

THE EVALUATION LIFE CYCLE: A RETROSPECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF STAGES AND PHASES OF THE CIRCLES OF CARE INITIATIVE

Gary Bess, Ph.D., James Allen, Ph.D., and Pamela B. Deters, Ph.D.

Abstract: A life cycle metaphor characterizes the evolving relationship between the evaluator and program staff. This framework suggests that common developmental dynamics occur in roughly the same order across groups and settings. There are stage-specific dynamics that begin with Pre-History, which characterize the relationship between the grantees and evaluator. The stages are: (a) Pre-History, (b) Process, (c) Development, (d) Action, (e) Findings/Compilation, and (f) Transition. The common dynamics, expectations, and activities for each stage are discussed.

Life cycle metaphors have been used to explain the developmental process of task groups, treatment groups, and organizations (Cameron & Whetten, 1983; Hasenfeld & Schmid, 1989). Underlying this framework is the assumption that these groups move through developmental stages that are roughly akin to biological processes. This framework suggests that the same developmental dynamics occur in the same order across differing groups and settings.

The Circles of Care (CoC) experience suggests that the evaluation process can be conceptualized as life cycle. We have observed stage-specific dynamics that characterize the relationship between the CoC grantees and the evaluator. There are distinct developmental levels that help to explain the nature and content of each party's actions and concerns. Given that the evaluator's engagement in the CoC process is participatory (e.g., he or she is a critical member of the planning team), understanding the relational bond that is gradually formed and the stage-specific tasks that are undertaken can help future planners and evaluators to assess the process by which they and their projects develop (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). This understanding may also help groups to review their developmental pace and to troubleshoot common stage-specific issues that arise throughout the process.

Understanding the evaluator's relationship to the CoC initiative also necessitates consideration of the members' *pre-history*, which refers to their history before the creation of the setting (Sarason, 1971; 1996). There may be unique dynamics that distinguish the evaluation life cycle from other endeavors, based on historical experiences of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and the non-AI/AN status of many CoC evaluators.

The CoC initiative was born out of a history of conflict between AI/AN communities and federal and state governments, both broadly and specifically surrounding American Indian child welfare and health issues (for a thorough review of this history, see Freeman et al.'s paper in this Special Issue). These encounters have often been highly emotional and negative experiences for AI/AN communities which culminated with an important series of legislative innovations: the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975), the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (1976), and Indian Child Welfare Act in (1978).

Furthermore, the experiences of AI/AN communities with regard to research, including evaluation research, reveals a history of practices and approaches that have alienated not only individual AI/AN people but entire AI/AN communities (Darou, Hum, & Kurtness, 1993; Manson, 1989; Norton & Manson, 1996). This history, which predated the creation of CoC, is thus important in formulating our understanding of the CoC planning process and its evaluation. It required CoC planners to initiate a process of discussing their various ideas and preferred agendas for the evaluation with a perceived *judgmental* outsider (i.e., the evaluator), and in addition, required working through the various tensions that were associated with this new relationship. In the end, this process created a shared sense of co-membership and a common base among the participants that allowed culturally diverse groups of AI/AN and non-AI/AN people to reflect upon their shared values, and to rise above a prehistory of conflict (Erickson, 1975; Hornby, 1993).

The Evaluation Life Cycle

With this pre-history as context, six developmental life cycle stages can be distinguished as separate and distinct evaluation phases. They are: (a) the Pre-history Stage, (b) the Process Stage, (c) the Development Stage, (d) the Action Stage, (e) the Findings/Compilation Stage, and (f) the Transition Stage. The common dynamics, expectations, and activities for each of these stages are discussed below, followed by concluding remarks intended to summarize the evaluation life cycle.

Pre-History Stage

This stage is characterized by relationship testing and building. In many instances, this is the first time that an outside contract evaluator has

been engaged to assess a particular agency-based AI/AN program. The notion of a non-AI/AN person involved in the evaluation, though a contract employee, can conjure feelings among the CoC program staff of prior adverse experiences within both professional and personal contexts. In many instances, the evaluator is unknown to the program staff prior to his or her engagement, having been recruited from a local university's psychology, sociology, or social work department, or *vis-à-vis* a recommendation provided by an allied service provider. In either instance, the evaluator and the program staff are unacquainted with one another, and each may have preconceived notions about the other.

The program staff may view the evaluator as an outsider, someone who is not part of the CoC team. In fact, the evaluator may be suspect for several reasons that include: (a) non-AI/AN heritage; (b) socio-demographic roots that differ from the local AI/AN community; (c) academic and research interests that may be perceived to be out of sync with the project's programmatic focus; and (d) the nature of the engagement itself, whereby the evaluator is compensated, as is the staff, and yet there is a perception that the evaluator's motivation is not derived from the same selfless commitment to helping the AI/AN community as is that of the program staff.

There is also distrust of the evaluator's judgment: that he or she will inaccurately interpret and report process and outcome domains, or demonstrate the insensitive qualities that all-to-often have been displayed by those charged with assessing AI/ANs. These feelings on the part of program staff often confront the evaluator as s/he enters the agency for the first time.

Similarly, the evaluator may have preconceptions that affect the work relationship. The evaluator may be concerned that he or she will not understand the specific context of AI/AN processes, needs, and services that will be evaluated. The evaluator may also be concerned s/he will not display or fully comprehend the cultural nuances that are an essential part of the assessment despite her/his technical competence. This latter point is especially critical as cultural context is an essential component of the evaluation process, affecting the form and substance of the assessment inquiry and influencing its interpretation.

Conversely, the evaluator may incorrectly assume knowledge or comprehension of ethnic and racial groups from prior experiences that do not conform to those of the AI/AN community. Spiritual awareness, non-verbal communication, talking circles, and reverence for elders are often part and parcel of the planning design and program implementation process. These cultural-specific dynamics can be confounding for the uninitiated evaluator, and consequently, may cause misrepresentation of events.

Furthermore, differing work approaches, reliance on a technical vocabulary and conflicting evaluation paradigms can create barriers between the evaluator and program staff. Some evaluators are not accustomed to working as part of a team, and, if they do participate, their involvement is

relegated to their expertise in evaluation. The evaluation design process can sometimes be a solitary one, where drafts are presented and input sought, with communication bi-directionally alternating (from program staff to evaluator and back again) without frequent face-to-face interactions. By contrast, AI/AN members of the team come from a tradition of conjoint planning and active participation that influence all facets of the CoC planning process. Thus, the expectation of the AI/AN participants is one of ongoing dialogue with the evaluator, their participation in the design of the process, data collection and interpretation.

The evaluator's technical vocabulary is also full of research jargon and methodological requirements that are little understood and perhaps even less trusted by program staff. Similar to the perception that federal, state and local laws are sometimes misapplied to AI/ANs is the concern among many AI/AN members of the program staff and community that the process of evaluation is not relevant or applicable. The evaluator may be seen as representing the values and beliefs of "the establishment" (i.e., the mainstream) that are incompatible with AI/AN ways. The program staff may grapple with the question, "Whose side is the evaluator on?" as they describe the importance of preparing an Institutional Review Board application, to be reviewed by an all-White panel of university or Indian Health Service researchers.

Since CoC requires an assessment of the planning process, an early decision must be made as to whether the evaluator's role is that of "participant observer" (Rubin & Babbie, 1993; Rossi & Freeman, 1993) or the more conventional "sidelines-objective" observer. For many evaluators, the latter is the more familiar, requiring a lesser level of engagement. Yet this approach, though methodologically valid, fulfills Pre-History notions of the evaluator as an outsider. The evaluator is seen as not being truly part of the team, but rather as a critical, unforgiving assessor of all that is deficient and that requires intervention. Though not congruent with the evaluator's intentions, these perceptions argue for participant observation, enabling the evaluator to be seen as a fully participating member of the team.

In light of these and other possible issues that may arise early in the process, discussion between CoC program staff and the evaluator concerning similarities and differences in style, approach, and expectations is encouraged at the Pre-History stage. Overall, a stronger foundation for the entire evaluation process can be built with the open expression and acknowledgement of these personal feelings and concerns. The three-year working relationship between program staff and evaluator is dependent on each party's trust of the other as well as commitment to working together as one united community enterprise. Though not instantly created, good will, acknowledgements of differences, and openness to learning, can each contribute to a solid beginning.

Process Stage

The work of evaluation truly begins in the Process Stage. During this stage, the evaluation process itself is defined. This definition includes how (a) the evaluation will relate to planning activities, (b) provide data to fulfill Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) grant requirements, and (c) fuel the planning process itself. Program staff will likely feel somewhat unsure at this stage. That is, although they may have strong community-based program skills, they likely do not have formal planning experience and may have even less exposure to the process of evaluation.

The evaluator is still seen as a new, somewhat tangential, member of the group. Though the program staff may have worked together before, this is the first time that program staff and evaluator will meet to discuss project activities. Each may be silently questioning the process, as outlined in the following hypothetical questions.

Program staff: How will we work together? How much explaining about my ideas and recommendations do I need to make? Should I ask for input from the evaluator, or am I asking for trouble? We haven't discussed the resource needs for the assessment process. Is it my responsibility, or that of the evaluator, to direct this component?

Evaluator: How will we work together? How much explaining about my ideas and recommendations do I need to make? What do they expect of me? If I have an idea about their program, should I offer it or will I be considered ill-informed and pretentious? Is conducting the resource needs assessment, which relies on statistical compilation, a part of my responsibilities?

As is evidenced by these questions, getting to know one another and clarifying roles and expectations is an integral part of the Process Stage. While there may have been general philosophical discussions at the Pre-History Stage about how issues are approached and tasks undertaken, it is in the Process Stage that true interaction begins. This is the point at which the program staff and the evaluator begin to express themselves on substantive issues, where reasoning is explained, and where all begin to learn and to teach each other.

While program staff begin to determine an approach, mapping the community and its resources, as well as identifying potentially supportive and restraining forces, the evaluator undertakes the observation of the planning process. Given the newness of the evaluator's involvement, there may be a feeling of self-consciousness on the part of staff and evaluator

alike. Though participant-observation is a proven method for assessing the planning process, the likely perception among staff that the evaluator is not truly an integral part of the program inherently suggests that her/his participation is not fully accepted.

An important component of the Process Stage is the resource needs assessment. This assessment is a joint endeavor between program staff and the evaluator. It is an opportunity to meld the knowledges of program staff and evaluator and to test the developing relationship among its participants. Program staff members are most attuned to the community and its resources. They are familiar with the major institutions in the community, the formal and informal systems of care that exist, and where initial support and resistance to the CoC initiative may be present. Staff members are also responsible for collecting the needs assessment data. This includes requesting and cajoling health, human services, and educational personnel to provide detailed information on their services, programs, and beneficiaries.

The evaluator's role in the resource needs assessment is that of managing the data that is received. While some data are shared in raw form with the Circles of Care Technical Assistance Center (CoCETAC), the information also forms the foundation for community-based planning activities and for baseline assessment of the program's progress. Thus, the evaluator is responsible for the important task of organizing the needs assessment data into manageable and meaningful components.

At this point there is a convergence of interest. Program staff and evaluator alike are interested in the results of the needs assessment. The program staff have specific questions that they would like to have answered so they can confirm or disconfirm their knowledge of community needs based on the information that has been reported. For example, they may wish to know how many AI/AN youth are involved with the county's probation department? Or, what is the ratio of foster care placements by the child welfare agency for AI/AN youth relative to other youth in the service area? The evaluator is similarly interested in these and other questions, as they represent baseline information that is descriptive of the community that can be subsequently reassessed to determine whether positive change has occurred. This capacity to demonstrate the impacts of the CoC intervention is also of interest to the program staff.

Development Stage

Having successfully engineered the Process Stage, the program staff and evaluator proceed to the Development Stage. It is at this stage that the partnership between program staff and evaluator is cemented. Their initial work together during the Process Stage makes it easier to proceed into new domains of less prescriptive assessment and evaluation. Virtually every

planning meeting or programmatic undertaking (e.g., community picnic, newsletter, Gathering of Native Americans - GONA event) should have an associated evaluation component. In some instances the evaluation is part and parcel of the program's design, while at other times the evaluator's role as participant observer is most applicable. In either situation, however, trust and communication between staff and evaluator are essential.

Long-term perspectives on the planning process characterize the Development Stage. A master calendar of events and meetings is often established, whereby program staff and evaluator discuss incremental activities and timelines. While program staff focus on the preparation of materials, acquisition of event resources, and garnering support for specific events, the evaluator probes staff for relevant measures and consistently notes aspects of the planning process that may be informative to the overall evaluation process.

While program staff may have ideas about what measures are relevant for each undertaking, they will likely look to the evaluator for direction on specific instruments and their applicability. Whether it is a question of satisfaction with a planning meeting or the impact that a GONA or community picnic has had on participants' views, the evaluator is charged with developing questions and identifying or creating scales that will capture this information. Since a longitudinal perspective is available *vis-à-vis* the three-year planning process, care is taken to select measures that can be tested and retested over time. Changes in attitude and beliefs as well as knowledge about resources and regional AI/AN history, can be assessed and compared at periodic intervals.

A sample of standardized measures, including an explanation of instrument validity, can be obtained from the evaluator at this stage. However, determination as to the utility of each measure from a planning and program development perspective rests with the program staff. It should become clear at this stage that the evaluator and the evaluation process are in the service of the program, and that the program does not exist to serve the evaluation. From this perspective, each party's role and function on the team is clearly defined. Indeed, it is during the Development Stage that roles and responsibilities are clearly understood.

Consequently, though there may have been an orientation to the role of the evaluator at the Pre-History or Process Stage, this role bears repeating at the Development Stage. It is likely that with a clearer sense of their role and subsequent inclusion as a member of the team, the evaluator's contribution will be better understood, valued, and utilized. This experience may also prove to be cathartic in that early assumptions by program staff about the evaluation process and the evaluator can be explored and redefined in light of current roles and responsibilities. At the Development Stage, the CoC planning process is reaching its stride, and will be fully realized in the Action Stage.

Action Stage

Building on the Development Stage's solid planning, it is during the Action Stage that program staff and evaluator give meaning to the word "team." They are working in unison. Just as a GONA event requires meal planning, program planning, and recreational/social planning, so too does it require evaluation planning. And, just as members of the program staff assume responsibility for the first three activities, the evaluator as a team member is responsible for the latter component. Distinctions are no longer made between evaluation and program. Rather, it is now viewed as one process with several inter-related parts.

The collaboration among team members that characterizes the action stage is enhanced by the introduction of emerging evaluation findings. Though the evaluator is schooled in data coding, data entry, data manipulation, and data presentation, the interpretation of findings and the cross-tabulation of results based on planning assumptions and program-related questions come from the program staff. In line with the evaluator's role of furthering the planning process, findings need to be driven by planning and programmatic concerns. In other words, preliminary findings, which fuel a process of continued evaluation, are used to enrich program and planning activities.

Process evaluation also takes on new meaning during the Action Stage. Though process evaluation is an attempt to chronicle planning activities, seeking out distinct phases and benchmarking events that inform others who may attempt to replicate the planning effort, it also serves as a staff development tool. The evaluator is in a unique position to ask questions about the meaning of certain activities, and to query staff about their priorities and concerns. The dialogue that ensues between evaluator and program staff helps the latter to reflect on their immediate situation, to address specific issues that the evaluator has helped them to frame, and to view the planning process itself as a replicable and dynamic vehicle for producing change.

A shift has thus occurred in the relationship between program staff and evaluator. At an earlier stage the program staff likely perceived evaluation as an additional requirement, a non-negotiable add-on to contend with in the interest of receiving a CoC grant. However, by the Action Stage, evaluation is now an integral part of the overall effort, as is the evaluator. It is also during the Action Stage that the fruits of the planning effort begin to be seen, progress acknowledged, and an end-direction perceived.

Findings/Compilation Stage

CoC activities are in high gear during the Findings/Compilation Stage. Findings from the community engagement and evaluation process are contributing to policy and planning recommendations, and reports are being prepared to satisfy grant requirements. An abundance of primary and

secondary information is being obtained, catalogued, and interpreted. Program staff and the evaluator are interested in better understanding the meaning of the data that they have compiled, while also testing their tentative conclusions.

Meetings are convened with key informants and community members to review data and to confirm or disconfirm interpretations of findings. Program staff and the evaluator explore the meaning of the information obtained with these participative, community-based respondents. Possible programmatic and systemic solutions are discussed. In some instances, new and additional insights emerge from these sessions, as respondents explain subtleties in the data, and steps are considered that will transition CoC from planning to implementation.

Gaps in information also emerge at this stage. Program staff and the evaluator must decide whether additional surveys or interviews are necessary. Like earlier stage activities, survey or interview questions will be jointly developed by the team, with the evaluator responsible for assuring that the information obtained can be presented in a way that informs the planning process.

By the Findings/Compilation Stage, much has been written about aspects of the initiative that need to be compiled into a comprehensive report with recommendations. Though the evaluator or another team member with strong writing skills will ultimately pull the narrative together, conceptualization of the plan's elements is the responsibility of the entire team. If the evaluator is not the writer, the presentation of data is reviewed by the evaluator to assure accuracy.

As the implementation plan is developed, the program staff begin to explore funding opportunities that will support the introduction of services. The justification of need, an integral part of funded proposals, requires statistical and other proofs that the project is rooted in a clear understanding of the community and the intended beneficiaries of services. The abundance of evaluation data that has been amassed can be used to support this section of the proposal. In addition, should a separate evaluation be required as a condition of funding, the evaluator, who is familiar with the project plan, can be called upon to develop the evaluation design and possibly oversee its execution.

At the close of the Findings/Compilation Stage, a clear plan emerges with strategies and resource considerations that can lead to implementation. The seemingly unlikely marriage between program and evaluation, while consummated at the Action Stage, can now point to the progeny of its union: the creation of a developmental plan with specific recommendations for implementation. And, like doting parents, there is pride in the offspring and its potential, which begins to be realized at the Transition Stage.

Transition Stage

During the Transition Stage, the evaluator and program staff are at another juncture in the project's development and their evolving relationship. A choice point is reached as the planning phase ends and implementation begins. Will there be a role for the evaluator as the project moves from planning to implementation? Are resources sufficient to support this transition? If funding is limited what value is placed on the evaluation process? This question becomes particularly relevant when the funder does not require an independent assessment.

The Transition Stage thus may represent an end to the evaluation process through the preparation of the final report, the formal separation of the program staff and evaluator, and the contract termination. Alternatively, it may represent the beginning of a new work relationship, as the project moves toward implementation. There is also the possibility that individual program staff members or the evaluator may not be available beyond their initial three-year CoC commitment. Consequently, the project and its plan for evaluation, which are universally understood as an important part of program services, may continue with a revised agenda or a changed composition of program team members, each bringing to their new career assignments an enhanced understanding of roles and how the performance of their duties is dependent upon the expertise of other team members.

Even if a new team is assembled to carry on with the project, the continuity between planning and implementation is essential. Some would argue that these are different sides of the same coin, meaning that there is no currency unless planning and evaluation are united. And so, unlike the Pre-History Stage that began the evaluation process, at this transition it is likely that an evaluation component will be carried forward as an expected component of the Implementation Phase.

Several data elements on which the CoC evaluation rests also are important to the Transition Stage. They represent baseline information on which the impact of one or more interventions will be assessed. Evaluating complex data uncovered during the planning phase and subsequently designing interventions that address these issues are a fundamental and necessary part of this transition. Both program staff and evaluator at this stage are aware of the interdependence between the two phases, and having immersed themselves in an in-depth understanding of the problems facing the community, they are keenly interested in producing positive change.

Conclusion

With the Transition Stage complete, the Evaluation Life Cycle is ended and program implementation begins. Both parties now understand and appreciate the relationship between program staff and evaluator, which was once tentative. The success that characterizes the end of the evaluation process will likely carry forward into program implementation.

We have seen the nature of the work and the work relationships progressively change from the Pre-History Stage, to the Process Stage, to the sequential stages of Development, Action, Findings/Compilation, and Transition. The collective energies of the program staff and the evaluator have produced a series of outcome reports and a plan that addresses the unique mental health needs of AI/AN youths and their families. The three-year timeframe has afforded the planning process an opportunity to develop and mature across the six stages.

Though each stage has been described by key characteristics, including the evolving relationship between program staff and the evaluator, both the length of time that comprises each stage, and the confidence that all stages will be attained during the planning cycle, are uncertain. The planning and evaluation processes for each of the grantees encompass a different set of circumstances, and consequently, differing experiences and outcomes.

Gary Bess, Ph.D.
Gary Bess Associates
389 Wayland Road
Paradise, CA 95969
Phone: 530 877 3426
Fax: 530 877 3419
Email: bess@sunset.net

References

- Cameron, K. S., & Whetten, D. A. (1983). Models of the organizational life cycle: Applications to higher education. *Review of Higher Education, 6*(4), 269-299.
- Darou, W. G., Hum, A., & Kurtness, J. (1993). An investigation of the impact of psychological research on a Native population. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 4*, 325-329.
- Erickson, F. (1975). Gatekeeping and the melting pot: Interaction in counseling encounters. *Harvard Educational Review, 45*, 44-69.
- Hasenfeld, Y., & Schmid, H. (1989). The life cycle of human service organizations: An administrative perspective. *Administration in Social Work, 13*(3/4), 243-269.
- Hornby, R. (1993). *Culture competence for human services provider*. Rosebud, SD: Sinte Gleska Press.
- Manson, S. M. (Ed.). (1989). Barrow alcohol Study [Special Issue]. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center, 2* (3).

- Norton, I. M., & Manson, S. M. (1996). Research in American Indian and Alaska Native communities: Navigating the cultural universe of values and process. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 64*, 856-860.
- Rossi, P. H., & Freeman, H. E. (1993). *Evaluation: A systematic approach*. New Jersey: Sage Publications.
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (1993). *Research methods for social work* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Books/Cole Publishing Company.
- Sarason, S. B. (1971). *The culture of schools and the problem of change*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sarason, S. B. (1996). *Revisiting the culture of schools and the problem of change*. New York: Teachers College Press.