

Practitioners and Researchers: Two Cultures Collide

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INTRODUCTION

Both applied researchers/evaluators and practitioners work to help people, but they use different techniques. Evaluation researchers try to help people indirectly by discovering information ("truth") about how people, programs, and the world work. Practitioners try to help people by working directly with them and improving their situation, attitudes, or behavior. These divergent approaches become especially obvious when it comes to program evaluation and can lead to conflict and frustrations. It is not that one approach is right and the other wrong, but that the two groups look at the world through different lenses. In the fields of human development and human services, practitioners and researchers seem to come from two different cultures.

The authors worked with a team of students and faculty at a university to conduct a large, multi-site, longitudinal evaluation of a home-visiting program for parents at risk of abuse and neglect. The evaluation team designed the procedures, located the instruments, and entered and analyzed the data. The program site staff were expected to gather some of the data and to recruit families to be interviewed by the evaluation team members. In the process of this collaborative effort, much was discovered about the cross-cultural differences between researchers and practitioners.

This article explores both the researcher and the practitioner cultures. A picture of the two cultures is presented, and several issues related to program evaluation are examined from both perspectives. Occasionally the researcher and practitioner cultures collide, and conflict may occur. This article highlights conditions to look for when conflict occurs, including causes, types, and levels of conflict. Finally, some solutions are presented for ways to reduce and resolve conflicts between the two groups.

A Look at the Two Cultures

Following is a glance at the differences between practitioners and researchers with regard to their professional needs, decision making styles, focus, communication methods, daily operations, and the tools they use.

Needs

Practitioners look at life in terms of immediate needs and crises. They deal with clients who have lost housing, have no food in their cupboards, and need a job now. They want immediate answers for the crises they face and for the clients who need help as soon as it can be

offered. Practitioners work in jobs with low levels of job security and are often supported by grants, which can mean learning about having or losing a job with two weeks' notice or less.

On the other hand, researchers look at issues in the long term, knowing that finding answers to research questions can take years. They're concerned with getting it right. Many evaluation researchers are employed in academic settings where they may have tenure and the long-term job security that comes with that position.

Decision Making

When practitioners make decisions, they depend on intuition, instinct, direct experience, clinical evidence, diagnosis, and interpersonal sensitivity. They choose courses of action that "feel right" and that have been successful in the past. Testimonials from colleagues who work in similar positions can be very convincing.

When evaluation researchers make decisions, they look at numbers, statistical significance in study results, logic, prediction, and systematic gathering of information. When a new idea is proposed, they want to know who proposed the idea and what empirical evidence is available to support it. Hard-core researchers might not be convinced

that the new idea has merit until they have tested it in their own studies.

Focus

What really matters to a practitioner is making a difference for individuals and families. A practitioner feels successful if a family that has struggled in the past finally achieves some important goals, or if an individual completes a degree, gets a job, or passes a parenting course. Practitioners want to make the world a better place, using hands-on intervention.

Researchers really care about gathering large amounts of valid, reliable data that lead to statistically significant results. Most quantitative evaluation researchers feel especially successful if they have been able to generate large amounts of data using a control-group design. The bottom line is that researchers want to make an important contribution to knowledge about individuals, families, programs, and the world.

Communication

Communication is a critical tool for practitioners. Their communication is usually personal, direct, and immediate. One goal of communication is establishing

The why and how of evaluation take on very different perspectives, affecting the way the two groups view timing, purpose, methods, success, and communication of the evaluation results.

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an emotional connection and nurturing a personal relationship.

Communication is also important to evaluation researchers, but most of their communication is written and is designed to get certain information across. Communication is used to establish and maintain study designs and procedures and then to inform others of study results. Relationship and emotional connection are not typical goals.

Daily Operations

In their daily operations, most practitioners face volumes of guidelines, procedures, reporting structures, and rules. They are supervised closely and regularly in most positions. Those guidelines make their jobs structured and inflexible. At the same time, several authors have defined quality practice as flexible and adaptive. In fact, some authors have said that the best practitioners "break the rules" to meet the needs of their clientele. So practitioners may attempt to establish flexibility and responsiveness within their highly regulated environment.

Researchers are likely to operate in a setting with very high amounts of personal freedom and flexibility. Outside of scheduled classes and meetings, they rarely need to keep assigned work hours and are encouraged to think creatively and design new approaches. Once an evaluation or research design is created, however, the flexibility ends; the goal is to maintain as much consistency as possible in the collection of data so that any changes in individuals and families can be attributed clearly to the treatment and not to changes in procedures.

Tools

The tools that are likely to be important in the lives of practitioners are those that keep them in touch with clients, supervisors, and referral contacts. Pagers and cell phones are invaluable in their work to maintain contact and personal communication. The most central tools in the lives of researchers are likely to be computers, large on-line databases with search engines, and e-mail. Their tools focus on management of large data sets, complex analyses, and quick, efficient communications.

ISSUES RELATED TO EVALUATION

It is clear that evaluation researchers and practitioners operate with very different visions of professional life. Sometimes it is difficult to see how these two cultures are even related. One situation in which it may be critical for researchers and practitioners to bridge these gaps is when they conduct a pro-

gram evaluation. In that situation, they need each other. The practitioners, who work for a program, must have the program evaluated to prove its effectiveness in order to receive grants to continue providing services or to improve services; they often need the help of a researcher to accomplish that. Researchers interested in intervention and the impact of programs must work with practitioners who are willing to have their programs evaluated and are willing to cooperate with the researcher.

The way that practitioners and researchers look at evaluation is consistent with the focus of their job. Several issues in particular are often viewed differently. The why and how of evaluation take on very different perspectives, affecting the way the two groups view timing, purpose, methods, success, and communication of the evaluation results. Table 1 illustrates some of those different views.

REASON FOR CONFLICT

As mentioned earlier, when the practitioner and researcher work together to perform a program evaluation, conflicts may arise mostly as a result of the differences in their professional lives, contrasting views of the world, and different ideas about evaluation. Nevertheless, they must depend on each other to complete the evaluation. The bottom line is that researchers may be afraid that practitioners will ruin the research design and compromise the data. And practitioners are likely to worry that

Table 1: Program Evaluation Issues: Practitioners vs. Researchers

| Issue | Practitioners | Researchers |
|--|---|--|
| Purpose of the evaluation | Program improvement and advocacy | Contribution to the literature, accountability |
| When data collection should begin | After rapport has been established and family is firmly committed to the program | As soon as a person is identified as a client, or earlier, if possible |
| Ideal data collection methods | Flexible, matched with the client's needs and program flow | Consistent, standardized |
| Ideal evaluation instruments | Short, simple, non-intrusive, incorporated into program delivery | Comprehensive, objective, reliable, and valid, using multiple measures |
| If problems are identified in the family during data collection | Immediately explore ways to intervene with the family and assist in dealing with the problem | Record the situation, but do not let the data collection process influence the family any more than necessary |
| When results should be released | Continually with the data collection and analysis, i.e. yesterday | Only after sufficient data have been collected and all analyses have been completed |
| Primary audience for evaluation | Program staff, funders | Other researchers, academicians |
| Exciting evaluation findings | Powerful success stories and case examples, identification of streamlined and effective intervention techniques | High levels of statistical significance in findings |
| Personal benefits from completed evaluation | Program funding and job security—if the evaluation is positive | Publications, presentations, and promotion—if the evaluation is well designed and executed and finds significant results |

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the research will alienate their families or clients and drive them away from the program. It is as if the researcher says, "Okay, you can do what you need to do to deliver a good program, but be consistent and don't mess with my research design." The practitioner seems to say, "Okay, you can evaluate the program, but be nice and don't mess with my clients."

As the earlier description of the two professional worlds illustrated, conflicts between researchers and practitioners may arise from their different views of time, their different ways of thinking, varying views of what is really important and what defines success, contrasts in communication styles and levels of independence in work settings, and differences in the tools they use to do their jobs. In working with a team to conduct the previously mentioned evaluation of a home-visiting program for parents at risk of abuse and neglect, the following conflicts were encountered:

- Views of time became an issue when evaluators wanted to wait until the multi-year study was complete to release results, but the program staff wanted to know details about findings before the first year was over. Differing views of time also were evident when the program staff reassigned ID numbers of former families to new families. The program did not need that ID number any more, but the reassignment caused havoc for the evaluators who entered data by ID numbers.
- The different ways of thinking may have contributed to misunderstandings related to consent forms. The program staff knew that the evaluators did not want to receive identifying information on families, so they blotted out names that were signed on consent forms, even though signatures were exactly what the evaluators needed. The evaluators thought the instructions were clear and logical, but the program staff were thinking of the needs and feelings of their families.
- Differences in values were very evident when program staff missed data collection points because the families had immediate needs—and those needs did not include answering questionnaires. This also was evident when staff were unwilling to assign families in need of services to nontreatment control groups. Program staff felt services to families were most important, but the evaluators thought data collection should take priority.
- The evaluators tried to maintain personal contact and communication with program staff, which would have been consistent with the practitioner style, but the program grew too quickly. The resulting loss of relationship hurt the evaluation.
- Understanding the differences in levels of independence between the two settings was a regular point of frustration for the evaluators who had difficulty knowing who was capable of making decisions and

what was the best way to implement changes. The evaluators lived in a world in which individuals could operate independently. Evaluators needed to learn that it was not enough to explain procedures only to supervisors or only to home visitors.

- The difference in tools was evident in any evaluation work group meeting. The evaluators had laptop computers for taking notes and consulting data, and the program staff were interrupted often by beeps and bells from pagers and cell phones. The computers could be seen as intimidating and pretentious by the program staff, and the pagers and phones could be seen as disruptive and rude by the evaluation staff.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

There are several different types of conflict that may occur between the researcher and practitioner: unnecessary conflicts, genuine conflicts, and realistic conflicts.

Unnecessary Conflicts

Unnecessary conflicts are those that may arise due to problems in communication and perception (Girard & Koch, 1996). The differences in this case are not great. For example, as the situation above described, both researchers and practitioners are concerned about confidentiality, but they approach it from different directions. Researchers must get consent from participants and follow the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board. Practitioners protect the privacy rights of their clients by not passing on names and information about clients to others. The ultimate goal is the same, but the typical procedures differ. The researchers and practitioners see things in different ways, and their perspectives influence their perceptions of consent forms and participant rights. When the groups did not communicate their perceptions to each other in the abovementioned study, unnecessary conflict occurred. If such conflicts are recognized as unnecessary, they can be solved easily.

Genuine Conflicts

Genuine conflicts are those that arise out of concrete differences (Girard & Koch, 1996). Those are very real and touch on core values. Researchers and practitioners have different job-related goals, and these goals may not be compatible. The concrete differences in their jobs may cause genuine conflicts. As described above, meeting data collection deadlines or meeting immediate family needs is one such dilemma. The solution for one side directly threatens the interests of the other. Communicating alone will not eliminate those conflicts but may help find a solution.

Realistic Conflict

Realistic conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1993) occurs when there are disagreements over the means to an end or the ends themselves. Researchers and practitioners may disagree on the way the evaluation is

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conducted, why it is being done, or even what the evaluation may produce. In the author's study, practitioners were asked to read questionnaire items out loud to families in order to control for differences in literacy. However, program staff were uncomfortable doing this and felt it was insulting. The evaluation team changed the format of the answer sheet, and the final form eased the concerns of the program staff. Another example encountered was related to the timing of the evaluation. Practitioners did not want to collect evaluation data before rapport was established with the families they were visiting. However, the researchers needed the evaluation done as early as possible before the program could have a significant impact. A compromise was reached by determining that data would begin to be gathered anytime between the fourth and the tenth visit. Again, communication and sharing of needs can help, but each side must approach discussions with a degree of flexibility and willingness to listen and adjust to each other.

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

There are not only several types of conflict, but a variety of levels of conflict as well. These conflicts may occur at the interpersonal level and/or the intergroup level (Girard & Koch, 1996; Folger, et al., 1993). The *interpersonal level* would be a conflict between individuals. For example, a conflict may occur between the program supervisor and the evaluation coordinator. If it does, it can be solved best by bringing the individuals who are in conflict together to discuss and solve the problem, or it could be handled by minimizing their need to have contact. The *intergroup level* would consist of a conflict occurring between one or more groups with each other. An example of this would be a conflict between a group of practitioners and the evaluation team. In the above study, tension existed between the program sites that were established at an early point in the evaluation project and those sites that were newer. The original sites had input into data collection procedures, while the newer sites needed to conform to the expectations that had been set. In this case, solutions may be found either by altering procedures or by building a sense of loyalty to the larger group context.

RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

When faced with a conflict, people may respond in one of three ways (Crawford & Bodine, 1996). One response is called a *soft response*, which would result in avoidance, accommodation, or compromise. In many cases, ignoring is the easiest response; everyone can go home and pretend that nothing happened. However, the problem is likely to resurface later, especially if groups discuss the situation among themselves in the absence

of the others. Another response is the *hard response*. This response typically includes force, threats, aggression, and anger. Some of the meetings in the study seemed to almost reach this level, but most often moved to compromise and constructive solutions or to denial and sweeping the issue under the rug—even if it appeared again later.

The last type of response is the *principled response*. Problem-solving, communication, and meeting the needs of everyone are the products of this type of response. Clearly, a principled response is most constructive. Regardless of cause, level, or response, conflict is a reality in any workplace, especially when there is a contrast of cultures like that of researchers and practitioners. If it is dealt with positively, however, the results can be helpful rather than destructive.

TECHNIQUES FOR REDUCING CONFLICT

If conflict arises between researchers and practitioners, the most effective response is to address it as soon as possible. Conflict is harmful to client families as well as to the researchers and practitioners. There are several techniques that may be used to manage conflict between the two groups. First, get to know each other and understand the differences.

- **Listen to each other.** Make sure that you have enough contact with each other to do this. Researchers and practitioners should attend meetings together, whenever possible.
- **Shadow each other on your jobs.** In the above study, evaluators attended some portions of practitioner training. Practitioners accompany evaluators to homes when they do interviews so that they can introduce the evaluators. Although they leave after the introductions, this gives them a brief time to observe the evaluators at work. It might have been helpful for evaluators to observe a few home visits and for program staff to observe the process of entering questionnaire data or coding videotapes.
- **Explain your needs and roles.** This should be a part of every meeting. It is a special challenge to explain roles without being defensive and in a way that the other group understands. Both sides need to learn to say "I feel..." and "I need..." instead of demanding particular solutions or behavior from the other group.
- **Practitioners could share program newsletters and materials with evaluators.** It is important that researchers take some time to read these materials and glean implications for the research. The better the

Decide what is non-negotiable, but allow for some flexibility in your expectations. Make sure that the primary goals, needs, and values of each group are honored, but each group should be willing to compromise where possible.

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researchers understand the intervention, the better the evaluation will be

- **Researchers could create an evaluation newsletter for the program staff.** It is important to avoid technical jargon and concentrate on issues that affect program staff. Thanks for and recognition of accomplishments by the practitioners are valuable components. Ideally, the researchers can also provide evaluation information as it becomes available, and that will help practitioners improve their program

Second, both researchers and practitioners could define their needs and communicate them to each other. This helps both groups get in touch with genuine conflicts. The groups could also explore how their behavior may affect each other's needs, reducing the feeling of threat

- **Always inform the other group before changes in procedures are made.** Each group should consider how changes in their procedures would affect the other group.
- **Decide what is non-negotiable, but allow for some flexibility in your expectations.** Make sure that the primary goals, needs, and values of each group are honored, but each group should be willing to compromise where possible.
- **Offer choices to the other group, and work together to find solutions.** Instead of announcing the way things will be, each group should explain what they are trying to accomplish and then suggest at least two ways that the other group could cooperate
- **Clarify how your personal needs are connected to the evaluation.** Researchers could describe their need for publishable results, and practitioners could share their concerns about continued funding and a positive public image. Allow yourselves to be human.

Third, researchers and practitioners could focus on shared goals whenever possible, developing a principled response.

- **Make sure the other group knows that you care about their concerns.** This assumes that you do care, but pretending at first may lead to real empathy over time. Ask questions and listen to the answers.
- **In order to build trust, each should be trustworthy.** Follow through with commitments and promises, or explain why it will not be possible to do so. Avoid talking about each other when there is no opportunity for dialogue and representation.
- **Remember that the well-being of families is the ultimate goal.** Keep your "eyes on the prize." The short-term concerns about the program and data collection are only temporary issues; the improvement of the lives of children and families is likely to be a shared goal.

Communication is vital in preventing conflict as well as to resolving it. Researchers and practitioners need to both talk and listen to each other. If a conflict arises, they may not wish to try to resolve it when they are angry. When cool heads prevail, practitioners and researchers may go directly to each other to share concerns. Finally, researchers and practitioners should celebrate any successes together. It took both groups to gain success, so why not appreciate it together?

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Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the National Council on Family Relations and to the Healthy Families America Research Network. Funding for the evaluation study described in this manuscript came from the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. Appreciation is expressed to Phyllis Kikendall who assisted with earlier versions of this paper.

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