Taking Evaluation Contexts Seriously: A Cross-Cultural Evaluation in Extreme Unpredictability

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Abstract

Evaluation of a prevention project for sex workers was implanted in a remote region of Northern Brazil. The study analyses the contextual limits of predictability that render evaluative research difficult within the established criteria of Western scientific rigor. Crucial defining issues were identified: 1) individual (individual skills for dealing with unforeseen developments); 2) socio-political (inequalities of power, mainly between so-called developing countries and so-called developed countries); 3) socio-economic (inequalities of resources from one country to another, and from a peripheral region vis-à-vis the capital) and 4) ecological (some geographies are more susceptible to floods, epidemics, etc.). Posing them as questions to be answered in a pragmatic and realistic perspective develops cultural competency for evaluation. Intercultural experience illuminates at the deepest levels the challenges of inserting evaluation in a specific setting, especially when it differs significantly from that of the program formulation.

Crossing the Borders of "life-threatening grip on the distribution of scholarly knowledge": Overcoming Evidence-Based Knowledge Constraints

An evaluative research study of a prevention project for sex workers was conducted in a remote region (Amazonas, Brazil). Going beyond the available epidemiological surveys, evaluation was performed with an ethnographic and community approach with local actors (participant observation, individual and collective exchanges). The evaluation was performed "on the basis of the points of view of the various actors involved" (House & Howe, 1999): health network authorities, municipal authorities, peer-educators, sex workers and voices often forced into silence (marginalized communities). This study underlines how this context imposed varied limits to predictability that render the production of evaluative research difficult within the established criteria of Western scientific rigor regarding predictability of outcomes and researcher control of process.

This paper is particularly relevant for the field of evaluation with non-profit organizations regarding major social questions, but also for contextual and culturally sensitive evaluation. Research was performed in a remote area with difficult access that increases the challenge for both preventive and evaluative action. As a health professional, the researcher (me) had been living and working in that area for six years from which she developed her concern with realistic evaluation. This scholarly article is not just an evaluation report; it is a depiction of two productions: a study that was presented at the « Crossing Borders, Crossing Boundaries 2005 », Joint CES/AEA Conference, (24 au 30 October 2005, Toronto, Ontario) and an article presented to the Forum Social of Qualitative Research (see

Laperrière, in press). While the latter discussed the research methodology perspective in Latin America, this paper aims at making a contribution to evaluation practices.

In order to deal with accrued setting unpredictability, the methodology used was adapted to a "goal-free evaluation" (Scriven, 1972, 2004) in an "experimenting society" (Campbell, 1969, 1971) perspective. A Canadian non-profit organization experienced in constructing an open instrument was used and adapted in that five-months long field evaluation experience. This project used community evaluation tools produced by the Coalition of community organizations against Aids - COCQ-Sida (Jalbert, Pinault, Renaud & Zúñiga, 1997). It is directly pertinent because it poses those challenges in a pragmatic view and tries to offer some orientations and future perspectives to perform evaluation within an uncontrollable sociopolitical and geographic context. This background characterizes many of the promotion and prevention health actions in both developing countries and marginalized regions.

When Objectives Stifle the Objective-Free Contribution

The possible rupture between imported conceptualizations and actions and instrumental concepts in direct action illustrates two different logics of evaluation—two evaluative pathways indicated in terms of Scriven's distinction (Laperrière, under press). On the one hand, *objective-based evaluation* is oriented towards an evaluation/verification of whether results instigated or controlled by program administrators have been met. This kind of evaluation is fundamentally aimed at controlling programmed actions within the framework of its specifications. On the other hand, *evaluation without preconceived objectives* ("Goal-free") is a complementary evaluation proposal that deals with the

operational situation and excludes the administrators' specific mandate from which arise the only objectives of interest for the management of the program (Scriven, 1991). This distinction converges with Mendel (1998) who invites us to keep a cautionary awareness of the difference between our projects as ideas and our actions as deeds. This conceptualization supposed that we transform the evaluation relationship to a source of mutual change through a negotiated outcome for the evaluation's participants as well as the evaluator.

Exploring a Method for Attending to Context and Culture: The Pertinence of Immersion

As Kushner (2000: 37) argues, evaluation research makes it possible to draw out relationships between actors and social institutions. "A program evaluation is a process by which society learns to understand itself and in which the evaluator is an educator" (Cronbach, 1989). The stage was thus set for situating a kind of evaluation to be conducted in conditions that made it difficult to impose a pre-established logic, a logic that was produced far from the real conditions of a concrete action that evolved in a context much more unpredictable than those presupposed by the model. I thus opted for a qualitative research framework because in my view it was the kind of approach that would provide more visibility to experiences that would have otherwise remained hidden.

The approach was elaborated during a five-month total immersion in the field (February to June 2004). The process included individual interviews (18) and life history (3); collective interviews (18 during 2 months – weekly meeting) with 3 Strategic Focus Groups (SFG), using a Self-Evaluation Guide for Community

Organizations (Jalbert et al., 1997); participatory observation, documents analysis and auto-ethnographic journal. The information sources were different local actors (n=35 in total): regional-level research personnel: team members of the Regional Reference Centre's STD/HIV/AIDS Sector; management coordinating members; Staff group (n = 17/from 3 projects [sex workers—Men who have Sexual Relation with Men (MSRM)—marginal youth]); Volunteers; Users; Sex workers; and collaborators from the public administration.

Background Results of an Empiric Evaluation Practice

The global evaluation considered the results of these experiences. In all, a team of local participants acted as "multipliers" or mediators. The findings present the changes noted in the self-reflexive process of shared evaluation groups made up of the multipliers from the three prevention projects. These groups followed the method presented in the Epsilon Project (Coalition of Community Groups against AIDS), which uses a methodology of radical participation involving all actors in every aspects of the evaluative research.

Towards the end of the shared evaluation process, the groups had common or distinct concerns depending on the history of their respective project. The process drew out the adjustments needed to improve the prevention projects. One group felt that the internal sub-coordination function (values, commitments, function, and authority type) was their main concern (Q: how can we become more autonomous and have our own coordinating body?). For another group, the outcome of the meetings was an emphasis on developing new intervention strategies based on the multipliers' knowledge (Q: how can we overcome the monotony of prevention education interventions formulated at higher levels?). And for another group, the

important issue was translating the project's interventions for authorities in the form of a journal (Q: how can we describe our practices in terms that are understandable by the authorities? How should we go about preparing material for a national conference? How can we describe our own observations and daily actions within the current prevention projects?).

The evaluation activities sought to provide the groups with new energy once they had finished the complete cycle of the evaluation experiences; that is, the planning of new actions for improving their projects and actions themselves. At this point, it seemed that the evaluation portion was completed and that there was a situation of theoretical information saturation. The themes contained in the Epsilon questionnaire (Jalbert & al., 1997) were exploded by this reality: the multipliers now needed concrete action following the evaluation of their ongoing prevention projects.

From the beginning of their active evaluation, many multipliers had indicated their concerns about the continuity of the consultation services and the instability of services offered to the users. They talked about the possibility of creating a NGO and of acquiring more autonomy. Their desire to know where they were going and to know how to organize themselves was expressed on several occasions. The observations and the collective interviews drew out the importance of bearing in mind the lucidity of local actors with regard to the possibilities for social change. They know much more about what can really be made to happen and what is beyond the possible actions within their own local organizational culture. The participatory observations revealed the initiatives of certain multipliers in asking for users' opinion about the services provided by their projects, in reflecting upon

the reasons of participants for not using the medical consultations that were available for them, and upon the formulation of new strategies for continuing their "mission." The multipliers' capacity for working together became very evident, this despite the differences between their respective prevention projects. There was a clear sharing of their experience-based knowledge and a pooling of challenges and work in order to carry out collective actions. It was in this way that, following the self-evaluation process; the multipliers in the three projects formed a partnership to begin health visits to the two local prisons. At the time of the present study's end, these activities had been officially integrated into the STD/HIV/AIDS prevention projects' activity calendar.

Developing Skills to Manage an Unknown Context of Evaluation

The field experience made it possible to verify both the prevention project's gradual development and the resistances opposing it to the prevailing social reality. It was a complex situation in which prevention is not shut off from the world and cannot happen without disturbing relationships and the balance of administrative, political and even criminal power. An established order can react with all the means at its disposal to prevent changes that it views as threats. It was characterized by limits to what could be anticipated. The evaluation occurred at a time when the local managers were going through a critical period—the projects would only survive if they could obtain other sources of continuing funding (self-sustainability). The evaluation activities took place in a context of insecurity, something that the evaluation could not choose to ignore if it was to be conducted with a minimum of consideration for unforeseeable events and contextual realism.

The challenge for this evaluative research was to contribute to understanding the establishment and implementation of a prevention program situated at the limits of what was controllable, and in the presence of and affected by a wide variety of recognized and hidden actors operating in the background. In summary, then:

(a) The evaluation occurred in a complex situation affected by a wide variety of recognized actors as well as ones operating in the background. Given that the HIV/AIDS prevention project was inserted into the various registers of many local actors, it could not select targets arbitrarily. As such, it had to remain open to all channels of understanding, which presented themselves to a long-term presence (six months of fieldwork), which had been preceded by six continuous years of professional work as a nurse by the researcher on the same project.

(b) The evaluation situation was traversed by socio-political danger, which affected socio-political relations among sanitary, police, legal, government, cultural (educators and the clergy) and criminal actors. Given that it is close to the border, the region had problems related to smuggling and drug trafficking, the fluidity of clandestine people, and land invasion issues, with their violent consequences. A reality of this kind requires that research activities explicitly delimit the kind of information needed for socio-sanitary evaluation, and explicitly exclude the kind of information that it must avoid, information that opposes local actors in hidden relations which are kept secret by often-violent methods. They must also be explicit with regard to the confidentiality of information that they generate about spheres that do not concern them, so as to avoid accusations of informing and unauthorized transmission of information about one actor to another.

(c) The observations and the collective interviews drew out the importance of bearing in mind the lucidity of local actors with regard to the possibilities for social change. Community actors know much more about what can really be made to happen and what is beyond the possible actions within their own local organizational culture. Their reading of the project presented to them filters the action proposal in terms of what they thought as feasible. This reading determined their attitudes towards the kind of participation proposed to them. If they trust the researcher and the authorities he or she represents, they will be willing to discuss winning strategies. On the other hand, if there is no trust, they accept the proposed action discourse and act on their own as a function of their evaluation of the situation.

Challenges for External Validity in Evaluation

Prevention requires dynamic evaluations and a grounding in local cultures that respects the dynamics of preventive practices, especially in settings in which the variables cannot be predetermined. Here, crucial variables of concrete political power, obscure relationships of illicit activities and catastrophic natural disasters, and define a world far away from the expectancies of researchers. There are several challenges that can increase external validity awareness.

The first challenge: translating the evaluator's intentions into terms that make sense to evaluation participants. Participants involved, affected, or interested in the evaluation see it as an opportunity or a threat. They must acquire the sense to understand the objectives, procedures and methods of analysis: if the participation is to be radical, it has to be present in all the project's aspects and

moments. Project failures, limitations or unplanned benefits make the foreseen objectives obsolete and the actual results mysterious.

In this context, the participatory method is the foundation for the work to be carried out (evaluation and "shared evaluation") in which the two quoted words are filled with significance: a negotiated awareness that the project requires a jointly constructed meaning (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, 1989). As such, everyone should agree about what it is we are trying to build.

Participation also presupposes intercultural negotiation in every sense of the term: ethnic cultures, nations, regions and power relationships. The open expression of the participants' thinking is the foundation of this agreement. It is a dialogue that begins with an explanation of research in action, that is, in activity situations. Abstract, theoretical explanations of participatory action-research are incomprehensible to participants. They grasp their practices on the basis of a palpable reality and the emerging problems encountered in day-to-day life and survival (see Schön, 1983; Schön & Rein, 1994; Mendel, 1998). During the group discussions, the information was produced through analogies with their environment, nature, comparisons with similar situations, and individual or collective experiences.

The objects of deliberation encompassed not only the content of the self-evaluation of their projects, but also how the project was conducted and the dissemination of research findings. A central concern of the local actors was how the information engendered by the evaluation activities would be disclosed. While some participants were not concerned about its disclosure at the international level, most

were concerned about its local dissemination, which had direct implications for their personal and collective lives.

A second challenge: cultural variations of *unpredictability*. Cultural communication variations and the incorporation of modifications can be viewed from the perspective of other cultures or social classes as things which are unforeseeable. The national and international cultures of a foreign managerial sector are not always able to decode the local contingent factors of variability, and so view them as obstacles rather than as healthy requests for adjustment. Observation and insertion in the local actors' and research participants' environment revealed important socio-cultural elements that had an influence on the way the research was conducted: (a) rapid oral communication among social actors in a relatively small community; (b) the functioning of the community network of local actors in the municipality (e.g., informal networks, such as street gangs, and more formal ones, such public health institutions); (c) The demands for a participation activity that flows from the faith that the research will really improve the prevention project in a relatively short period of time; (d) a reciprocal service exchange between local actors and the evaluator; and (e) the success of the project will translate into real improvements in the lives of the participants.

At the beginning of the evaluation, the research question noted the notion of *unpredictability*, viewed largely as a consequence of a remote geographic periphery setting characterized by a lack of resources (marginal prostitution zones, geographical remoteness, and the very limited resources available for a "boondocks" village). We use the notion of contextual unpredictability, which entails the need to consider important variations for the follow-up of the pre-

established objectives of prevention and evaluation practice. It also underlines the consequences of a methodological choice favoring participation and action. Although these elements remained constant throughout the project, *unpredictability* was refined over time and with the researcher's direct contact with the field.

The notion of *unpredictability* can be interpreted at the individual level as an obstacle to the total control of all variables. However, observations and time spent in the evaluation setting reveal that *unpredictability* was more of a lack of understanding, if not the willful neglect of certain factors of variability which have an unwelcome impact on action. It is for this reason that the concept of *unpredictability* should take into account the difference between obvious *unpredictability*, which constitutes an obstacle to one's plans (power failures, no water, storms and accidents) and hidden *unpredictability*—unrealistic cost estimates, predictions about stability in political behaviors and structures, and the absence of worst-case scenarios (what if …?). While the research context was well aware of the foreseeable consequences of upcoming elections for local actors directly involved in the prevention projects, it can appear as an obstacle for the foreign researcher's pre-established participatory intentions – one which s/he is sorely tempted to minimize or ignore.

Moreover, it became clear during the participatory action-research project that the individual interviews engendered the participation of the actors who embraced the exchange groups' dynamism and became factors triggering unplanned positive effects, which altered the project for the better. As such, the inter-communication among the various social actors from the political and health levels as well as

among the members of the prevention projects suggests that they share the knowledge created in the course of the individual and group meetings.

A third challenge: relations of institutionalized influences and field information. The validity of evaluation findings is influenced by the authenticity of the participants as it is incorporated into the internal evaluation process. Several multipliers were quite frank in expressing their attitudes towards external evaluators and their gullibility in accepting literally opinions that were expressed in terms of their easily decoded expectations.

Conducting evaluations in a given environment presupposes that evaluators bear in mind the context of the social and cultural organization in which the participants are immersed. We cannot analyze answers given in focus groups if we pay no heed to the political and social context in which this group communication took place. Meeting results cannot be analyzed as "truths" issuing from a questionnaire or from a positivist approach. Disclosure of the information outside of the group or even within the group can have serious implications for the safety of the participants. The local actors are very much aware that development effectiveness in terms of numbers and identifiable innovations represent the justification for funding their source of income.

It is important to pay attention to project evolution over time. To be immersed in the project' activities helps to get a better grasp of the reality that "deviations" or "gaps" might actuality be adjustments and safeguards, despite apparent "deviations from the ends." The perception of the dynamism of the process would not have been possible by means of a cross-sectional approach at one moment in time. It was an ethnographic approach in the community and over time that made it

possible to observe these changes. The area in which this study took place included drug traffickers, owners of bars in which prostitutes ply their trade, street gangs and local political elements with whom the evaluator had to negotiate, in addition to negotiations with "visible and recognized" peers in the official health system (see Laperrière & Zúñiga, under press).

Conclusion—Learning in Contextual Minefields : What Evaluation is all About?

This evaluation experience enabled the identification of avenues of thought for guiding community health prevention projects, especially the need to incorporate a heightened awareness of "what was happening" and of the socio-cultural and socio-political context in which it took place. To quote Zúñiga (1975, 114), an experimenting society needs the example of a community in which the "passion for understanding and the desire to help are coupled with an acceptance of the concrete, societal, and historical determinants of the limits of ideal, abstract benevolence". Being close to the local environment enabled the project's insertion into the social movement of the evaluation's socio-cultural and socio-political context. It encouraged the evaluator to insist on the multiplicity of actors involved in the day-to-day aspects of the project. These actors operated within the framework of unequal relations of control and influence—in a relative verticality of power—which exacerbated the evaluation project's "context of unpredictability."

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