. Towards this end, we tried to highlight the multiple, ambiguous, and competing perspectives of our interview accounts through consideration of alternative opinions when pulling together support for each tension (Tracy, 2010). For instance, Steve is a full professor, and, at the time of the evaluation, Elizabeth and Suzy were doctoral students. We sometimes had varying opinions based on research experience and expertise. We also considered the plausibility of our conclusions based on what was known from previous research (Tracy, 2010). For example, our experiences were consistently compared and contrasted with research on program evaluation challenges. Last, the processes of writing can reveal our “own slippery subjectivity, power interests, and limitations--the recognition that [our] knowledge is partial, contextual, and inevitably flawed” (Richardson, 2007, p. 459) and facilitate a reflexive analysis. Richardson’s (2000) crystallization brings together multiple representations of phenomena into a rich, partial account that problematizes researcher vulnerabilities, language meanings, and analytic claims. As such, our analysis integrates our personal stories and experiences working together on

this evaluation project. We speak together and separately at times, and hope our framing of these tensions reveals underlying assumptions and “hidden dependencies on particular ways of seeing things” (Niemi & Kemmis, 1999, p. 56).

Following a brief background on the CAPE program, we organize our article around four identity tensions. We conclude this article by articulating our conceptual contributions and pragmatic recommendations.

CAPE Program and Research Background

In 2005, the Lilly Endowment awarded a group of community stakeholders (e.g., social service, literacy, and child care organizations, local schools) from a Midwestern university community with a population of about 200,000 in the greater metropolitan area a \$1.5M “Community Alliances to Promote Education” (CAPE) grant to develop an intergenerational learning program designed to promote children’s school readiness and healthy development (Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette, 2005). For the next six years, we were part of the research team of academics and community partners charged with helping to conduct an evaluation study envisioned in the grant proposal.

The community stakeholders presented evidence that kindergarten readiness was a significant barrier to subsequent school success in the local urban school district and that high-quality early childhood education programs that could help prepare children for school had long waiting lists. Thus, they proposed a new program, modeled on best practices of intergenerational programs but with greater emphasis on helping parents with limited income and education to pursue their own educational goals. The CAPE Care program was composed of four parts:

1. An Early Childhood Education (ECE) program: the CAPE Care classrooms were designed to provide high quality care for infants and toddlers in a safe, stimulating, and healthy environment. The program was officially licensed as a child care provider and offered full-day care for 16 children and their families in two classrooms. Families in CAPE Care received free child care for the program’s first three years, with the hope that families would transition to government-funded child care vouchers as the funding from the CAPE grant ran out.
2. Parenting classes: weekly classes were designed to empower parents as teachers. At least one parent from each family was required to successfully complete the three-month curriculum; for the most part, mothers participated but a few fathers also attended.
3. Home visits: each family received visits approximately once a month from an employee of the CAPE Care program. The home visitor provided information about child development and literacy activities and discussed the parent’s educational and life goals. She also assisted families as they addressed larger challenges (e.g., employment, transportation, housing, health care) by connecting them with relevant agencies.
4. Educational goals: to participate in CAPE Care, one parent had to establish attainable education goals and pursue plans for accomplishing those goals. This requirement reflected an underlying program philosophy that parents will be better prepared to support their children’s learning if they have positive experiences with their own educational goals.

The evaluation component of the proposal was not fully developed when the grant was funded; indeed, the proposal simply called for a “longitudinal study to track children who participate in the ECE during the grant years” and indicated that a “research partnership with Purdue University will be negotiated upon approval of the grant” (Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette, 2005, p. 7). From the perspective of Steve, “It was a good opportunity because it meant that we could collaborate with the program in designing the evaluation.” Steve was not involved in the grant-writing processes; however, he was working with the same network of community stakeholders that had been assigned to oversee the CAPE grant on a different project and hence became a likely candidate to develop the research partnership because he had already established these relationships with the community collaborators. Additionally, over the course of our involvement, the grant also funded two quarter-time research assistant positions, held by Suzy and Elizabeth, to help design and carry out the evaluation research.¹

The CAPE evaluation study is an example of what Barker (2004) labels “community partnerships” as a form of engagement in which scholars assist “intermediary public entities such as public agencies, local schools, activist groups, and community organizations” to work towards social transformation (p. 131). As such, a number of evaluation components were developed collaboratively with CAPE staff, the larger social-service agency charged with implementing the grant on a day-to-day basis, and other community stakeholders. The CAPE community collaborators did not develop a formal “RFP” in terms of what they were looking for from an external evaluator and we did not present them with a

formal proposal, in part because the nature of the grant initially did not require much detail about the evaluation study but also because we hoped to develop an evaluation plan collaboratively as is highlighted in communicative evaluation research. For instance, we had discussions with them to clarify and prioritize the importance of various potential evaluation goals (e.g., providing feedback to improve program implementation and processes, assessing whether the program was having a positive impact, and telling the story of the program and participating families to external audiences). We also collaborated on what needed to be developed to plan the evaluation (e.g., they did not have a formal program logic model at the start, so we worked together to develop one); discussed how much of the grant could be devoted to supporting the evaluation; and considered what was feasible to do in terms of the evaluation. For example, we discussed how we could effectively integrate evaluation procedures with regular program procedures without overburdening CAPE staff.

Following these discussions with CAPE Care staff as well as others involved in writing the grant, four research goals were established: (1) to describe the families who chose to participate in the CAPE Care program; (2) to understand what parents and staff believed were program strengths as well as barriers to successful program implementation; (3) to assess short-term and long-term impacts of CAPE Care programs for children, parents, and families; and (4) to help tell the CAPE Care story to the local community and potential sources of future funding. Based on these research goals, we designed a longitudinal, quasi-experimental study to gather quantitative and qualitative data from parents, children, and program staff starting when participating families enrolled in the CAPE Care program (Time 1, baseline) as well as after 6 months and 1 year of program participation (Times 2 and 3). Multiple types of data were gathered over time, including questionnaires, video-taped parent-child interactions, in-depth interviews with parents and staff, home and field observations, and review of program records.

Although guided by these goals, our priorities changed during the course of our involvement with the CAPE Care program. Initially, we focused on designing the evaluation study and making sure it was well-integrated with the other program components. Later, our focus shifted to providing detailed feedback to CAPE Care staff and stakeholders about one specific aspect of the program, the parenting class, which was not being implemented as originally envisioned. We also put more emphasis on the sustainability not only of the program but of the evaluation component when the grant funding ran out. With this shift, we talked with the CAPE Care staff, for instance, about the kinds of evaluation activities they could do internally to continually improve the program when funding for research assistants was no longer available. Through these interactions, we found ourselves grappling with several dialectical tensions regarding our identities as researchers.

Identity Tensions of Communication Evaluation Research

We organize our findings around four intersecting dialectic tensions that indicate how reflecting on evaluation research can assist in negotiating issues of power as well as enhance evaluation theory and community partnerships.

Insider/outsider tensions

Throughout the CAPE Care project, we faced tensions between our roles as “insiders” and “outsiders” or “collaborators” and “evaluators” (for discussion of a similar tension, see Crabtree & Ford, 2007). As a community partnership, the CAPE Care study involved much more collaboration with stakeholders than is typical in program evaluation research. Elizabeth explains this project was “a lot different than just having data and sort of looking at it... it’s been a big change.” Steve comments on the blurring of boundaries when giving presentations to community groups about the CAPE Care evaluation in which we were asked questions about the programs themselves:

At first I was very uncomfortable with such questions and would always re-direct them to program staff to maintain clear boundaries between the “program” and the “research.” However, I became more comfortable answering program questions--in part because our research team had remained constant whereas key staff positions had turned over. We often knew more about the program than new staff.

Our commentary explicitly describes the blurring of boundaries between our roles as outsiders, or evaluators, and that of insiders, or community partners. There are advantages to this blurring of boundaries. For example, evaluation research

recommendations indicate that program staff are more likely to keep evaluators in the loop (e.g., letting them know immediately when a new family joins or leaves the program) and help facilitate data collection if they view evaluators as “one of them” (Wholey et al., 2004).

In contrast, Suzy and Steve recall an extended example that reveals the identity tensions that can result with this blurring. Following procedures approved by our university’s institutional review board, one of the research team members attended the “intake” meeting, where a new parent completed enrollment paperwork, to explain that in addition to participating in the CAPE program they had the option to participate in the evaluation research. Suzy explains,

I did an intake with a mother who did not speak either English or Spanish as her native language. We had only developed Spanish translations of our written materials. After I explained the purposes and procedures of the study, she said that she wanted to speak with her husband before consenting. I could understand this mother’s position. It’s hard to tell what someone thinks of when they hear the word “research.” It was challenging to explain confidentiality and to justify the video-taped interaction. I felt the CAPE staff person who conducts intakes warily watching me.

Shortly afterwards, the CAPE staff member called Suzy and indicated that the mother had chosen not to participate in the evaluation research. Steve recalls this situation,

I remember feeling frustrated when Suzy told me what happened. I expressed concerns about whether the mother really had understood the research purpose and procedures given her limited English fluency, and hence whether she could have explained them to her spouse. However, the CAPE employee was confident that the family had made an informed decision not to participate. The CAPE employee felt strongly that additional attempts to recruit the family with a translator would be coercive and might lead the family to decide not to enroll in the CAPE Care program itself and refused to provide information that would allow the research team to contact the family. I met with the CAPE Care director to express concern that the CAPE Care employee did not have sufficient background to judge the mother’s English proficiency or to make decisions about when a parent had made an informed decision about research participation or what types of recruitment procedures were/were not coercive. The CAPE Care director offered to mediate the dispute about this family, but we decided to follow the employee’s wishes and focus instead on preventing similar conflicts in the future.

This example addresses the politics that emerge as boundaries between collaborator and evaluator are blurred. In some cases, we felt that we were insiders who could accurately portray program components during, for instance, community presentations. However, there were other instances in which data collection may have been threatened as we attempted to balance our roles as insiders and outsiders. In these cases, our identities as researchers were questioned. The CAPE Care staff member felt the need to “protect” this family from our undue influence, perhaps because she still saw us as outsiders or perhaps because she saw us as partners and hence had the right to evaluate how we interacted with families. Either way, it felt like our professional judgment was being questioned and our ability to recruit families was being infringed. To navigate this tension, we developed strategies that included refining our research protocol. We were able to jointly negotiate procedures for avoiding similar situations in the future, such as (a) alerting the research team in advance when a family enrolling in the program did not speak English as their native language so that a translator would always be available to attend the intake session and (b) encouraging fathers as well as mothers in two-parent families to attend the intake session, especially in instances where the family’s culture might have placed decision-making power in the hands of the father. Eventually we were able to create procedures that everyone agreed gave families in the program agency over their situation while allowing them to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the research. And we were reminded that if program employees truly are research partners, then employees at all levels need to be included when creating procedures for all elements of the research including the informed consent process. In this case, we learned to trust others’ assessments and that gathering all possible data is not always the most important goal.

Expert/novice tensions

We have also observed the tensions of being an expert but feeling like a novice about things like the purpose of the grant and the individual families. In some cases, CAPE staff directly referred to us as the experts about the grant and CAPE programs. Suzy comments,

The fieldworker had said to me, “Well, you know the grant so is this what we’re supposed to be doing? Does this sound right to you?” I immediately responded, “I’m not comfortable answering that question.” I don’t have the expertise in child development and social work that staff have. And we didn’t write the grant.

Staff sometimes sought reassurance that they were doing their jobs correctly based on grant requirements. However, we hesitated to be labeled “experts” on the program because we did not write the grant and we did not want to overstep our roles in this partnership. Steve explains:

I often felt like – why are they asking me this – I’m not a service provider. We would meet monthly with classroom teachers, the home visitor, employees from local educational organizations, etc. to make sure everyone working with the families knew what others who had contact with the family were doing. Because of confidentiality, we couldn’t share a family’s exact score on measures or comments from interviews, but we did share impressions of whether what we saw in the evaluation component was consistent with the staff’s impressions of the families. By participating in these meetings, we learned more about our research participants and developed closer ties with the staff – and yet we weren’t the experts on how to work with families – they were.

Steve and Elizabeth describe an extended example that problematizes the meaning of expert. Elizabeth was responsible for training program staff on how to conduct a home assessment, using a standardized interview and observation procedure called the HOME (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) that was part of the evaluation study. Elizabeth explains,

We would do the intercoder reliability to make sure that the field worker, who wants the program to succeed, is not just seeing that the family is improving when they may or may not be. The measure is challenging because it says things like, “takes the child to the doctor regularly.” And the home visitor probably already knew that because they interacted with the family so much. But, in keeping with the research, they still had to go through the motions and complete the formal HOME assessment. This makes me wonder if expertise about a family can only come with the completion of a formal assessment?

Steve: Elizabeth’s comments about expertise lead me to reflect on what it means to “know” and what we and the staff knew. As evaluators, we “know” (are confident based on a large body of prior research) that scores on the HOME inventory predict young children’s subsequent language and cognitive development – outcomes central to the CAPE program. We know why it is important to establish inter-coder agreement, for the reasons Elizabeth just explained. The CAPE home visitor knew the families far better than us. I felt good when our research goals and expertise complemented those of the CAPE staff. For example, the home visitor would conduct the HOME interview during her first visit with each new family. She had to have a wide-ranging conversation with the mother about her daily life with the child in order to get the information needed for the HOME inventory – which allowed her to start getting to know the family while also helping us with the assessment.

These examples highlight the tension between the knowledge we have garnered from social-scientific training, and the knowledge that arises from our day-to-day interactions with clients and staff. These examples also document instances where our epistemological positions were challenged. For instance, the home assessment measures generated “objective”

knowledge about the families. However, privileging objectivity can sequester the everyday knowledge that can directly ensure successful program participation, outcomes, and community engagement. The shift from these two sources of knowledge can be unsettling as our research expertise is made vulnerable by community expertise in situ, however this shift reflects our commitment as engaged scholars to problematize the privileging of scientific knowledge over social practice (Barker, 2004). This example also outlines two key issues, namely that the relationships among evaluators and partners will influence the type of knowledge generated, and that evaluations communicate and legitimate particular norms and values (Abma, 2006). In other words, we hope that our collaborative relationships with community partners contributed to the valuation of the knowledge we brought as social scientists *and* the knowledge staff brought as social service experts based on their extensive work in the field. It is important to consider these different forms of knowledge because “all evaluations are located somewhere in terms of the politics and norms of the context” (Abma, 2006, p. 187). We tried to be reflexive about what unique expertise we could bring and how we could work in a complementary way with the staff rather than downplaying their knowledge because we are the “experts.”

Program sustainer/impeder tensions

Because we had limited experience conducting evaluation research, we expected our experience with CAPE Care to be consistent with what we read and our previous experiences. In our collaborations with community partners, we expected to provide feedback to facilitate program implementation and evaluation. However, we assumed that community collaborators would retain ownership over the program itself. This tension explicates how we struggled with ensuring program sustainability without impeding that sustainability.

To begin, we often found ourselves doing things beyond what we expected to do to ensure program sustainability. For instance, because of high staff turnover, we sometimes socialized new employees into their staff roles during the intake meetings. Suzy recalls one situation:

I often assisted the new field worker with how to determine if families could participate in the program. This seemed like an administrative issue but because I had attended so many intake meetings, I was very familiar with the process. I essentially helped train and socialize her into her new position.

Thus, despite our expectations, we became one of the most consistent aspects of the CAPE Care program. In this way, we often wondered if we were in the best position to ensure successful program implementation. Steve adds,

We do lack control over staff turnover. Non-profit organizations typically pay low salaries and employees often work long hours with multiple programs. Three key employees had left within one year. With each turnover, we had to establish rapport with a new employee and explain how our evaluation study fit into and benefited the larger CAPE program.

We assumed that the program would be run by a consistent set of staff who were informed about program goals and procedures. However, our experiences defied these expectations. Thus this tension also relates to the insider/outsider tension, in that we helped socialize new CAPE staff into their jobs, a role that is unusual for outsiders. As such, we recognize some situations where the program may not have functioned as well without our involvement. Elizabeth adds, “There was a sense that we were the historians, helping the program function, and the source of stability as a catalyst for change.” In this way, we reflexively reframe this tension between supporting and impeding program implementation as a key opportunity to contribute to program sustainability.

However, this tension between providing helpful feedback and assuming ownership of the program also created difficulties in our relationship with community partners. For example, we expected that different people working with the same family (e.g., home visitor, classroom teacher, parenting class instructor, and the program working with the parent on educational goals) would communicate with each other about that child/family. Yet we observed that often this was not happening and so we suggested holding periodic “case” meetings where staff could discuss individual families. Because we proposed the meetings and wanted to see how they functioned, a member of the research team also attended each case meeting. And because we had data on each family, we prepared a brief profile for each family in terms of where they scored relative to established norms for various measures. Staff would also bring their profiles for each family so that we could compare and contrast observations and interpretations. Elizabeth explains:

The purpose of these meetings was to have all the players together; but my plan was to take a back seat because I'm not an expert on these families. All I had were numbers from our data—which were not meaningless but I wanted to see how the teachers and fieldworker described the families. And if for some reason, their observations were really different than our observations, I would mention that. But I felt like it was not my job to take the lead; we needed the staff to take ownership of the meetings and place value on their own input. However, because we suggested that the meetings happen in the first place, we sometimes ended up facilitating the meeting.

Through subsequent interviews with the staff conducted as part of the evaluation research, we learned that some staff felt uncertain about how to participate given our presence. Elizabeth adds,

The staff member told me that she thought we had too much input in the meetings and that she did not feel like she was contributing to them in a meaningful way. Although in the context of the interview this turned into a brainstorming session about how to improve the case meetings, it made me reflect on our role as we conceive of it and as others perceive it. There seemed to be a constant struggle over who had power and authority to speak in these situations.

Thus, in this example, Elizabeth ironically notes her ambivalence about suggesting the case meetings and actually facilitating the case meetings. Some staff thought we were getting too involved in the case meetings in a way that was counterproductive. To these staff, the research team was claiming too much authority over the meetings which threatened the engaged aspects of this evaluation. Indeed, there are two related but distinct issues here: (a) we may have been undermining engagement by controlling rather than facilitating interaction between different program staff; and (b) we also might have been undermining program sustainability. If the staff were not committed to these case meetings, or did not feel like they were able to actively participate in them, then the meetings would probably have stopped as soon as our evaluation role ended. In this case, we would be undercutting the staff's own problem-solving about how they could coordinate most effectively.

To summarize, this tension expands on the insider/outsider tension but is specifically framed around issues of program implementation and sustainability. We note how we worked to provide program feedback in the hopes that staff would retain program ownership. In some cases, we became the program historians, working to ensure successful program implementation. For example, in socializing new staff, we took on a responsibility that typically would be held by staff to ensure accountability over the program. As we moved away from strict evaluation and into program implementation, one consequence was that some staff perceived our role as infringing on their responsibilities, creating situations that could be damaging to engagement and sustainability.

Researcher/friend tensions

Throughout our experiences with CAPE, our experiences frequently problematized identity distinctions that began to feel artificial. For instance, we began our relationship with staff as collaborative partners working on the evaluation. But over time, we developed friendships with CAPE staff. These friendships complicated the evaluation.

To begin, we note the benefits of these relationships. Steve explains, "It can be less threatening to provide critical feedback if you have a relationship that you consider a friendship." For example, in 2007 we provided critical feedback about the initial version of the parenting program--the curriculum they had selected was not designed specifically for parenting young children and the class was only meeting once a month. We feared our feedback might create defensiveness. It helped that Elizabeth had observed 7-8 parenting classes and also interviewed the parents and instructors. But it also helped that Steve had developed a friendship with the Executive Director of the agency implementing the grant. This friendship minimized differences of authority. By that time, the Executive Director knew Steve well enough to trust our assessment that something needed to change. Rather than being defensive, she said "find us a better curriculum and tell us what it will take to implement it." Eventually, multiple program staff and one member of the research team (Elizabeth) were sent for training to implement a parenting curriculum that had been tested extensively with Head Startⁱⁱ families.

As friends, we felt comfortable providing constructive criticism. Yet we also observed instances where these friendships led to problems as we enacted our roles as researchers. For example, when the CAPE program lost several classroom teachers, they were pulling the fieldworker into the classrooms as a substitute, making it difficult for her to do some of her other job responsibilities. Elizabeth had gotten to know the fieldworker pretty well because they were working together on the new version of the CAPE parenting class. Elizabeth adds:

I think they should have had a substitute list but I wonder if I'm missing something in terms of organizational politics or constraints. I was concerned about the fieldworker; it wasn't fair for her to be a sub in the classroom in addition to her full time job.

As friends, we worried about staff being overworked. However, our focus on these personal relationships may have obscured a critical program-wide perspective. For example, having staff temporarily fill other staff roles when employees leave is a sensible way to cope with unexpected job turnover and cross-train staff. Viewing a situation like this from the perspective of friendship may inadvertently compromise program implementation.

We also note instances where identity appeals to non-academic, personal subjectivities have facilitated, for us, more smooth interactions with families. For example, Elizabeth and Suzy talk about conducting interviews with the parents:

Elizabeth: I can't say I'm from Purdue. That doesn't mean anything. I think, "How do I identify myself accurately but in a way that won't make them think that I'm trying to sell them something?" So becoming a parent myself has helped with the interviews.

Suzy: I also recall interviews with parents where I completely downplayed my association with Purdue. I too wanted the parents to know that we were interested in their individual experiences. I felt guilty about my privilege. I assumed they would admire me because of my association with Purdue. But do they even care?

The identity tensions of researcher and friend expose how we embody different identities in various contexts, blurring the boundary between the personal and professional. In some cases, we drew upon particular identities to benefit the research, like when Elizabeth privileged her identity as parent. In the process, we downplayed our academic associations. Suzy notes the guilt that can be associated with academic privilege when doing the work of engagement. In other instances, we wanted to assist our friends, although this focus may have obscured alternative perspectives that could have benefited the program. In negotiating the tensions of researcher and friend, evaluators often form connections with people that are seemingly different from themselves, highlighting aspects of their own identity that they assume may downplay power differences. Therefore identities that get (de)emphasized are a product of the other person's social location and the intentions of the evaluator. These negotiations surface issues of power in our attempts to downplay hierarchies that privilege academic expertise and problematize arbitrary identity distinctions. Engaging in these reflexive exercises indicates how different identities can serve different purposes in evaluation research.

Intersections of Academy, Community, and Identity

In this section, we describe our conceptual contributions to the literature on communicative evaluation and engaged scholarship followed by our pragmatic recommendations. First, we extend prior research on the challenges of conducting communication evaluation research by articulating the ways in which power dilemmas of community partnerships are realized, negotiated, and resolved. We indicate how these tensions allow us to "learn from progressive struggles without reinforcing the hierarchies of privilege" (Blomley, 1994, p. 385). In specific, our reflexive analysis details how our negotiations of power sometimes facilitate and sometimes hinder community engagement. In articulating the power dimensions of engaged evaluation, we attempt to provide theoretical and conceptual insight into the everyday interactions of activist research (Blomley, 1994). Moreover, evaluators must consider how these tensions operate simultaneously such that navigating insider/outsider tensions, for example, may have implications for how researcher/friend tensions are managed. Our findings encourage engaged evaluators to be reflexive and to discuss the blurring of boundaries between the academy and community with partners when relevant.

Second, we consider the need to balance multiple and sometimes competing objectives when working with community partnerships. The four proposed tensions highlight different aspects of our challenges and successes at working to: make this program sustainable, empower program staff, conduct a sound evaluation study, contribute to communication theory,

and expand our professional portfolios. Israel et al. (2006) suggest that for community partnerships to be effective, they must sustain relationships among all parties, sustain knowledge and values garnered from relationships, and sustain program resources. To these three important dimensions, we add the need to engage in consistent critical reflection in an effort to problematize agendas, relationships, and outcomes of evaluations. We explain how discursive constructions of researcher as expert can become problematic in everyday interactions with community partners. We highlight the ways in which our experiences often defied our expectations as we felt pulled into program implementation issues and away from our roles as evaluators. We problematize the pursuit of objectivity in program evaluation research as we navigated the tension between researcher and friend.

Third, we attempt to politicize evaluation research by naming the researchers, labeling our interests, and problematizing the expert knowledge that is typically privileged in evaluation research. Our discursive reflections call into question agency and power in navigating identity tensions as we consider, for instance, who determines who is an insider or an outsider in situations where we were attempting to consent non-native English-speaking participants. We draw attention to the fluidity of expertise and our ambivalence about the power that is linked with our academic associations. We also note that the quality of researcher-staff relationships can influence the quality of the findings, and emphasize the need for community partners to have a voice in the development and implementation of evaluation processes.

Pragmatic Recommendations

We conclude with a set of pragmatic recommendations. Our list of recommendations provides a starting point to think about the practical implications of incorporating reflexivity in evaluation research. First, when planning for reflexive evaluation research, be prepared for a significant time investment. The exact amount of time to invest can range anywhere from months to years and will largely depend upon the scope of the evaluation. However, we recommend avoiding evaluation pitfalls in which the researcher comes in, gathers data, makes stock recommendations, and leaves (Fetterman et al., 1996). It takes time to learn about the specific challenges facing a particular program and to gain trust to the point where recommendations for change are considered seriously. This is more likely when program staff see the evaluators as having a long-term commitment to the program. Moreover, this significant investment of time means that evaluators must be willing to adjust research protocols in response to changing social relations and practical considerations. In reflexively considering our roles as insiders, friends, and sometimes experts, we explore how trusting relationships can naturally evolve over time.

Second, develop relationships with employees at all levels of the program from those doing the day-to-day work to the executive director. For engagement, this involves more than keeping employees at all levels informed or getting their buy-in since employees are actively involved in designing, enacting, and assessing the evaluation process. To develop trusting relationships with all levels of staff, we recommend a number of formal and informal strategies to facilitate communication and reflection about the evaluation. We conducted orientation sessions with all new staff in which we introduced the evaluation and invited questions. We scheduled regular meetings with staff where program leaders were present. We also held meetings with staff without program leaders so staff would feel comfortable sharing their impressions of the evaluation. We made staff feedback a formal part of our research design in the form of in-depth interviews with a member of the research team about their role, program sustainability, and the evaluation. We summarized and presented our findings to community partners. We encouraged informal staff feedback at any time, and we also volunteered for work beyond our official role as evaluators. For instance, we assisted with hosting the ECE open houses. And Elizabeth actually co-taught the parenting class with a new staff member the first time it was offered. These relationships create tensions that must be managed, but they facilitate many aspects of the evaluation, help with managing organizational politics and providing critical feedback, and are one of the most rewarding aspects of doing the work. Evaluation recommendations often overlook the complexity of these relationships (Abma, 2006). However, evaluators should embrace the intrinsic value of these social relationships while also accepting responsibility for evaluator-collaborator relationships. Doing so can contribute to program sustainability through the establishment of partnership among evaluators and key stakeholders (Niemi & Kemmis, 1999).

Third, engage in constant reflection. Previous research has identified the merits of reflexivity in evaluation research (e.g., Ahonen & Virtanen, 2008; Ryan, 2004), however, this research has yet to articulate these identity tensions and how negotiating the attendant power dilemmas impacts engagement and program implementation. We suggest the design of an evaluation study that builds in reflexivity and “allows one to examine what is actually there, regardless of the goals and

objectives of the program or service” (Pinch, 2009, p. 393). Engaging in constant reflection means “that every statement on claimed facts that has been uttered on evaluation practice should be turned back on the evaluator who utters it” (Ahonen & Virtanen, 2008, p. 1147). We employed a number of techniques to pursue reflection over the course of this evaluation. Some mechanisms assisted us in negotiating a tension *during* the evaluation project, like our research team meetings where we explicitly discussed project challenges. We developed strategies to negotiate the insider/outsider tension during these meetings and were able to adjust our evaluation protocol. Second, we linked this study with a discussion-based course on conducting community evaluation research that was taught by Steve. Students were encouraged to critically question both course content and Steve’s assumptions. Third, we conducted presentations to outside audiences that included questions about the implementation and sustainability of the program. This question and answer component often exposed the tensions implicit in our analysis, sparking subsequent conversations among the research team and community partners about our various roles and responsibilities. Fourth, we kept research journals where we critically reflected upon this evaluation.

Last, the process of inviting a colleague to interview us about this research and then writing this manuscript has facilitated several aspects of reflexivity. In specific, these post-research reflection interviews offer a new tool to systematically reflect on the nature of evaluation research and explore the tensions that emerge when agendas, relationships, and outcomes collide. Although these interviews were conducted and analyzed towards the end of the evaluation, they were still able to inform future CAPE program directions in terms of ongoing evaluation, sustainability initiatives, and community transformation. Indeed, the outcomes of this process served as a springboard for our final recommendations to community partners. These post-research reflections will also influence how we design future communicative evaluations. For instance, we would like to conduct post-research reflection interviews with all community partners, not just members of the research team.

In closing, we proposed a set of identity tensions and offered a series of pragmatic recommendations that propose critical reflection as one of the many tools that can assist communication evaluators in negotiating the challenges of engaged evaluation.

Postscript

The CAPE program is no longer operating as it did during the period of grant funding (2005-2011). Although the initial plan for sustainability envisioned transitioning families to government childcare vouchers, the recession of 2007 meant that funding was slashed and the waiting list for vouchers more than doubled. By early 2011, it was apparent that the organization overseeing the CAPE program could not sustain the program in its current form; some services were cut and one of the two classrooms was closed at that time. Although some program features survive (e.g., the parenting curriculum continues to be offered through other programs), the second classroom closed July 2012 with families transitioning to Head Start. Steve comments, “If I had to do it over again, I would have pushed earlier and more aggressively to be a part of discussions about sustainability and made sustainability a key part of the evaluation. The organization charged with implementing the grant viewed those discussions as ‘internal’ because they were part of that organization’s larger discussion about how to integrate CAPE Care with their other existing community programs to sustain services in tough financial times.” Steve currently is working with community partners on a grant proposal that would reopen the early childhood classrooms.

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ⁱ Purdue University is a research-intensive university. Funded, evaluation research is typical at this University. However, at the time of this study, engaged research was not the norm although it is becoming more common.

ⁱⁱ Head Start is a program funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive education, health and nutrition information, and parent development programs for low-income children and their families (<http://www.bauerfamilyresources.org/index.php/early-care-a-education/head-start>).