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## | **From the Beginning: Negotiation in Community Evaluation**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores negotiation skills and discusses their relevance for evaluators. It is argued that the 'interpersonal skills' required of researchers and evaluators is underplayed and that evaluators would benefit from improving skills which enable them to make decisions alongside stakeholders, in particular in community evaluations. Negotiation skills are explored using a case study of a Sure Start programme evaluation in a UK setting, and recommendations are made on how to utilise elements of negotiation in community programme evaluation. Literature on stakeholder involvement and negotiation is discussed together with the UK case. Key skills are highlighted, including attention to: *working with emotional situations, face-giving, rapport and creativity, timing, perceptions and improvisation.*

## **Introduction**

Evaluation of complex community-based initiatives (CCIs) is an important facet of improving health and reducing inequalities in the UK (Sullivan et al. 2004; Judge, 2000). Successful evaluation of community based initiatives is arguably a collaborative effort by all stakeholders. Recognising the 'multitude of actors' (Alexander, 2003) involved in any given piece of evaluation activity, the role of networking, and shared learning, acknowledges the growing importance of partnership and whole systems approaches within evaluations (Bauld et al 2005). These types of principles are variously incorporated into a wide range of community programmes and provide the mechanism for evaluators to engage with complexity.

Globally, the positive outcomes of participatory and partnership approaches to evaluation are increasingly reported. For example, Foster-Fishman et al (2005), working within the community psychology movement in USA, explore the importance of reflection and 'voice' in evaluation methods. They argue for designing evaluation methods to support goals of empowerment and social justice. In their work they discuss how using photography as a medium for group work, resulted in participants having an increased sense of control over their own lives as well as becoming community change agents through empowering them as experts in their own lives. Based in South Africa, Niba and Green (2005) compare participatory and non-participatory frameworks for evaluation in HIV/AIDS projects and conclude that participatory frameworks create an enabling environment to meet objectives, in particular, improved group awareness, knowledge and attitudes, as well as internalisation of objectives. More recently, international studies have identified improved public participation, sustainability and better multi-disciplinary working as positive outcomes from participatory approaches in community evaluation activities (Edwards and Roelofs, 2006; Speilman et al, 2006; White 2006).

There is a clear impetus to undertake evaluations 'with' rather than 'on' communities (Wallerstein, 1999).. Strategies are needed to ensure that programme evaluators working within community programmes have the skills to support stakeholders' involvement to be a safe and satisfying experience for them, as well as identifying objectives for a programme evaluation. This article outlines ways in which negotiation skills can be utilised by evaluators and researchers when working with stakeholders involved in community programme evaluation. Examples are provided, based on researcher and participant experiences in establishing and maintaining a 'negotiated' evaluation framework for a Sure Start programme in a UK setting.

## **The complexity of community**

CCIs have been characterised as programmes which aim to promote change in individuals, families and communities; develop mechanisms for improvement and build community empowerment (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). In this sense CCIs are characterised by dynamic and change, being 'organic' and 'learning enterprises' (Judge, 2000). Weiss (1998) also identifies the complexity of community, suggesting that social programmes are 'an amalgam of dreams and personalities, rooms and theories, paper clips and organisational structure, clients and activities, budgets and photocopies, and great intentions' page 48.

Community pertains to individuals, their relationships and group processes and to networks within it. This fluid and dynamic nature should be recognised by programme developers and evaluators. Davies (2005) provides a comprehensive account, for example, of complex processes of change and the advantage of a network perspective. Although mainly focusing on international projects and the importance of linkages between them leading to 'cumulative learning within a wider population' page 144, Davis ultimately argues for the importance of 'actors' within evaluation and highlights the reality of 'persuasion and negotiation over objectives and priorities' page 146, rather than 'logical' more abstract types of evaluation. Arguably, social programmes or programmes of change are experienced differently by each participant or actor and each will view objectives, implementation and achievement differently, despite attempts at consensus. Over a decade ago, Palumbo and Hallett (1993) suggested that there is no 'single reality' in programmes, but 'multiple realities that are socially constructed by different stakeholders, and these realities are often in conflict.' Page 11. No two perspectives on what should be evaluated or how, are going to be exactly the same. Nevertheless, agreement in undertaking evaluation is needed.

Comment:

### **Evaluation of complexity**

In a recent speech to the UK Evaluation Society (UKES), Robert Picciotto, in making a case for evaluation standards in the UK, outlines the two main functions of evaluation as:

*..... to make authority responsible and to reduce the probability of errors in decision-making. These two roles (accountability and learning) are inextricably linked.*

He goes on to say:

*But evaluation goes further: it helps not only individuals but also groups and organizations to learn from their own mistakes as well as the mistakes of others. This is far cheaper and less painful than trial and error. Thus, evaluation is a social function, and its usefulness hinges on its performance along three distinctive dimensions; (i) collective action; (ii) participation; and (iii) knowledge creation. P. 5. (Picciotto, 2003)*

There is increasing emphasis on a 'real world' approach to evaluation (Patton, 2002). Evaluation needs to make a difference to someone somewhere (Geene et al. 2001), be trustworthy and help make sense of change in the real world. All parties involved in an evaluation need to make choices about how to go about it, guided by the aims, principles and impetus of the programme, namely negotiated and shared. Naturalistic approaches to evaluation value meaning and interpretation as experienced in the 'real' world (Brewer, 2003). Movement away from evaluation based on experimental design has seen an increase in designs which involve more qualitative methods and seek the perspective of everyone involved in a community of interest. Concerns remain that while evaluation research is 'moving away' from positivism and traditional approaches to measurement, evaluation practice remains embedded within these conventional approaches (Khakee, 2003)

Recent developments in 'social ecology' in community psychology, however, do, view communities as systems 'with multiple interdependent layers of influence' requiring 'relevant programs that co-ordinate multiple intervention strategies' (Knightbridge, et al. 2006 page 326). It is, therefore, important that the benefits of adopting evaluation approaches which capture a wider range of perspectives are 'flagged up' to stakeholders and funders as a means whereby the 'real world' experiences of complex community programmes can be more accurately represented.

For example, sensitive preparatory work can ensure stakeholders 'see a role' for themselves and develop skills and confidence to become involved. (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). Many frameworks are reported for guiding evaluation practice (Campbell et al. 2000; Andrews, 2004; Krushner, 2005) and have advocated and described systematic approaches which variously claim to enhance stakeholder participation, goal articulation, as well as programme implementation and effectiveness. For example, the comprehensive checklist developed by the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University (<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr>) to guide evaluators and provide a model for evaluators and stakeholders to work together. Negotiation is identified as an important component in evaluation frameworks, not least that provided by the UK Evaluation Society ([http://www.evaluation.org.uk/Pub\\_library/Good\\_Practice.htm](http://www.evaluation.org.uk/Pub_library/Good_Practice.htm)).

The remainder of this article describes the use of negotiation within a community evaluation. In particular, the following sections provide an introduction to negotiation theory, followed by a description of the development of a Sure Start programme evaluation which took place on the south coast of England (Sharples et al. 2005). Building on negotiation theory, the subsequent discussion highlights how relationship building and decision-making were facilitated, thus providing an illustration of the interactions and activities which can be used to optimise involvement and collaboration via negotiation among stakeholders, including evaluators. Conclusions and recommendations are presented as having utility for evaluators.

## Negotiation Theory

A vast literature exists around negotiation, and this article cannot fully reflect its breadth and depth, but does attempt to summarise relevant aspects. Negotiation literature involves a number of traditions including mathematical modelling (in particular game theory), theory about the behaviour of negotiators and mediators and advice and manuals on the process of negotiation. The behavioural paradigm has been paramount, exploring the relationships between two parties and the outcomes of these relationships, with attention to culture and social context, as well as group processes (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993). A range of models or theories have guided negotiation practice including utility models used in economics, strategic models or the theory of 'games' and face-theory, among others. Negotiation theory has become relevant within organisations and to individuals outside those areas with which it has traditionally been associated, such as: trade unions, law, conflict resolution, politics and business, where often the process of negotiation is an exercise in bargaining (Morley, 1997). Kolb (2006) suggests that negotiation skills are no longer required only by those whose job entails formal dealings with unions, suppliers and customers. Conflict resolution draws heavily on negotiation theories and skills development (Kolb, 2006). Negotiation is a change management tool in many contexts, further identified as more than positioning and tactic, attending to the past, culture and meaning, as well as differing perceptions, values and wishes (Morley, 1997)

The word 'negotiate' stems from a Latin word meaning 'to do business', including interaction with the 'work and interests of others' (MOL, 1993). The process of negotiation involves the coming together of two or more individuals or representatives with the aim of agreeing (or reaching a compromise) with a view to mutual gain. Negotiation is about *moving on* from difference or conflict and *progressing* towards agreement. This dynamic is essential for decision-making, the relevance of which is clear in relation to developing project plans, particularly within complex settings. Getting the progression right requires ability to manage change by creating a climate which is able to accommodate variety, is fair and facilitates discussion and debate, ie. an environment where listening, problem-solving and information exchange take place. Negotiation can be 'tacit' (characterised by indirect communications, hints and signs) or 'explicit' (characterised by open statements, asking for information and so on) or they can be complementary to each other (Strauss, 1978; Wall, 1985). Negotiation can be characterised by stages and arguably negotiation may be seen to be more useful when it reaches a tacit stage – with increased intimacy, trust, establishing norms of communication between parties; all help improve negotiation and hence decision-making.

As part of the dynamic of change management, negotiators require an understanding of the processes which aid decision making in project management Useful guides are available for project managers to help them

negotiate, which are equally applicable within the research field (For example, Fletcher, 1998; Fowler, 1999). Fletcher (1998) highlights issues such as; preparation, understanding context (people and systems) and shared aims, knowing the similarities and differences in language and perceptions (including hidden messages), listening, acknowledging times of stress, staying calm, recognising all skills and the importance of relationships. Researchers and evaluators need to be able to build successful relationships with collaborators and stakeholders, often over long periods of time, who will have different aims, perceptions and experiences. Working with stakeholders in a participatory way, to achieve equity and shared decision making when possible, requires understanding and strategies to work within situations where there is often inequality of power, resources and control.

### **Impetus to develop negotiation skills**

Weiss, 1998 talks about evaluator roles in light of growing awareness of the need for stakeholder involvement and collaborative and empowering practice, stating: 'evaluators are not necessarily chosen for their skills in interpersonal relations' page 104 and suggests that a time may come in evaluation when a facilitator is needed who knows how to lead group discussions. This implies that evaluators themselves should not and cannot (due to lack of skills) get involved in sensitive or controversial topics as this may be an 'intrusion'. Contrary to this view, for example, Guba and Lincoln (1989) point out that there are always many different stakeholders and in order to illicit information that reflects 'different constructions', it is one of the evaluators major tasks to help stakeholders deal with these (different) constructions – their 'hermeneutic dialectic' page 41. Arguably, evaluators/researchers do often find themselves in the 'thick' of discussions with stakeholders, which form central and crucial data for evaluations. Researchers in many evaluations cannot and do not want to distance themselves from the experiences and views of stakeholders (Fetterman, 2001). Decisions have to be made in developing evaluations and it is not always desirable or practicable to 'bring in a facilitator' as suggested as an option by Weiss. Evaluators, while needing technical skills, arguably also need to develop good interpersonal skills which enable them to negotiate decisions about evaluations with stakeholders.

Kolb and Williams (2003) suggest that in everyday interactions every decision point is a potential issue to be negotiated (page 339). Advocacy (being in the right position) and connecting (establishing common ground) are central in negotiation activities. Both are needed to reach agreement and facilitate decision making and change. For them, negotiation can be substantive and explicit or on an interpersonal level, encoded exchanges about how to negotiate, about expectations and assumptions about people and outcomes. This parallel activity of 'shadow negotiation' is where learning about each other and the process takes place, where relationships are built and reciprocity and understanding develops. For negotiators, building understanding and trust are crucial skills to open opportunities for common understanding, identifying new ideas and ultimately reaching agreement. It is suggested that evaluators need to begin to more fully

understand these sorts of processes and how they might function to enhance relationships with stakeholders in evaluations.

Increasingly, evaluation sponsors are more aware of the value of including a wide range of client groups in sharing experiences as part of feedback or assessments. (DOH 1999; DOH 2000; Turner & Beresford 2005; DOH 2006). Indeed more evaluations are being undertaken which have sensitive or controversial topics as their foci, thus creating opportunities for the views of vulnerable and disempowered groups to be heard in evaluation activities, as well as opportunities to run and take part in the activities themselves. This includes in particular the participatory, emancipatory and empowerment evaluation literature (see Fetterman 2001). So the impetus is clearly there for evaluators, not to bring others in to do the 'relationship bits', but to expand their repertoire of skills to allow them to engage fully with stakeholders in a more participatory way.

## **Sure Start Local Programme and Evaluation**

### ***Background***

Sure Start is a UK Government driven innovation aiming to improve outcomes for children; tackling inequality through creating new opportunities within disadvantaged communities. By focusing on improved access to early education and play, better health services for children and support to parents, the Government aims to promote local, parent-led change within empowered communities. (Glass,1999). Objectives relate to improved social and emotional development, health, ability to learn and strengthening families (SSU, 2001). The first wave of Sure Start programmes had been established by 2002 focusing on families in designated areas with children under four years old, and building on existing services.

Sure Start principles include parental involvement at all levels of programme design, management and delivery; joined up services within Sure Start areas; cultural sensitivity, sustainability and local relevance (Vimpani, 2002). Sure Start emphasises partnership working throughout and local programmes are encouraged to identify and support links between families and providers in Sure Start areas. In this way Sure Start has constituents in common with other 'complex community initiatives', aiming for 'synergy among them' (Houston, 2003. page 257).

The National Sure Start Programme in the UK recognised levels of complexity from its inception and, whilst a National Evaluation to measure long-term outcomes was set in place, called for process evaluations to be undertaken and short-term outcomes measured at the local individual programme level. The Sure Start initiative emphasised the importance of establishing what works for young



children and their families, highlighting questions about what was effective within Sure Start programmes, for whom and why, in order to continue to inform policy and service delivery at a local level. Shared negotiation around decision-making would clearly be central to partnership working and the development and implementation of local Sure Start evaluations.

### ***Embracing negotiation in setting up the Evaluation***

The research team commissioned to undertake a local Sure Start Programme evaluation (SSPE) in Southern England, aimed to use a participatory and inclusive approach for the evaluation of local services and activities, involving a range of stakeholders, in particular parents, not only in decision making about the types of activities and services needed in local projects and in delivering them, but also involvement in the evaluation plan and its implementation.

Patton (1997) describes a participatory evaluation approach as:

*'...a style of evaluation in which the evaluator becomes a facilitator, collaborator, and teacher in support of programme participants and staff engaging in their own evaluation' (Patton, 1997, p98).*

Given the complex set of relationships, experiences, skills and expectations among the researchers, project leaders and community residents, a means of reaching agreement was required through discussion and compromise.

Participants in evaluation can often have contradictory aims and expectations, such as: differing perspectives about time, priorities and cost. There can be anxieties about the programme or concerns over ethics. Acknowledging this diversity and its impact on early discussion is an important first step in developing collaborative and participatory working relationships. Within the Sure Start evaluation early discussions identified key contacts : community groups, the Sure Start Steering Group and commissioned service providers. As the project evolved, an evaluation advisory sub group included community based staff in health and social care sectors, voluntary sector staff, National Sure Start guidance staff, local residents, other local agencies and the researchers. Participants in the evaluation were encouraged through planned meetings and events to feel they had a role in the decision making process. The researchers highlighted a humanistic and interpretative outlook to all stakeholders, emphasising that people's views are important, that social context influences how people see (interpret) the world around them (and cannot therefore be ignored) and that evaluation should aim to (at least partly) elucidate this meaning and interpretation. From the outset, the Sure Start Local Programme (SSLP) held Consensus Days and Consultation Events with the community and other stakeholders prior to bidding for funding, from which local Sure Start Plans (Sept 2000/2001) emerged from the 'amalgam' (Weiss, 1998)..

From the beginning the evaluation was 'flagged up' as an important component within the Sure Start plan. Researchers had a presence at consensus events and Steering group meetings, when the 'thread' of the evaluation plan was presented and discussed. Initial information giving activity by the evaluators included collaborative development of an evaluation booklet for stakeholders explaining what an evaluation is and what the options were to meet the needs of the local programme. Negotiation was also necessary regarding the issue of copyright. With the support of the National Sure Start Programme a way forward was eventually agreed. In particular, issues of sensitivity and a perceived risk of adverse publicity were resolved. These negotiation activities took time, but were invaluable in increasing understanding and acceptance of the evaluation approach, particularly in light of ever changing staffing profiles. The recurring 'thread' of the early evaluation meetings provided a consistent 'loop', weaving back into the project and providing a sound basis for ongoing negotiation and building relationships for subsequent evaluation activities.

Researchers acknowledged the 'knowns' and 'unknowns' of the evaluation enquiry. Knowns, identified in the main by the National Sure Start Unit, included, for example, data relating to objectives on smoking or birth weight. Unknowns related to issues which would emerge as important to residents and families in the local Sure Start area. On this basis an imperative existed to identify methods of inquiry and data collection which allowed both a 'measure of change' as well as an exploration of experience and perspective within a local, social context. (Greene et al, 2001; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1988).

An evaluation subgroup supported a negotiated agreement of the local evaluation plan which aimed to:

- Identify how services were being used and by whom
- Assess short-term outcomes for a sample of Sure Start services in the community
- Assess the perceptions of local parents, Programme workers and volunteers as to the key processes and services that were making a difference within the Local Programme.

Phased as follows:

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Phase 1</b> | <i>Set up:</i> negotiation of evaluation plans, establishment of advisory groups    |
| <b>Phase 2</b> | <i>Individual service development:</i> services, target groups, evaluation needs    |
| <b>Phase 3</b> | <i>Data collection:</i> surveys, measures, interviews, rolling evaluation programme |
| <b>Phase 4</b> | <i>Service refinement:</i> feedback from rolling evaluations.                       |

During each of the phases, researchers were able to negotiate decisions relating to evaluation activities.

## **Applying negotiation skills in evaluation activity**

### *Working with emotional situations*

Participatory evaluation which includes exploration of people's experiences, often sensitive issues, can, at any stage, evoke emotional experiences for participants. Evaluators need to be able to work with people who have emotive reasons for involvement in an evaluation or who may react emotionally to proposals or decisions. Evaluators need to be able to acknowledge and respond to emotional events. Within a negotiation framework, emotions are acknowledged as dynamic and complicated and rather than attempt to focus on every emotion, negotiators are advised to focus on 'core concerns'. That is, matters that are important most of the time – appreciation, autonomy, affiliation, status and role (Shapiro, 2006).

These issues are particularly relevant within an evaluation context, where feeling appreciated and having a role are important for community participants in particular, who may lack confidence in participating in evaluations. Having one's decisions taken seriously and valued helps avoid tokenism. For example, within the evaluation of the SSLP, parents were involved in the evaluation at every stage and took on a number of roles ranging from membership of Evaluation Working and Advisory Groups to membership of a Family Survey Group. Parental involvement spanned a range of evaluation activities, from questionnaire development through to dissemination of findings to resident groups and at local, regional and national conferences. One way in which the contribution by parents was acknowledged and valued in the SSLP evaluation was through a process of decision making about payment for time taken in evaluation activity. Following negotiation with the SSLP and the University Team, parents chose to be supported financially with vouchers for a local supermarket. In this way parents were treated more as a colleague or equal with particular skills and perspectives acknowledged. Another opportunity to discuss 'core concerns' was provided by the Evaluation Sub Group where issues such as 'what happens once the evaluation is over' were raised as a concern by parents.

During evaluation researchers can enhance the feeling of belonging for community members or practitioners by attending to reasons, often emotional (may be through choice or role), for why people are involved in evaluation. One simple way of showing appreciation, for example, is to actively ask advice from a community participant in a way that will help give a role and provide a sense of being valued. Working with parents in a Family Survey Group also provided opportunities for evaluators to address core concerns through valuing individual

strengths and, sometimes acknowledging their own weaknesses. For example, one member, who was dyslexic had a particular talent for layout and design was encouraged to design the outside cover of the questionnaire from which they expressed a great sense of achievement. Bringing community residents together to work on different aspects of the evaluation facilitated discussion about what was important to participants. One member of the Family Survey Group for example, reflected that one of the hardest aspects of the evaluation process was to put their own feelings to one side and think about what was best for the community and the survey.

### *Face-giving*

Van Ginkel (2004) discusses the role of mediation and face-giving in a negotiation context. Part of the role of a negotiator is to 'set and maintain a positive climate in which concessions can be made and, eventually a settlement can be achieved' page 475. As Van Ginkel points out, the term 'face' has been used as a metaphor for our self-image in public (relational) settings (See also Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001). Face is about our position and status and credibility as others see us. It's also about how we see others and how we want others to see us. Saving face can be both an outcome for mediators or part of the process of interaction between those in dispute. 'Face-giving' is where an individual or group provide support to an image claimed by another. In a situation where there may be inequality in power and knowledge, such as in an evaluation context, it is arguably important for evaluators to be sensitive to different levels of understanding and the dangers of unrealistic expectations between stakeholders.

Managing relationships as facework within evaluations is key. Van Ginkel (2004) discusses the important role of information exchange, particularly given that 'face concerns' can be hard to pin down. Knowing triggers and signs for underlying self-image concerns can help: for example, venting in a defensive way; taking a hard line on an issue (all or nothing); avoidance of differences. In order to provide support to save face in these sorts of situations evaluators, like negotiators, can talk with individuals on their own to acknowledge feelings and concerns or reframe (Goffman, 1955) goals (moving from 'positions' to acknowledge 'perspectives' and therefore optimizing compromise). For example, an evaluator can restate a goal as his or her idea and take responsibility (and therefore perceived burden) off others. These sorts of situations are very relevant for evaluators who may be working with participants who get into a position of feeling out of their depth but do not want others to see this. Within the SSLP evaluation there were occasions when sensitive or difficult situations arose in meetings when it appeared that stakeholders became 'defensive' or took an uncharacteristically hard line on an issue. Evaluators attempted to remain sensitive to these signs (recognizing values and being observant of nonverbal cues) and took steps to help save face. For example, providing a repeated presentation for further clarification, not making an issue if work wasn't produced as promised and identifying with difficulties the stakeholder might be having.

### *Rapport and thinking creatively.*

A relationship of understanding, empathy and trust has been found to be crucial in mediation and negotiation activities in that it allows participants to develop confidence in the credibility of negotiators (Goldberg, 2005). Building rapport allows negotiators to exhibit genuine interest, develop working relationships (bonding), and build connections and understanding of dynamics. Within the evaluation situation the university team were aware that credibility was important in that it would help with stakeholders developing trust in the evaluation and open the way for the university team to begin to make suggestions about the way forward. In addition, early in the life of the evaluation project, the university team were aware of the need to take on the role of 'insider researchers'. Over time this included attendance at Community Meetings, and fun days where they ran stalls, organized raffles, and arranged 'photo opportunities'.

Dealing with emotions can also be an important issue when trying to encourage creativity. Balachandra et al (2005a) talk about addressing tensions within negotiations as a way of making it easier to move on or unsticking a situation which may involve heightened emotions. Stepping back and giving time to raise issues or concerns can open the way to new ideas. Humour can help reduce tension and move things on. University staff in the Sure Start evaluation worked with members of the community as co-members of the Evaluation Working and Advisory Groups and within these attempted to 'step-back' when it was felt that tension was rising around issues. As the relationship with the community residents developed it enabled humour to play a part in discussion and negotiation.

The role of empathetic listening is also an important aspect of rapport building (Goldberg, 2005). Participants in evaluations need to feel as though they are being listened to and that what they are saying has value. Actively listening during the SSLP helped the university team to get a sense of what someone was 'thinking' behind the talk, particularly given that practitioners and/or community members were, in some cases, working with researchers for the first time and had little previous experience of the planning activities. This attempt to 'reveal' interests is also part of the negotiation process, making use of 'conceptual metaphor' (Smith 2005 p344). Identifying metaphors, preferably positive ones that help move things forward eg winning, which all participants can 'buy into' can help working relationships and can help understanding. Use of metaphor does not have to be based on fantastic ideas. Even trying to 'tune into' mundane metaphor can help with relationship building and a sense of working towards similar goals. Parents within the Sure Start evaluation used the metaphor of child rearing to help them associate with the evaluation and this was incorporated into the final report of the evaluation, where the words of one parent, likened the development of Sure Start to learning in school.

Rapport and attentive listening can aid in creative thinking within evaluations by allowing ideas to flow and take on value within a group setting. Understanding the perspectives of stakeholders and their reasons for participation helps identify solutions and ideas that are more likely to appeal.. This may mean that those leading an evaluation might have to 'think outside their own boxes' to creative solutions (Goldberg, 2005). Sometimes solutions are symbolic rather than real, like praising ideas in minutes even if they aren't taken forward and attributing ideas, thus allowing stakeholders to view decisions as theirs. Evaluators need to be able to keep on track regarding evaluation goals, while being flexible in finding ways of achieving them.

### *Timing and perception*

How we use time can affect the way in which we establish and maintain relationships. Negotiators are encouraged to recognise that there is a relationship between the 'perception' of time and the 'reality' of time, in other words their perceptions and the perceptions of others (Macduff 2006). Issues about time can be a source of conflict, such as, the best use of time, or views about how to run a meeting. Equally important are the assumptions that underlie different views about time, such as, 'building relationships, the connections between social and task-orientated activities, and the impact of history on current conflicts' (Macduff, 2006 page 33.) How we organise our time influences our experiences, our identities and our relationships with others and it is therefore important to be aware of how different people perceive time differently. Time and space are bound together in our experiences of ourselves and others (Jenkins, 2004). In this way, experience of time is also linked to culture (shared knowledge and symbols) in that an activity linked to a particular time may carry cultural differences.

In the context of community evaluation, differences will exist between stakeholders in terms of race, socio-economic status and priorities. Differences may be particularly pertinent, for example, in evaluations which involve very young or very old people, such as a Sure Start project. Evaluators may also find they readily attach timescales to activities within an evaluation which are unfamiliar for groups of participants given that researchers view the evaluation within a 'bounded' timeframe. The Sure Start evaluation described here used a collaborative model, allowing for 'delay loops' when necessary. One example was where negotiation resulted in extra time for evaluation document approval between the Working Group, Advisory Group and the Management Board, whilst, on the other hand, setting clear time-scales for completion of Community Surveys to meet National Sure Start targets.

The 'lived experience' of community residents will arguably not be experienced in the same 'phased' episodes of activity as might be perceived by a researcher. Jenkins (2004) suggests that 'Whatever people do they do within or over periods of time – even if very short periods of time – not in successive nano-seconds'

page39. The point being, in terms of evaluation participants, that how 'periods' are perceived is likely based on individual experience and it is only going to be 'over time' that participants' knowledge and priorities may (or may not!) fall into step with those of the evaluation funder or researchers. For example, providing time for parents to gain skills in questionnaire design and implementation involved unknowns for all and this required sensitive handling to build confidence both for the university team providing the support and parents.

### *Improvisation*

Contemporary community evaluation activity in social science is increasingly enabling stakeholders to have a say in every stage of the research process. This introduces uncertainty given the variation in skills and knowledge amongst stakeholders as well as changes in knowledge and skills as the programme develops and time passes. Balachandra et al 2005a in discussing the role of improvisation within negotiation, emphasise the skill of being able to work with new information, coping 'regardless of the people, the problem, or the process in place' page 416. They identify a 'cornerstone' of negotiation theory as 'considering the needs, interests, and concerns of the other side' and the need for proper preparation. Balachandra et al 2005b also identify core skills of improvisation, for negotiation students based on Crossan's work in the theatre (Crossan, 1997; Vera and Crossan, 2005). Within these, knowing the environment and being able to work 'in the moment' are issues pertinent to evaluators. These skills also link to the issues of timing and perception discussed above. Being able to improvise allows negotiators to respond to novel situations and take advantage of opportunities to resolve conflict or make decisions, which in real world research and evaluation is a familiar situation. Individual stories are often brought to table by community members whose involvement has been prompted by individual experiences. Such experiences, when shared, can require novel and unseen responses. Being able to respond reflexively is therefore important.

One essential way to help improvise decisions along the way, is to work towards a shared language and understanding. For example, in early meetings it became evident that all partner organizations were not using the same terms. It was agreed that the university team should use the same terms as the SSLP. For example, 'Core Services' rather than 'Projects'. Later on, in presentations to the Steering Group and Community Groups it was necessary for the university team to examine their use of research terms. A 'gobbledygook test' was applied to drafts of the Memorandum of Co-operation and Information Booklet in an effort to respond to this. As time went on with greater parent involvement, the issue of 'different languages' lessened as parents and other stakeholders such as community staff were able to input and make decisions about information sharing and the nature of that information. For example, the production of a Community

Information Leaflet with user-friendly language, involving parents, university staff and community staff.

### **Engagement during evaluation**

The increasingly central role of researcher engagement with and interaction between stakeholders, highlights the relevance of negotiation practice to that of evaluation. Researchers developing participatory evaluations will recognise the importance of the needs of the stakeholders they are working with and may benefit from adopting negotiation practitioners' strategies. The nature of CCIs means evaluator teams are often right 'inside' a community for the duration of a project, where the evaluator is less likely to be seen as a 'stranger' and spends more time outside the academic environment.

Members of a community may themselves have very personal and emotionally sensitive reasons for being actively involved in an evaluation, and will want to have a sense of the genuineness of the researcher, and need emotional recognition with the researchers. While skills, such as being focused on goals, having a framework and establishing priorities are familiar to researchers as part of their training and experience of setting up projects, awareness of negotiation skills highlights issues important to stakeholders, ultimately supporting a more participatory approach to evaluation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The role of an evaluator within an evaluation can vary considerably. For example, shifting between someone who is collecting data via a questionnaire format, to someone who is supporting a community resident to successfully participate in a decision-making group. Alongside this, the involvement of stakeholders in the design and implementation of evaluations is also increasing and can vary from someone who is heavily involved in decision-making about evaluation design to someone who administers questionnaires to fellow residents. The more participatory an evaluation, the more likely the blurring of roles. Both evaluator and stakeholder/participant are influenced by the changing dynamic and processes within an evaluation activity (Fetterman, 2001; Oakley et al, 2004). This potential for blurring roles and increasing empowerment of stakeholders and participants within an evaluation activity can have a positive impact on an evaluation by enhancing the learning within and success of a programme, thus providing a clear impetus for optimising the ways in which stakeholder and participants are involved in evaluation activities.

A paradox exists for programme evaluators in trying to acknowledge the fluidity and dynamic of community, the changing relationships between people and activities and the need to somehow articulate, track and assess those



relationships in order to establish what kind of difference (if any) a programme has made. Attention to negotiation skills can help address this.

Introducing negotiation skills into evaluation and research training is a way forward. Balachandra et al (2005b) identify a process of learning for negotiation students to help them break out of traditional thinking and see things in new ways. They provide examples of practical exercises asking students to change agreements with partners, maybe through the introduction of new information. Role play in research and evaluation training could improve novice researchers' confidence in dealing with complex community evaluation teams. Balachandra et al (2005b) also suggest students keep journals to help track decision making, to uncover unconscious decision-making processes. This is a potentially useful activity to incorporate into research and evaluation methods teaching, to help evaluators work more effectively and empathetically.

Evaluation students may also benefit from opportunities to practice working with the 'core concerns' affecting emotions, as discussed earlier (Shapiro, 2006). Shapiro suggests that the core concerns can act as a 'lens' to understanding the emotional dimensions of negotiation and asks students to 'observe' the concerns in their own lives and write these up, thus enhancing awareness. He also suggests the use of a video clip and analysis of this. Again, these learning methods could readily be incorporated into research/evaluation training sessions, particularly relating to participatory working.

This article has attempted to illustrate how thinking about the role of negotiation from the beginning of an evaluation could be beneficial in enhancing relationship building and participation in community evaluation. The case study of a Sure Start local evaluation has provided an account of how aspects of negotiation were utilised during interactions and activities with stakeholders. The case has helped to illustrate the use of negotiation strategies, ultimately increasing the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the development, implementation and revision of evaluation.

It is hoped that the strategies utilised within the Sure Start evaluation will have resonance for other community project evaluators and developers, providing a means for them to identify useful and practical ways of optimising collaboration and negotiation in their efforts to define what it is they want to do in their evaluation.

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