From Program to Network

The Evaluator's Role in Today's Public Problem-Solving Environment

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Today's public policy discussions increasingly focus on how *networks* of public and private actors collaborate across organizational, sectoral, and geographical boundaries to solve increasingly complex problems. Yet, many of evaluation's key concepts, including the evaluator's role, assume an evaluand that is programmatically or organizationally defined and bounded. This article explores the implications of this changing public policy environment for the evaluator's role by examining one case: an evaluand that was a loose collaboration of four individuals in dispersed organizations working to reframe public policy and to change professional practice in early care and education. We describe this evaluand and the dimensions of it that challenged our evaluative role. We conclude by suggesting an alternative conception of the evaluator's role that can serve evaluators in this changing policy environment.

Keywords: evaluator role; networks; collaborative; governance

Program evaluation remains a diverse and multifaceted social practice. Although commonly focused on discerning (Stake, 1997) and judging the quality of society's efforts toward social betterment (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000), evaluators conduct their practice in different ways with many understandings of their craft and with a range of epistemological orientations and value commitments. Accompanying this diversity is a proliferation of "roles" that evaluators "take on" as they conduct their work. Guba and Lincoln (1989) characterized this proliferation as a generational evolution from measurer to describer to judge to negotiator. Cronbach and associates (1980) and Weiss (1998) emphasized the educative role of evaluation in society, and Patton (1997) underscored evaluators' consultative role. In more ideologically motivated conceptualizations of evaluation, evaluators take on roles as social critics (Everitt, 1996; Mertens, 1999); agents of social change (Whitmore, 1998); facilitators of deliberative democratic dialogues (House and Howe, 1999); or advocates for cultural justice (Hood, 2001; Hopson, 2001).

The current discussion aims to both enliven and trouble these longstanding ideas in evaluation by critically reflecting on our evaluator role in one study. The evaluand in this study, the Linking Economic Development and Childcare Technical Assistance Project, was not a program or an organization but rather a loose collaboration of four individuals in dispersed

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organizations working to reframe public policy and to change professional practice in early care and education. The goal of the collaborative was to strengthen the field of early care and education [ECE] by changing the way policy makers, practitioners, and academics *thought* about the economic potential of this care. Driving the team's work was the explicit assumption that reframing ECE in economic terms would spur new action and investment in this sector, leading to a high-quality, accessible, and affordable early care and education system in the United States. Although the team had a set of strategies that guided their work, much of their effort was emergent, responsively opportunistic, and relationship driven.

In this evaluation, we sought to balance two roles: independent observer and critical friend (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). These roles were congruent with our utilization-oriented, responsive evaluation approach and chosen to address two primary evaluation audiences, the funder and the project team, respectively. Our work thus involved both an outward-looking policy orientation and an inward-looking practice perspective—aspirations we acknowledge as presenting possible tensions in our work but not tensions that are inherently incompatible or uncommon for evaluators who balance formative and summative agendas. Our focus here is on a different tension—that between our evaluator roles and the particular nature of the evaluand. As a dynamic collaboration of individuals implementing emergent, responsive, and relationship-driven strategies, this evaluand created a level of dependence on the project team that was unusual *and* that challenged our ability to enact our roles as envisioned.

Based on a critical analysis of this case, we suggest that current conceptions of evaluator's role presume an evaluand that is programmatically organized or institutionally situated. However, as we argue, these conceptions do not hold in policy settings, increasingly focused on *networks* of people and organizations that work more or less coherently and purposefully to address complex public problems (O'Toole, 1997; Salamon, 2002). This is not to say that programmatically defined evaluands are no longer relevant, but the unit of analysis in many policy conversations is shifting to networks. The complex reasons for this shift include the recognition that effective solutions to problems depend on the coordination of many actors—nonprofit, for profit, and public organizations, working at the local, state, national, and international levels. While recent work in evaluation, such as the application of systems concepts and social network analysis, lend insight into how we can work with evaluands that are not programmatically or organizationally defined (Durland & Fredricks, 2006; Williams & Imam, 2007), much more attention is needed to understand the implications of these evaluands for evaluative theory and practice. Our primary focus here is on the evaluator's role.

After briefly citing literature on the evaluator's role and describing the case, we examine four key characteristics of this evaluand that challenged our role. We then discuss the implications of this changing public problem-solving environment for our understandings and enactments of the evaluator's role. We conclude by suggesting an alternative conception of evaluator role that can serve evaluators in this changing policy environment.

Conceptualizing the Evaluator's Role

The construct of evaluator role is an honored one in evaluation history. This construct embodies distinctive stances on the meanings of evaluation and its location in the world. Mark (2002) has suggested that evaluators' different conceptualizations of their roles are a pivotal influence on their varied evaluation practices. So when evaluators choose roles, they also adopt particular tasks necessary to enact those roles. Mark's ideas are featured in a volume edited by Ryan and Schwandt (2002). This volume reconsidered the extant diversity of our roles and, more profoundly, whether the construct of role adequately captures what it is we

aspire to do and actually do when we practice the craft of evaluation. One of its central themes concerns the social and relational dimensions of evaluation or the relationships that evaluators establish with clients and other stakeholders in the evaluation. In this respect, the volume challenges the idea that evaluators simply choose their roles and that role choice only has implications for technical tasks. For example, Mark proposed a social psychological circumplex model—anchored in two interpersonal dimensions: dominance versus submissiveness and affiliation versus hostility—to differentiate among evaluator roles (and thus also evaluation theories). Abma (2006), adopting a poststructuralist perspective, argued that evaluator role/ identity is relational and textual, actively created rather than just donned or represented. Schwandt (2002) synthesized the arguments in this volume and suggested that construing evaluator role/identity as constituted by relationships and interactions "inevitably entails normative choices" (p. 202), and thereby the evaluator role construct also becomes infused with ethical and moral considerations.

This literature suggests some conceptual agreement that the evaluator's role is anchored in particular understandings of evaluation practice and enacted through evaluation activities. This work also emphasizes that evaluators' role is relational and interactive, partly constitutive of the knowledge generated, and suffused with values and ideals. This is in some contrast to traditional notions of role as an identity temporarily donned, circumscribed by task, and protected from the particularities of the context. However, what happens when the evaluand is an informal, dynamic, diffuse network, rather than a contextually bounded set of definable activities? What does this suggest for evaluators' role in the future? Our experience is consonant with the notion that the evaluator's role is relational—that is, the roles we choose structure our relationships with evaluation stakeholders at the same time that our roles are constituted through ongoing interactions with these stakeholders. Yet, our experience also suggests that the characteristics of the evaluand can shape evaluators' relationships with stakeholders in fundamental ways that can challenge evaluators' enactment of their roles, calling for an examination of evaluators' role in settings where the evaluand is a less formal and more emergent network.

The Case[1]

The Linking Economic Development and Child Care Technical Assistance Project, the evaluand, was not a program, an organization, or even an advocacy campaign. Rather, this evaluand was a professional collaborative among four organizations: the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, Cornell University, Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research. However, the project was lead by four individuals or the "team" (four women, one from each organization) and this grant was part of a larger 10-year effort by three of the four individuals to change the way policy makers, practitioners, and academics thought about early care and education. The project team believed that if ECE was viewed as a critical economic development opportunity, rather than a social welfare issue, it would receive the attention and investment that it deserved, and eventually high-quality early care and education would be accessible and affordable for all families. This 3-year project was funded by the Kellogg Foundation.

Reframing Care: From Welfare Burden to Economic Investment

The economic framework adopted by the project was central to all project deliberations and activities. According to project documents, the economic importance of ECE had three

components: its effect on the regional economy, its effect on caregivers, and its effect on the children (Warner et al., 2005). By considering early care and education in an economic development frame, the project team called attention to key challenges facing the sector and suggested possible strategies to address these issues (see Stoney & Mitchell, 2008; Warner, 2006). For example, the team pointed to the problem of economies of scale and the potential of clusters, provider networks, and shared services models to reduce costs. As a second example, they highlighted how the lack of information, product differentiation and insufficient purchasing power of many families, meant ineffective demand to encourage the development of a quality ECE sector (Warner et al., 2005). Although the project team continued to debate the frame and reflect on its application in particular contexts, the end goal was clear. By framing early care and education as a critical component of the regional economy, the team sought to demonstrate that high-quality ECE was not simply a private matter of concern for direct consumers but rather a public concern of some magnitude.

Project Ambitions and Major Strategies

This project focused on the contribution of ECE to the regional economy. Prior to this granting period, the project team developed and disseminated a methodology guide using input−output analysis to estimate the contribution of ECE to a regional economy (Ribeiro & Warner, 2004). Practitioners in states across the country used this guide to estimate the economic impact of the sector. This grant had three main objectives: (a) to promote public policy that reflected this new economic framework for ECE; (b) to strengthen ECE by supporting practitioners to field test new ideas based on this framework; and (c) to mainstream these ideas by building the capacity of a broader group of leaders who understood, supported, and could disseminate information about ECE in an economic frame (grant proposal). To realize these objectives, the team got engaged in five primary sets of activities:

1. Hosted focused discussions via conference calls on subjects related to ECE and economic development. The discussions were open to all, but targeted to professionals and policy makers in planning, community economic development, economic development, and early care and education. These calls had as many as 200 people on them.
2. Offered financial support in the form of small venture grants to mostly local organizations attempting to pursue practical initiatives consonant with this new economic frame.
3. Provided hands-on technical assistance to organizations.
4. Organized sessions where practitioners and researchers had the opportunity to think outside the box on how they might incorporate this economic conception of early care and education in their own work.
5. Disseminated these ideas through a wide range of publications targeted at various audiences, including academics, researchers, professionals in relevant sectors, and policy makers.

Table 1 summarizes the project purposes and activities. Portraying the project's work as a fivefold list of strategies and related activities masks the more responsive, dynamic, and opportunistic work of the team and the facilitative vision they had of their work. The far right column in Table 1 lists a few examples that illustrate the dynamic nature of the work. The team did not see themselves implementing a programmatic solution to a problem or carrying out a predefined set of tasks, nor did they see themselves as experts with a set of answers they were advocating. Rather, they saw themselves as building relationships with networks of planners, economic developers, economists, employers, and ECE professionals to undertake

Table 1

Project Objectives, Strategies, and Activities

Project Objective	Strategy	Examples of Activities	Examples of Emergent Opportunities, Indirect Work, and Permeable Boundaries of Project Collaborative
(1) Promote pioneering public policy that applies economic development strategies to strengthen the care sector	*Facilitate conversations among professional leaders who encouraged innovative and creative policy ideas (meetings cosponsored by other organizations) *Host conference calls to showcase innovative ideas representing this new frame	*Organize discussions among professionals in economic development field (including planners, community economic development practitioners, traditional economic developers) to explore new policy options that link the care sector and economic development *Advertise conference call through existing lists and networks of practitioners; organize panel of speakers; develop background documents; moderate call; prepare follow-up report	A national care organization reached out to one team member based the earlier economic impact report and methodology guide. This team member worked with the organization to write a policy brief advocating that this care sector be included in the definition of critical infrastructure so that it would be eligible for disaster relief funds from FEMA. Later Congress made the change and redefined critical infrastructure to include these care facilities
(2) Strengthen businesses in the care industry	*Award venture grants—small amounts of seed money to test innovative practices *Provide technical assistance to venture grantees and others groups testing and pushing ideas at the local policy and practice levels	*Administer a competitive grant process *Make presentations to policy makers, practitioners. Develop proposals and models consonant with this frame, e.g., tax-credit policy, shared service models that would lower costs and increase the efficiency and sustainability of small care businesses	In reviewing the venture grants, the team realized that they could support local practitioners, who did not have a strong proposal, but could benefit by being connected to the project. They created a set of learning partners. These partners were invited to participate in the venture grant annual meeting and technical assistance activities The project team provided technical assistance on policy initiative that sought to create a tax credit for the care sector. This was not anticipated or planned but reported by the team as a significant outcome of their work

(continued)

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Project Objective	Strategy	Examples of Activities	Examples of Emergent Opportunities, Indirect Work, and Permeable Boundaries of Project Collaborative
(3) Mainstream care into economic development policy and practice	*Build and support a network of leaders who can talk about the care sector as an economic development strategy *Disseminate ideas through popular and scholarly publications	*Develop materials for leaders; list leaders on Web site as resources; hold meetings of leaders to talk about role *Write papers for economic development organizations; scholarly papers on the economic returns to investing in care sector; presented at professional organizations of economic and community economic development practitioners	Given the level interest generated by one of the conference calls, one team member partnered with another foundation to write and distribute a paper on using tax strategies

collaborative efforts that were consonant with this new frame, while further refining it in local settings and in professional communities of practice (e-mail exchange with the team).

At the same time, each of the project team members herself had been working on this issue in various capacities for a relatively long period of time and had her own professional networks and agendas, albeit consistent with the project goals. Thus, team members were constantly connecting and integrating the aspirations of the project into these other streams of work, as opportunities presented themselves. For example, the team member from the women's policy organization, whose own work included issues related to women and work, brought continued attention to the underpaid, primarily female labor force that works in early care and education while another team member (the independent consultant) worked to strengthen the economic capacity of ECE by improving business operations in creative and innovative ways.

Our Role and Our Work

We were originally contacted by one of the project team members, familiar with our evaluative work: one of us had been a distant colleague and the other had been a student in the same academic department. This relationship meant that she thought our expertise was a good fit, given the goals of the project and the team's desire to hire an evaluator that could assess the outcomes of the project and encourage critical learning and reflection among the project team. So in our role as independent observers, we documented the team's accomplishments in achieving the project objectives through interviews, observations, surveys, and case studies. As critical friends, we encouraged their learning by listening, raising questions, and facilitating data-based discussions that would surface assumptions, different standpoints, and possible tensions. This dual role was consonant with key evaluation questions that were negotiated with both the project team and the foundation.

We spent the first 6 months listening to the project. We listened in on project team meetings, interviewed each project leader, sat in on the conference calls, reviewed project materials, and attended conferences and professional meetings where the team was presenting their ideas—all with an ear to understanding the project team's work. At the end of the first year, we facilitated a critical reflection session for the project team. This session was organized around four thematic sets of questions intended to help the team identify and examine implicit assumptions guiding the work of the project, recognize issues that may merit additional attention or require further clarification, and affirm or change activities as appropriate.

In the second year, we gathered data from direct project participants through interviews, observations of meetings, and an online survey. Direct project participants included participants on the conference calls, recipients of the project's small grants, and recipients of technical assistance from team members. The purpose of these data collection efforts was to understand the quality and meaningfulness of participants' experiences with the project and to document significant or important changes in the participants' knowledge, networks, and professional practice. Again during Year 2, we facilitated a critical reflection session with the team members. This time the focus was on important and surprising findings from the direct participant data.

In the third year, we continued to gather data from the direct participants who received the small grants from the project, but the bulk of our effort was directed toward understanding and documenting the indirect and broader consequences of the project. We conducted mini case studies in two sites where the project team had spent a substantial amount of time providing technical assistance: one site the team considered a success and the other they considered less successful. The case studies were intended to gather the indirect outcomes of the project,

specifically, to document how the direct work of the project spurred the broader policy and practice changes. However, the case studies were also selected purposefully to offer insight into the contextual variables that played a role in the divergent outcomes, furthering the learning goals of the evaluation. In this final year, we also participated in a retreat where the project team reflected on their work to date and how they hoped to move the project forward. In that meeting, we again attempted to raise questions and offer observations to the team that encouraged them to think more critically about their work. So, the evaluation reflected a consistent effort to balance both the needs of the funder and the needs of the project team and to play two roles, an independent recorder of project outcomes and a more involved facilitator of key stakeholder learning.

Troubling the Evaluator's Role: Dependence and Credibility

Evaluators typically begin their work with some measure of dependence on key clients and core project staff, as they learn about the evaluand—its design and rationale, its history and context, any controversies of note—to craft a meaningful evaluation plan, identify appropriate questions and quality criteria, select appropriate instruments, and so forth. Then, as the project proceeds, the evaluator develops enough project understanding to conduct the work with significant independence from evaluation stakeholders. We expected to be able to do the same consonant with our chosen roles. As Chelimsky (2006, 2008) reminds us, independence is vital for the methodological and especially the political credibility of our work. However, four distinctive dimensions of the evaluand affected our evaluative efforts and our dependence−independence in important ways: (a) the evolving framework and definitions guiding the project, (b) the emergent and opportunistic character of the actual work of the project, (c) the centrality of relationship building to achieving the project goals, and (d) the absence of clear boundaries around definable project activities.

Evolving Framework and Definitions

The central focus of the project was to encourage policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to think about early care and education in economic development terms and to encourage policies and practices in sync with this new framework. Although this economic framework importantly defined project strategies and activities and thus outcomes, the team was constantly refining it as they responded to emerging issues in the field and as different team members focused on specific aspects of economic development—workforce policy, finance, and economic theory. Redefining the framework was not necessarily a weakness of the project or a signal that the project was not mature enough for an evaluation but rather it was a strategic choice for the team. With the goal of reframing care as economic development, the team explicitly recognized that this broad idea will be taken up differently in local contexts and actively welcomed the input and experience of others.

In response to our requests for clarification, the project team identified key elements of the economic framework: a focus on incentives rather than sanctions to motivate action and the consideration of tax incentives rather than grants as a tool for encouraging investment in the sector (see Stoney & Mitchell, 2008). However, these ideas did not provide much purchase or serve as a sufficient guide for our evaluative decisions and judgments. For example, the project's venture grant program supported innovative ideas from practitioners that sought to link ECE and economic development in some way. The team seriously and repeatedly debated

what constituted ''innovative'' practice and whether this was consonant with the new economic development frame. Arguments were made that innovative meant new ideas, old ideas in new places, new partnerships with old ideas, and an initiative that is replicable or has policy potential. All these meanings of innovative were honored in the selection of grantees, recognizing that innovative is dependent on local conditions, but making our evaluative work quite challenging. Did the project's small grants strategy recognize and reward practical innovation in ways consonant with the new economic development frame? Was the venture grant strategy of high quality and successful in promoting ECE as an economic development opportunity? Or perhaps, we wondered, was the more important question whether the economic development framework was articulated well enough yet with enough flexibility to organize diverse actors in different localities to come together around this idea?

Emerging Project Activities

The project was more opportunistic and emergent than programmatic. Although the team outlined five action strategies for the grant proposal, ideas and opportunities for intervention surfaced all the time. Some were taken up and pursued; others were discussed and then lay dormant waiting for a possible opportunity for action; while others were deliberately not pursued because the potential for movement seemed limited relative to the amount of effort required. For example, the team discussed the possibility of pursuing collaboration with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) around a common agenda to ensure that city planning practices considered diverse population needs. This potential partnership was not anticipated nor planned. The possible partnership was discussed in 2007, but resulted in a joint conference session after the grant period ended in 2009. Yet when a more concrete linking opportunity emerged, it was pursued and actually resulted in policy change. Here, a project team member was contacted by Save the Children to help craft a policy brief targeted at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The policy brief advocated that child care facilities be included in the definition of ''critical community infrastructure,'' making these facilities eligible for disaster relief funds (Warner & Haddow, 2007). Later Congress redefined critical infrastructure to include these facilities. The initiative was not predicted, nor had the team been focused on changing disaster policy or FEMA regulations.

We, the evaluation team, were challenged by the need to make ongoing decisions to incorporate these opportunistic activities, or not, into our data collection and analysis. Responsive evaluators are accustomed to shifting gears and foci in sync with the changing dynamics of the context. However, this context would challenge most evaluators, as discerning issues of salience and activities of importance involved constant shifts in both figure and ground. In the moment, it was difficult to judge how integral any given activity was to the project's core ambitions or how important it was to overall project success. Yet, our focus on assessing the success of project strategies and activities—their intrinsic worth and their contributions to project objectives—necessitated such choices and decisions. Maybe our evaluative antennae should have been aimed not at strategies and activities per se but at how these actions contributed to the ever-evolving network of this project?

Relationship Building as Core Project Strategy

Third, the project work itself was relational as well as policy oriented and practical. One of the primary project strategies was brokering relationships, facilitating connections, and trying

to build the capacity of other actors to push the work forward so that the team could pull themselves out of the center. The team saw themselves less as purveyors of some framework and more as colearners in a process to strengthen the ECE sector. The action was constantly one of decentering their work. For example, the project team identified a set of leaders who could speak about various aspects of early care and education from an economic development perspective and consistently referred requests for speakers to this group. They also referred requests for technical assistance or advice to other practitioners who had been successful in that particular area.

In terms of the evaluation, this desire by the project team to decenter themselves from this work meant that they did not feel a need or desire to build an identity for the project. More than once, we talked with participants who did not associate the project activities with the project but rather with the work of one of the collaborative organizations or one of the individual project coleaders. Our online survey of direct project participants required the use of multiple terms and ideas to help remind respondents of the project activity in which they had participated.

How could we capture this relational work? We considered Social Network Analysis but we could see no clear way to bound this system or sample in any meaningful way (Durland & Fredricks, 2006). How could we capture the efforts of the project team to build relationships within and across professional sectors, while at the same time capture their desire to decenter themselves within these relationships? Would we try and capture the venture grantees' relationships to the team, among themselves, or to other organizations working in other professional fields? Moreover, we wanted to capture the development of these relationships—not describe them at one point in time—and we were not sure how we would judge the significance of the relationships if we were able to trace this work.

Blurred Project Boundaries

Finally, the project boundaries were unclear. It was not always obvious whether a given action by a core team member constituted a project activity. Because this project was one small part of a larger 10-year effort and directly connected to the more general portfolio of work for each team member in her "home" organization, the boundaries between this "home" work and the work of the project were substantially porous. Repeatedly, the team responded to our question, "Was that a project activity or something you would be doing anyway?" with, "well both, actually." Defining the boundary around the work of the project was an artificial activity, yet at some point necessary for the evaluation. Contractually, our work needed to concentrate on assessing the quality and effectiveness of project work, not the regular work of the project coleaders. An e-mail text from one of the team members in response to our question about whether a particular initiative was a project activity illustrates the challenge:

> I don't think you can draw lines in the sand regarding "evaluation for work related to the [foundation] grant." Things don't fit into neat, separate boxes labeled "funded by ___" and "funded by ___". Everything we do in this project is collaborative; that's what makes it work . . . . I know this is complicated . . . but that's the nature of our work. It's not just a project; it's a perspective, a deep commitment to change that takes place on many fronts and engages a variety of people in many ways (e-mail, April 2008).

The project's blurred boundaries made it difficult for us to make defensible judgments about just what we should be evaluating. At one point, we made a decision not to monitor the project team's connections with other funded projects in the same domain. When this set of

collaborations appeared to be possibly fruitful and generative for the project, we questioned our original decision but lacked the data on this collaboration to do much about it.

We had been hired to provide an external, independent assessment of project quality and effectiveness and to support the ongoing learning of the project team. We undertook evaluative strategies to assess the intrinsic quality of program activities and the instrumental value of their consequences, remaining attentive to context and gathering multiple perspectives on the meaningfulness of key project events and issues. However, because the evaluand in this case was not characterized by discrete and bounded tasks but instead was a fluid, dynamic, unpredictable, temporal, and profoundly relational engagement informed by a set of commitments—we struggled to fully enact our dual role, in significant part because we were highly dependent on the team to continually delineate the project. The dynamics of project evolution included refining the economic development frame and determining whether an effort was consonant with this frame, keeping track of the emergent nature of the project activities, distinguishing the project's work versus individual organizational work, and capturing the facilitative and indirect nature of the relationship-building work. In the next section, we discuss the implications of evaluands of this kind for the evaluator's role.

The Evaluator's Role in a Governance Environment

Evaluators' roles have long reflected cultural norms and beliefs about how to better address social problems (Schwandt, 2002). Today policy models have shifted greater responsibility to the private sector and devolved authority down to the local level, while globalization has introduced a level of complexity and connectivity that makes our world smaller (Kettl, 2002; Rhodes, 1997; Salamon, 2002). In this environment, policy makers and practitioners are focused on how to improve coordination among organizations, as well as across sectors and geographical boundaries, as a necessary step in addressing social problems that are beyond the scope and capacity of one organization.

This changing policy context suggests that current conceptions of evaluands, on which we rest so much of our evaluation practice, are no longer fully adequate (Schwandt, 2008). These evaluands are less stable, defined, and unified in scope and purpose and these characteristics are not signs of weakness in policy logic or an indicator of program immaturity but rather a reflection of the interorganizational cooperation required to address complex problems. For example, one of the ways in which we ensure evaluation is useful and will serve both programmatic and policy aims is by undertaking preliminary evaluability assessments to see whether a program has matured enough and achieved enough stability to adequately assess its effectiveness (Horst et al., 1974, p. 307 as cited in Shadish Cook & Leviton, 1991; Wholey, 1979). Here, if programs are still evolving or settling, then conducting an evaluation is premature because the evaluation cannot adequately capture program performance. Yet, if the evaluand is a less formal network, an evaluability assessment may need to consider criteria other than program maturity, stability, and clear causal logic with predicted outcomes.[2]

Here, for our purpose, we argue that when evaluands are networks of actors who are more informal and emergent, as the case presented here, evaluators will depend on stakeholders in a way that is not common with other evaluands. Furthermore, this dependency will challenge evaluators' ability to enact their traditional roles with credibility. We suggest that to competently conduct an evaluation in these settings requires that evaluators consider a different role: the role of network mapper. As a network mapper, evaluators work with stakeholders first to characterize the network and then to engage in an ongoing process of sketching boundaries and

tracing emerging lines of work. To characterize the network, evaluators can start by asking a set of questions to understand the extent to which it resembles a more traditional evaluand (see Berry et al., 2004; Milward & Provan, 1998, 2006). For example, evaluators should consider such questions as: How formal is the network? Does the network have an identity? Do organizations recognize the network? Is there a formal governance structure? How are decisions made?

Next, evaluators would draw on systems concepts and work with stakeholders to identify important network boundaries and then, to consider the values assumed in what is included or excluded by these boundaries (see Imam, LaGoy, & Williams, 2007, p. 9). For example, in our case, we might have worked with the team to identify the boundaries of the economic development frame and to consider what ideas were consonant with the framework and what ideas were not and why. Then we could have asked the team to revisit this boundary as the project went along. Because we know that network aspirations and purposes are often less defined than program missions and strategies, and that these aspirations can change and shift as different members enter and exit the network, the process of identifying and refining these aspirations will be important. Similar efforts could have been made with project activities.

After roughly characterizing the network and working with stakeholders to identify important boundaries, evaluators could then draw on social network analysis to map relationships, noting the gaps and disconnects and assessing the strengths of key relationships (Berry et al., 2004; Durland & Fredricks, 2006; Krebs & Holley, 2005; Sandfort & Dykstal, 2007). This analysis engages multiple nodes, strands, and dimensions of the network, explicitly going beyond any core project staff for information and insight. Sample analytic questions at this stage include: Who are the actors in the network? What are the length, intensity, and formality of network relationships? To what extent are there issues of distrust, concerns about power, unproductive cliques, or fragments? Given the purpose of the network, are there important stakeholders who are not connected to the network in some way?

How does the network mapping role address the evaluator's dependence and his or her need to ensure credibility? Chelimsky (2007, 2008) reminds evaluators of the importance of paying attention to the subtle and not so subtle ways that political interests can undermine evaluators' independence and thus our credibility. We suggest that evaluating networks requires an alternative criterion for establishing the credibility and legitimacy of the evaluator and his or her findings. In our case, dependence was not the result of falling prey to political interests but rather a consequence of the evaluand's characteristics, as we continued to rely on the team to track and delineate the project boundaries. In these settings, we suggest that credibility comes less from trying to be independent, which we would argue is not possible, but rather by anchoring this dependence in a multiorganizational perspective, that is, a perspective that aspires to credibility through multiplism versus distance.

The network mapping role offers a way to do this. This role gives evaluators a set of analytical questions to characterize more complex evaluands, which include the explication and tracking of boundaries. The network mapping role also makes the process of delineating the evaluand more systematic *and multiply anchored*. So, resting evaluators' credibility on independence from the evaluand seems not only like an impossible task but less helpful with networked evaluands because our contribution in these settings lies in our ability to bring a meta-perspective—an understanding of the work that is not located in one organization but takes into account many organizational perspectives and experiences (Marcus, Dorn, & Henderson, 2005). This is precisely the value of networks in social problem solving—the bringing together of diverse perspectives, capacities, and resources to address complex social problems.

This article argued that current conceptualizations of the evaluator's role are premised on evaluands with clear boundaries and definable, relatively stable program activities and

outcomes. We took on our two roles (independent observer and critical friend) based on our own evaluation theory and the context of two key audiences (funder and project staff)—two roles that again rest on assumptions of a bounded evaluand. We experienced difficulty in enacting these roles, most prominently because we found ourselves dependent on the project staff for simply keeping up with what the project was all about. This article offers our reflections on these tensions and suggests that, with this kind of dynamic and networked evaluand, some measure of dependency on staff is almost inevitable, but—if we reframe our thinking about evaluator role—need not risk our credibility. This article offers some suggestions for evaluators working in a policy environment that is increasingly focused on networks but much more attention is needed.

NOTES

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