AN EXPLORATION OF FOUNDATION AND NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS

IN EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION

by

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A THESIS

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Evaluation can enable nonprofits to more effectively compete for performance-based funds and improve programs. Limited resources for internal evaluation and shortcomings of external evaluation, however, challenge the sector's capability for accountability and self-reflection. Several foundations have responded by incorporating empowerment evaluation into their grantmaking. The evaluation approach builds on a history of participatory and collaborative methods, and aims to increase evaluation capacity by coaching agencies to take ownership of the process.

This study explores the practice and outcomes of these empowerment evaluation partnerships through telephone interviews with foundation personnel , nonprofit staff, and evaluation coaches from across the country. Results demonstrate that nonprofits have acquired only partial ownership of the process, leading to mixed outcomes that are limited by resources and vary depending upon the culture and capacity of the agency. Foundations

interested in empowerment evaluation are advised to first assess the grantee's readiness and

the foundation's goals.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Foundations have required evaluation of their nonprofit grantees for decades, yet nonprofits in recent years have come under increasing pressure to demonstrate to funders that their programs attain intended outcomes (Billitteri, 1998; Walker & Grossman, 1999). Capability for evaluation can thus enable an agency to better position itself for funding opportunities, as well as allow the organization to be self-accountable and react quickly to change to improve programs and operations through results-based decision-making (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Institutionalizing evaluation processes in the nonprofit sector, however, is not without its challenges. Resource-stretched nonprofits typically do not have the staff, skills, or resources to engage in evaluation when limited funds are channeled directly into service delivery (Cutt & Murray, 2000). An evaluation done by an external evaluator brought in by the funder solves this difficulty, yet produces an evaluation that is potentially of only limited or no benefit to the organization's programming and capacity (Weiss, 1998). Such an evaluation may be met with resistance from an agency who sees the evaluation's goals as unrelated and external to the organization and fears the punitive repercussions of poor results (Cutt & Murray, 2000; Easterling, 2000; Fetterman, 1996).

Recognizing these shortcomings of current evaluation practices in the nonprofit sector, some foundations have begun to engage in a capacity-building evaluation approach with their grantees called *empowerment evaluation*. David Fetterman (1994a),

the founder of the method, defines empowerment evaluation as "the use of evaluation concepts and techniques to foster self-determination" (p. 1). It emerged from a history of participatory and collaborative approaches, which seek to increase utilization of results and skill-building by including program personnel in the evaluation process. These inclusionary approaches were developed in response to the shortcomings of lack of use and relevancy of the more rigorous, methods-based traditional evaluations (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Empowerment evaluation goes one step further than previous participatory approaches by giving individuals at the program level *full* ownership over the process aided by facilitation and training from an evaluation coach (Fetterman, 2001). The intention is that the organization will recognize not only the outcomes of its programs, but also the value of self-reflection and data-based decision making, and will continue to incorporate evaluation in its operations. Although all participatory and collaborative techniques have the potential to build organizational capacity and increase the benefit of evaluation for nonprofits, empowerment evaluation was chosen for this study because of its specific focus on capacity-building that comes from its extreme position on the participatory spectrum.

This study seeks to explore and describe the current state of empowerment evaluation endeavors between foundations and their nonprofit grantees. To gain a full perspective on the process, telephone interviews were conducted with foundation personnel who have engaged in the process with their grantees, the evaluators hired to facilitate the process, and staff from the nonprofits who participated in the evaluation. Data are presented through qualitative case-study analyses of each subject population.

The study seeks to explore three fundamental research questions: 1) how and why is the process being implemented, 2) what are the challenges, and 3) how are nonprofit agencies impacted?

The purposes of the current study are: 1) to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on empowerment evaluation, 2) to describe the current use of this practice in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, 3) to provide foundations who may be interested in empowerment evaluation with information to gauge the costs and benefits of the process, and 4) to provide insight to nonprofits engaged in the process with funders or other groups about what has worked well for other agencies. It is hoped that the results will contribute valuable insight and information about empowerment evaluation within grantor-grantee relationships.

No known study to date has examined the use of empowerment evaluation by the foundation community. McNelis & Bickel (1996) report that only a handful of formal publications have directly studied the philanthropic sector's views on the role of any type of evaluation, and these authors advocate that "foundation-sponsored evaluation deserves more attention, in the evaluation, research, and foundation communities, given the amount of funding granted to organizations by the philanthropic community every year and the social trust that these organizations represent" (pp. 31-32). Foundations indeed have the power to guide social change. In 2003, foundations donated over $27 billion to nonprofits nationwide (The Foundation Center, 2004), and with their freedom from political pressures they have the independence to shape new directions through exploration of different solutions (Porter & Kramer, 1999). With an increasing focus on

new models of philanthropy such as *high-engagement* or *venture philanthropy*, which provides organizational development and capacity-building in addition to funding (Frumkin, 2003), the time is ripe to examine such innovative efforts as empowerment evaluation.

The four chapters that follow provide an overview of the evaluation literature, the data collection methods and interview results, and a synthesis of what has been learned about empowerment evaluation from this study. Chapter 2 details the state of evaluation within the nonprofit sector and the development of evaluation from traditional to participatory approaches and finally to empowerment evaluation. Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology. Chapter 4 presents the synthesis of interview findings from those involved in the empowerment evaluation process: foundation personnel, nonprofit staff, and evaluation coaches. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the study's findings and provides recommendations for the future of empowerment evaluation within the foundation and nonprofit communities.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Current State of Foundation & Nonprofit Evaluation

In the 1940's, private foundations began funding evaluation to measure the impact of funded social programs (Weiss, 1998). Since that time many foundations, particularly the largest and most influential, have continued to emphasize measurement of grantee outcomes (Walker & Grossman, 1999). Increased competition for funding in recent years has led to greater recognition of the need to use performance-based evaluation, a trend experts believe will continue (Billitteri, 1998). Grantees now report that foundations are requiring more emphasis on outcomes than ever before (Walker & Grossman, 1999), and nonprofits are rising to the challenge. For example, three-quarters of outcome measurement initiatives within United Way agencies began just in the last ten years (United Way of America, 2000). Funders hope that increased accountability will alleviate fears that funds are being wasted on underperforming programs (Cutt & Murray, 2000) due in part to the failure of philanthropy as a whole to demonstrate achievement of intended outcomes in the past (Walker & Grossman, 1999).

In addition to enabling nonprofits to demonstrate the impacts of their programs to funders and the public, evaluation can help a nonprofit to improve its operations and service delivery (McNelis & Bickel, 1996). In an environment of constant change due to the effects of globalization, workforce demographics and technology advancements, knowledge is an essential asset that allows an organization to adapt to changes with speed

and flexibility (Preskill & Torres, 1999). This concept has been recognized over the past few decades in the for-profit and public sectors and has initiated the practices of continuous quality improvement (CQI) and total quality management (TQM) (American Association for Higher Education, 1994; Dew & Nearing, 2004). CQI and TQM engage employees in a collaboration to improve work processes in order to increase product quality and enable the organization to learn and change. Communities that empower employees to act and share learning continually and systematically are important in fostering a culture of accountability and responsive change (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

Many grantees report positive impacts of evaluation on their organizations. In a survey of United Way agencies, 88% reported that evaluation helped them to better communicate their impact to stakeholders, 76% reported a resulting improvement in service delivery, and 83% found themselves more able to successfully compete for funding (United Way of America, 2000). An overwhelming 89% said they would recommend that others implement outcomes evaluation.

At the same time, evaluation within a largely undercapitalized sector is not without its challenges. Over half (55%) of the United Way agencies reported that evaluation overloaded their record-keeping capacity, and 60% said there was insufficient staff time available for the process. Nonprofits typically operate with only a slim margin of funds that are earmarked for more immediate service demands. Many nonprofits thus have neither the funds nor the skills to implement sophisticated evaluation techniques (Cutt & Murray, 2000), and do not put efforts toward evaluation that may be viewed as unrelated to the organization's mission (Billitteri, 1998). In this environment, evaluation

can become a burden seen "mainly as a ritual designed to placate the funding bodies, without any real usefulness" (Weiss, 1998, p. 23).

While the employment of an outside evaluator by a foundation alleviates this resource barrier, this option may not do much to benefit the nonprofit. Funders generally are interested in the overall effects of a program, yet program staff want to focus more on what strategy they can use to gain maximum program effects (Weiss, 1998). A lack of agreement between foundations and nonprofits about appropriate benchmarks for measurement and use of results can lead to confusion and miscommunication as well as misuse of resources (Carson, 2000). Staff may not see the link between their daily activities and commitment to progress towards goals set by the foundation or outside evaluator (Fetterman, 1996), hindering organizational improvement that depends upon goals that are relevant to and embraced by the entire organization (Ristau, 2001; Wing, 2004). An additional challenge is that an outside consultant may not have a good understanding of the organization (Billitteri, 1998) or may fail to see only symptoms rather than underlying causes (Wing, 2004). Because of these heavily externalized aspects of traditional evaluation, the resources it necessitates, and the fear of negative repercussions, nonprofits can be strongly resistant to engaging in evaluative activities (Easterling, 2000).

Evaluation commissioned by funders adds additional pressure to demonstrate positive impact in order to meet financial needs, and if continued funding hinges on the results of the evaluation, "projects may try to influence, subvert, or even sabotage the evaluation" (Weiss, 1998, p. 26). Mark, Henry & Julnes (2000) agree that "the combination

of the purpose of oversight with program improvement is ripe for conflict" (p. 128). Cutt &

Murray (2000) refer to phenomenon resulting from this pressure as *Look good avoid blame*,

where those being evaluated measure only those aspects that will be sure to produce

positive results and explain poor results as out of their control. The authors state that in

order to combat this threat, the organization must create a *culture of accountability* that

emphasizes acceptance of responsibility as a learning opportunity from which positive

change can stem.

Cutt & Murray contend that involving evaluees in the decision-making process can

help to achieve this goal. Grantee involvement in evaluation is in fact considered to be a

best practice in the literature on effective organizations (Schon, 1983, as cited in McNelis

& Bickel, 1996). Experts recognize there is a need to include the organization's own

questions and need for self-improvement in the evaluation process in a way that leaves the

agency with new skills (Easterling, 2000).

The newly emerging field of high-engagement or venture philanthropy seems to be

a natural vehicle for grantor-grantee partnerships in evaluation. Donors who have become

involved in this new type of philanthropy recognize the benefits of providing training and

organizational development that leaves the nonprofit with increased capacity extending

beyond the life of the grant (Byrne, 2002; Frumkin, 2003; Morino & Shore, 2004).

Foundations are in the unique position to expand the social benefit of their grants by

engaging in such full partnerships with nonprofits in order to increase nonprofit

effectiveness .

The Roots of Evaluation

Evaluation can be defined as "the formulation of judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of a program on the basis of systematic inquiry" (Cousins, 2005, p. 204) and is rooted in "the need and desire for accountability" (Alkin & Christie, 2004, p. 12). The beginnings of formal evaluation can be dated back to more than 4,000 years ago when the Chinese engaged in systematic personnel evaluation (Wortman, 1983, as cited in Mark et al., 2000). Modern evaluation in the United States is commonly traced back to the 1960s, when the Great Society legislation mandated systematic evaluation of many newly developed educational and social programs that received large amounts of federal dollars (House, 1993; Weiss, 1998). By the end of the 1970's, evaluation had become commonplace in government agencies (Weiss, 1998), and has since evolved into multiple streams of theory and practice (House, 1993).

Evaluation can serve one or more of several purposes, including: (1) assessment of worth or merit, (2) improvement for the program or organization, (3) oversight and compliance, and (4) development of knowledge (Mark et al., 2000). Evaluations fall into one of two categories: *summative* evaluation, which focuses on judging or proving based on outcomes, and *formative* evaluation, which focuses on improving programs or policies (Patton, 1994). These concepts can also be described as *outcome* and *process* evaluation (Cutt & Murray, 2000), respectively. A phrase from evaluator Robert Stake and reemphasized by Scriven (1991, p. 19), explains the difference well: "when the cook tastes the soup, that's formative evaluation; when the guest tastes it, that's summative evaluation" (Weiss, 1998, p. 31). A summative evaluation can be part of a formative

evaluation; if evaluation demonstrates mixed or negative effects, for example, it can help program personnel learn what could be done better and make improvements (Weiss, 1998).

Early, traditional evaluations were undertaken to provide a summative assessment of merit or worth. This was accomplished through the application of rigorous scientific technique in order to eliminate bias, a practice pioneered in the social sciences by Donald Campbell with *quasi-experimental design* (Alkin & Christie, 2004). The role of the evaluator in this traditional sense was an objective and dispassionate observer and reporter (Weiss, 1998). Proponents of traditional evaluation believed that proper quantitative methodology would produce value-free solutions reflecting all group interests that would be widely embraced (House, 1993).

Emergence of Collaborative Inquiry

As evaluation became more of an established field, evaluators began to realize that evaluation was a political enterprise, subject to different and often conflicting interests (House, 1993). It also became apparent that Great Society program evaluations were being largely ignored, and even a call for increased rigor to convince policymakers to take results more seriously did not result in greater use of results (Patton, 1997a). Without use of findings, evaluation is a futile undertaking, because "even when use is less direct and immediate, utility of some kind provides the rationale for evaluation" (Weiss, 1998, p. 15). The Joint Committee on Standards agrees: one of their four evaluation standards is utility (Patton, 1997a).

In response to the failings of traditional evaluation, several new forms of evaluation emerged on the scene in the 1970's that sought to involve people from the programs that were being evaluated and incorporate their concerns and questions (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). These many types share more commonalties than differences and can be termed under the umbrella of *collaborative inquiry* (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Such evaluations emphasize decision-making by key personnel (Alkin & Christie, 2004) and employ an evaluator in the role of facilitator, collaborator or coach with an aim to "use the evaluation process to increase participants' sense of being in control of, deliberative about, and reflective on their own lives and situations" (Patton, 1997a, p. 98).

Involving key program personnel, or *stakeholders*, in the process proved to alleviate the difficulties of underutilization of evaluation results. Numerous researchers have demonstrated that involving stakeholders in the process increases the likelihood that the results will be used (Alkin & Christie, 2004; Greene, 1988; Patton, 1997a; Preskill, 2004; Weiss, 1998), in part because "the process of engaging in evaluation can have as much or more impact than the findings generated" (Patton, 1997a, p. 99). It has also been found that if stakeholders participate in the process and gain an understanding of evaluation, they may be more likely to be self-reflective in the future (Weiss, 1998). The inclusion of a range of stakeholder perspectives additionally results in more representative findings that reflect all interests and promote the building of skill and awareness capacity (Preskill, 2004). Today it is widely accepted that stakeholders should be given a voice in the evaluation process (Mark et al., 2000).

Collaborative Inquiry: A Variety of Forms

The various types of collaborative inquiry can be gauged on a spectrum of three distinguishing characteristics: (1) who has control over the evaluation process (researcher vs. practitioners), (2) the breadth of stakeholder selection (primary users vs. all legitimate groups), and (3) the depth of participation (consultation vs. deep participation) (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). The inquiry approaches described here are far from a comprehensive listing of all such practices; this review is intended to provide a simplified overview of some of the most prominent approaches.

One of the original forms of collaborative inquiry, which engages a wide range of stakeholders on a limited, consultative basis, is *stakeholder-based evaluation* (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). It was developed by the National Institute of Education in response to the criticisms of traditional evaluation discussed previously, and was "designed explicitly both to increase the use of evaluation results for decision making and to bring a wider variety of people into active participation in the evaluation process" (Weiss, 1983, p. 8). Although stakeholder-based evaluation incorporates the input of many participants, the evaluator still retains full control over the process.

A second type of collaborative inquiry to emerge during this time was *utilization-focused evaluation* with a primary focus on enhancing the use of the evaluation by key program personnel by involving them in the process (Patton, 1997a). Utilization-focused evaluation employs a narrow group of stakeholders in order to focus the evaluation questions and process, and these individuals contribute and participate to a greater extent

than would participants in a stakeholder-based evaluation (Patton, 1997a). Patton (1994)

later expanded the possibilities for utilization-focused evaluation to include

developmental evaluation. In this process the evaluator and team of stakeholders engage

in immediate and ongoing evaluative feedback rather than producing a formal report or

judgment in order to foster continual and cumulative development and learning.

A third type of collaborative inquiry is *participatory action research*. This form is

traditionally characterized by a dual emphasis on improvement for the program and the

generation of social theory, shared responsibility between the researcher and participants,

and stakeholder involvement in all aspects of the evaluation. More contemporary

emancipatory action research focuses on empowering individuals or groups to right

social inequities and gives the participants exclusive control (Cousins & Earl, 1995;

Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). In whatever form, action research is characterized by

collaboration, a focus on practical problems, an emphasis on professional development,

and a project structure with time and support for open communication (Oja & Smulyan,

1989).

One of the most widely known forms of collaborative inquiry, *participatory*

evaluation, employs a high level of participant control and involvement in an equal

partnership with the evaluator in every aspect of the project (Cousins & Earl, 1995). It

involves a smaller number of primary users in a deeper level of engagement and

responsibility than stakeholder-based evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1995), and is more

geared towards continued and active user participation than utilization-focused evaluation

(Alkin & Christie, 2004). Most commonly participatory evaluation focuses on program

improvement and can build capacity at the individual, group, and/or organizational level

(Cousins, 2004). Cousins & Whitmore (1998) define two forms: *practical participatory*

evaluation (P-PE), which focuses on practical evaluation utilization, and *transformative*

participatory evaluation (T-PE), which aims to empower and bring social justice to

participants.

In 1994, a new theory and practice of collaborative inquiry called *empowerment*

evaluation emerged with a primary focus on empowerment and capacity building

(Fetterman, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2001, 2005).

Empowerment Evaluation

Fetterman (1994a) first defined empowerment evaluation in his presidential

address to the American Evaluation Association as "the use of evaluation concepts and

techniques to foster self-determination", with self-determination being "the ability to

chart one's own course in life" (1994a, p. 1). A decade later, he and his colleagues gave a

somewhat modified definition:

> An evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving
> program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing
> the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2)
> mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the
> program/organization (Wandersman, Snell-Johns, Lentz, Fetterman, Keener,
> Livet, et al., 2005, p. 28).

Empowerment evaluation falls on the furthest end of the participatory spectrum,

with high stakeholder participation and complete participant control (Cousins, Donahue

& Bloom, 1996, as cited in Fetterman, 2001). Fetterman stresses that the process can be particularly empowering among traditionally disenfranchised groups, such as African American and Latino communities, where outside evaluators may not understand the values specific to that community and individuals have particular need for advocacy tools (Fetterman, 1996). At the same time, he states that "self-determination is potentially applicable to human beings on every level of the social and economic scale" (Fetterman, 2001, p. 114).

Although empowerment evaluation primarily focuses on formative purposes (Fetterman, 2001), it can be an effective tool for demonstrating accountability as well (Fetterman, 2005a). Patton (1997b) infers that it places value on self-accountability as the highest form of accountability. Fetterman and his colleagues identify ten principles of empowerment evaluation that are given different weight depending on the context (Cousins, 2005) and determine the balance between accountability and self-improvement (Keener, Snell-Johns, Livet, & Wandersman, 2005). As more of the principles are included, the quality of the evaluation increases. These principles are: improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability (Wandersman et al., 2005).

Criticisms of Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment evaluation is often criticized for its ambiguity and lack of distinction from participatory, collaborative, stakeholder-involving and utilization

focused approaches, particularly in practice (Cousins, 2005; Patton, 1997b). Indeed, the

method shares more commonalties than differences with these other approaches

(Fetterman, 2001) and also varies substantially in its implementation (Cousins, 2005). For

example, in one analysis of an empowerment evaluation implementation, the authors

conclude that, in fact, the process was closer to a participatory approach because it

resulted in less organizational learning and built capacity than intended. This occurred

primarily because the organization did not have the resources available to take full

ownership over the process (Keener et al., 2005), illustrating that the organizational

environment and skill level will strongly influence implementation and the resulting level

of success. Fetterman (2001) states that "there is no absolute or pure form of any

approach in practice. Evaluations approximate an ideal type" (p. 114).

The above example illustrates the explicit emphasis that empowerment evaluation

places on capacity building, which most experts cite as its primary identifiable and

unique trait (Cousins, 2005; Fetterman, 2005b; Patton, 1997b; Vanderplaat, 1997, as cited

in Fetterman, 2001). Patton (1997b) also observe that empowerment evaluation differs

from other methods in its emphasis on liberation. In the words of one empowerment

evaluation facilitator, "the training in the tools for continuous improvement, imparted to

constituents by the evaluator, has liberated program participants and has given them their

strongest positions as program advocates" (Keller, 1996, p. 80).

A second prominent criticism of empowerment evaluation comes from the

perceived lack of objectivity and rigor surrounding the process. Critics fear that

objectivity and rigor are lost when evaluation is given away to those being evaluated,

potentially leading to unethical and corrupt use under the guise of legitimate evaluation (Stufflebeam, 1994). They also feel that an evaluator who is too invested in advocating for the beliefs and goals of the group being evaluated will be unable to determine the group's true merit and worth (Scriven, 1997; Stufflebeam, 1994) and that the method is insufficient for producing hard-line results (Cousins, 2005).

Fetterman (1995) counters these criticisms by asserting that even traditional evaluation can never be truly objective, as "evaluation, like any other dimension of life, is political, social, cultural, and economic" (p. 189). Weiss (1998) agrees that outside evaluators in any context are in danger of becoming "so engaged with practitioners and clients and so involved in the processes of the program that they become almost unwitting advocates for it" (p. 38). Fetterman posits that one need not to have distance from what is being studied to effectively evaluate and criticize, and, in fact, the best data comes instead from close observation and interaction with people. The empowerment evaluation structure additionally moderates bias and promotes rigor as much as possible by encouraging group members to check one another's agendas and by providing sufficient methodological training throughout the process. Additionally, participants who wish to retain credibility with outside agencies have a motivation to produce authentic documentation. Fetterman (1997) states that the external accountability function of empowerment evaluation is only one of many legitimate purposes, and that the method is not intended to replace all other forms of evaluation. He feels that, with this approach, "usefulness supercedes academic precision" (2001, p. 107).

Empowerment Evaluation in Practice

According to Fetterman (1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2005b), certain elements must be present in an organization's environment for empowerment evaluation to be effective. A group must be invested in the evaluation and motivated to take ownership if the results are to be meaningful and sustainable. The environment must be conducive to risk-taking and to taking responsibility for one's actions. There must be a high level of trust and support within the group that serves to encourage honest self-reflection and discussion of successes and failures. The presence of an outside evaluator keeps the process on track and monitors progress and rigor. Also, the inclusion of the funder in the process can contribute to the knowledge pool and make it less likely that the funder will require a change of course.

Case studies of empowerment evaluation highlight the importance of trusting and committed relationships, peer support, and clear roles and responsibilities (Millett, 1996; Gomez & Goldstein, 1996). One team found its partnership to be a success due to "mutual respect and trust, reciprocity, open communication, shared responsibility, a shared appreciation for the cultural and sociohistorical context within which the community and its organizations operate, and a common cultural style of communication and interaction" (Grills, Bass, Brown, & Akers, 1996, p. 135).

One of the most difficult and common problems is staff turnover during the process (Fetterman, 2001). Even if a staff member leaves after the evaluation is officially finished, the benefits of the capacity built within that individual will be lost to the organization. This raises the question of how to sustain the efforts of capacity building

amidst the well-recognized high turnover of the nonprofit sector. Wing (2004) postulates that both individual- and system-based efforts must be undertaken; "It has to be person carried, or it is dead; yet it has to be institutionalized in systems, or it evaporates" (p. 158). Fetterman (2001) states that "sustainability is dependent on the degree to which the group is successful in institutionalizing evaluation" (p. 146).

Another barrier to empowerment evaluation faced by nonprofits is lack of time and resources to devote to the process and resulting potential overburdenment of staff. Fetterman (1996) states that it is important to pace efforts with an organization that has a heavy work schedule so that the effort does not suffer due to staff being overburdened. Ristau (2001) found that nonprofit participants involved in an outcomes evaluation required continued technical assistance in order to ensure long-term commitment to the process. It is possible that even with the best intentions, once the evaluation coach finishes his or her work with the organization it could be difficult to sustain commitment to evaluation due to lack of resources.

Finally, organizations accustomed to traditional evaluation may be resistant to taking ownership over the evaluation process (Fetterman, 2001). In an environment where the process is still relatively new, agencies may fear what they do not know, possibly compromising the ability of the process to build evaluation capacity.

Despite these potential barriers to implementation, empowerment evaluation's focus on skill development and ownership of the evaluation process provides a potential vehicle for building nonprofit capacity and promoting a culture of accountability.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants in this study are foundation personnel engaged in empowerment evaluation with nonprofit grantees, evaluators hired by these foundations to facilitate the process, and staff from nonprofits who are or were engaged in the empowerment evaluation process with foundations.

The sample of foundations from which to draw personnel was obtained in two ways. First, a search for *empowerment evaluation* was done through The Foundation Center web site. This generated a list of six foundations, and the principal investigator visited the web sites of those foundations to search for more information regarding the evaluations. It was confirmed from published reports that two of the foundations had participated in empowerment evaluation. These foundations were cold-called using a prewritten script (see Appendix D), and through referral by internal staff, the individuals most closely related to those evaluations were identified and recruited using a verbal consent script (see Appendix E).

The second method of foundation personnel recruitment was through contact with David Fetterman and Abraham Wandersman, founders of the empowerment evaluation technique. Upon the request of the principal investigator, they provided contact information for two additional foundations that fund empowerment evaluation and the appropriate contact person at each. These foundation personnel were called and recruited

in the same manner as the other two foundation participants. Fortunately, all the

foundation staff who were approached about the study agreed to participate. In total, five

foundation personnel from four foundations were interviewed, including a program

director, a senior research associate, a vice president in strategic planning and evaluation,

an evaluation manager, and a foundation president.

These four foundations represent only a convenience sample of foundations in the

country that utilize empowerment evaluation with their grantees. Others can be identified

through published literature and case studies on empowerment evaluation, but time

constraints limited the ability to contact them all.

Evaluators were identified by asking each foundation interviewee for the names

of one or two of the evaluators they had hired to facilitate the process. These individuals

are outside evaluators who had been hired by the foundations to facilitate empowerment

evaluation for nonprofit grantees. The evaluators were contacted and recruited using the

same verbal consent form as for foundations (see Appendix E). Of the five evaluators

contacted, three agreed to participate: one from one foundation and two from a second

foundation. All three are associated with universities.

Nonprofit subjects are grantees of the foundations that have been partners in the

empowerment evaluations, and were similarly identified through referrals from the

foundation participants. In one case, due to difficulty obtaining contact information from

the foundation, nonprofit contacts were obtained from the evaluator who had been

working with the foundation and the grantees. Appropriate staff members at the nonprofit

agencies were identified either through this referral process or by cold-calling the

nonprofits (again using the script in Appendix D). The appropriate staff were recruited

with the verbal consent form (see Appendix E). Recruitment of nonprofit personnel

proved to be somewhat more difficult than for foundation staff. Several staff never

responded to phone messages and emails from the principal investigator, likely because

nonprofit staff are already frequently overburdened with organizational demands. One

organization that was contacted reported that the staff members who had worked on the

evaluation were no longer employed at the agency. Of the sixteen nonprofit staff people

identified and contacted as possible participants, seven agreed to participate in the study.

Each of the four foundations was represented in this sampling: one nonprofit had been

funded by one foundation, one by a second foundation, two by a third foundation, and

three by the fourth foundation. Of these latter three nonprofit participants, two were not

regular employees of the agency but rather had been brought in specifically to manage

the project for which the evaluation was done. The perspectives of these individuals

regarding the impacts of empowerment evaluation on nonprofits are thus somewhat

limited by an outside perspective.

 In order to safeguard against any potential risk to the subjects that could result

from answers given, and to promote honest responses, the identity of each participant and

his or her organization has been kept confidential in this report.

Instrumentation

 Three study instruments were created to guide semi-structured interviews, one for

each population of subjects (see Appendices A-C). Questions were designed in an open-

ended manner in order to avoid leading their responses in a particular direction. The study's main research questions regarding the process and impacts of empowerment evaluation focused the development of questions. Previous literature on empowerment evaluation also guided question development, particularly regarding the topics of how the process compares to more traditional evaluation and whether challenges and benefits described by other groups occurred in these cases.

Questions for foundation personnel focused on:

- why their foundations chose to use empowerment evaluation
- what they felt were the benefits for both their organization and their grantees
- whether challenges arose and how they were dealt with
- what advice they would give to other foundations

Questions for evaluators focused more on the process itself:

- what elements enabled or blocked success
- whether there were challenges and how they were met
- what the outcomes were for the nonprofits

Questions for nonprofit staff sought to determine:

- the positive and negative impacts of the evaluation on their organizations
- how the experience differed from previous experiences with other funders
- their level of involvement in and perceptions of the process

Procedures

Data for each participant were collected through one semi-structured telephone interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. During this phone call, the principal investigator focused on asking the open-ended questions included in the interview instrument. She additionally followed up with questions to clarify points or gather greater

detail about a particular answer or unique situation. Because of this, each phone call had a slightly different structure depending upon the subject's responses. Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed into written form, at which point the audio tape was erased. Transcriptions were identified only by a number linked to the interviewee's name in a spreadsheet accessible only to the principle investigator. This spreadsheet was destroyed following the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in qualitative case studies, with foundation personnel, nonprofit staff, and evaluators treated as three separate cases. Responses within each of the three cases were analyzed for common themes around the main study questions. Data are grouped by these main themes and specific examples are provided. Although a cross-case analysis of each foundation-evaluator-nonprofit relationship would have provided an additional and valuable perspective, this would have been a threat to evaluator and nonprofit confidentiality were a foundation to recognize itself and accordingly know the identity of the subjects linked to it. Participants are identified in the data analysis only by the type of organization for which they work, followed by a letter (for example, Foundation A, Nonprofit C, Evaluator B, etc.). These letters were assigned randomly and denote no particular order or personal information about the subjects.

Reliability in this study was promoted by using the same interview instrument for each participant of the same population (foundation, nonprofit, or evaluator), by timing all interviews to be approximately the same length, and by phrasing questions in the same

way during each interview. Validity was enhanced by using an interview instrument with open-ended questions to prevent leading the subjects into any particular answer. The principle investigator focused conversations around questions that were designed to be objective and avoided making value statements that would bias the subjects. Low interference descriptors were used as much as possible in the data analysis, as well as negative case sampling that demonstrates the range in perspectives.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews with foundation personnel, nonprofit staff, and evaluators who are or have been involved in empowerment evaluation. Data are analyzed in three case studies that group the subjects within each population together and highlight the main themes of the three primary research questions: 1) how and why is the process being implemented, 2) what are the challenges, and 3) how are nonprofit agencies impacted?

A summary of the most prominent findings from each of the three study populations is presented in Table 1 on the following page. Although the foundations, evaluators and nonprofits described similar challenges, particularly that of limited resources, the outcomes reported by each group differed somewhat. Foundations believed that the process built capacity for evaluation and self-reflection, and while nonprofits reported learning about the importance of data, they continued only limited use of evaluation techniques following the grant. The three groups did agree that empowerment evaluation can better position agencies to gain grant funding through data collected. The necessities of adequate resources, commitment to self-improvement, clear roles and true collaboration were prominent themes across all groups.

Table 1. Comparison of Main Findings Across Groups

	Foundations	Evaluators	Nonprofits
Necessary Elements	Commitment to self-improvement Clear roles	Commitment to self-improvement Data capacity	Adequate funding Clear roles & expectations
Challenges	Limited resources Nonprofit resistance Link to funding Limited rigor	Limited resources Nonprofit resistance Link to funding Limited skills	Limited resources Measures determined by foundations Relationships with evaluator/ foundation
Nonprofit Outcomes	Capacity for evaluation & self-reflection Grant funding	General capacity building Appreciation for data Grant funding Results can depend on commitment & skill	Little future evaluation limited by resources Organizational learning Some programmatic changes Grant funding
Advice to Foundations	Foundation must be a learning organization	Work in a true partnership Recognize resource limitations	Provide adequate resources Ensure clarity & collaboration

FOUNDATIONS

Five foundation personnel from four foundations were interviewed for their

perspectives on why they use the process, what elements are important, and what are the

challenges and benefits. A few things should be noted about the data from foundation

subjects. The individuals labeled Foundation C and Foundation D are two employees of the

same foundation. The Foundation E individual has engaged in some empowerment

evaluation in the past, yet currently aligns more with a utilization-focused approach and

based responses primarily on this current work. Because empowerment evaluation and

utilization-focused evaluation share more commonalties than differences (Patton, 1997b),

and this foundation staff said that in this process, "I see some of the empowerment that occurs along the way…if you can meet the needs of the evaluation users…they become empowered along the way and are stronger for it down the road", the results from this subject as well as from the nonprofit that worked with this foundation are incorporated here. In a similar circumstance, although the evaluation discussed by the individual labeled Foundation B was defined as empowerment evaluation in a public report published by the foundation, this individual referred to the process as "participatory action research". Again, because this approach has much in common with empowerment evaluation, and because Fetterman (2001) acknowledges that empowerment evaluation strongly influenced and was influenced by action research, the responses from this individual as well as from the nonprofit that worked with this foundation are included in the analysis. Interestingly, these data do not differ substantially from data collected from those individuals stating they use empowerment evaluation, even in terms of the degree of ownership taken by the grantee organization, illustrating the assertion voiced by many in the evaluation community that empowerment evaluation overlaps considerably with other participatory approaches in practice (Cousins, 2005; Patton, 1997b).

Experience, Purpose, & Use of Empowerment Evaluation

The level of experience each foundation staff member had had with empowerment evaluation varied across subjects. While Foundation A had only utilized empowerment evaluation and no other approaches, Foundation B had only used it for one grant initiative. Foundations C & D (two staff from the same foundation) reported investing in

empowerment evaluation in three different projects. While Foundation E had used

empowerment evaluation in some grantmaking in the past, this foundation's current focus

in all evaluation undertakings was a utilization-focused approach. For the most part,

foundations had used empowerment evaluation for collaborative initiatives involving

multiple grantees. Four of the five foundation staff reported overwhelmingly positive

experiences with the process, and even Foundation B who was not as positive about the

outcomes would still advocate for some aspects of the method.

Both Foundations C/D and E stated their primary evaluation aim was learning for

improvement. Foundation A sought to institutionalize best practices through documented

outcomes. Only Foundation B said the primary purpose was to evaluate the initiative.

Two of the foundations discussed briefly the extent to which they seek to involve

stakeholders in the process. Foundation A saw the grantee, evaluator and foundation as "a

three-legged stool", and spoke of the challenge of ensuring grantee control: "you can easily

be the tail wagging the program…and so we try very hard to say that's not what we want to

do." This foundation stated that it involves program personnel in all aspects of the

evaluation. Foundation E uses evaluators for the data management and analysis, but

recognizes that "it's important that groups come back together and talk about the findings,

what they mean and what are the implications for program decisions."

Reasons That Foundations Choose Empowerment Evaluation

1. Inadequacies of Traditional Evaluation

All foundation staff agreed that the more traditional outside evaluator perspective

compromises the quality and usefulness of an evaluation. An evaluator who only comes in to ask questions without understanding the organizational context can't get at the "intricacies and intangibles" (Foundation D) or "the real story and meaningful, vigorous stuff" (Foundation E) of that which is being evaluated. Gathering data at that deeper level is possible, according to Foundation E, only with program personnel participation.

Traditional evaluation that comes in after the fact also fails to provide continuous feedback that benefits program development, particularly for a new project. Foundation A stated:

> It's much more important to take a look early on and say, we're not getting what we need, what should we do differently, than to wait until the project is over and say…what could we have done differently?

Foundation E asserted that in traditional evaluation, "often people are measuring a lot of things they don't value very much, but because of some compliance function they're filling out the forms." Traditional evaluation can also cause an organization to hide problems out of fear of punitive repercussions. Finally, Foundation B recognized that grantees that had had experiences with traditional evaluators sometimes felt used when the evaluators never came back after gathering data.

2. Success in Building Nonprofit Capacity for Evaluation & Self-Reflection

All five foundation personnel felt that empowerment evaluation can build evaluation skill capacity and awareness of the importance of self-reflection in grantee organizations. They spoke of this potential benefit as a primary driving force behind their

choice of evaluation:

> We wanted to leave evaluation capacity at the community level…it was really teaching community groups to own and direct evaluation activities. (Foundation B)

> We wanted to leave something behind, we didn't just want to put our hands in the bucket, and then take them out and have everything go back to the way it was. (Foundation A)

> If we can help establish a results-orientation and an atmosphere of self-assessment and accountability around those results, we think that this is part of the shift that's got to happen if change on any grand level is really going to occur…they need to learn in real time what's working and what's not. (Foundation D)

Foundations recognized that the process caused grantees to change their views on

evaluation:

> What we end up seeing is that they actually become data hungry, they become interested, they become analytical of their own data…just by analyzing their data, they became much more powerful to understand what the policy and practice implications were. (Foundation C)

> The actual process of having to make judgements, to answer questions about what they need, changes their view about what evaluation is, and it becomes less of something you pay an outsider to do, and more about something you do as part of your routine. (Foundation E)

Foundations reported tangible benefits for nonprofits as a result of the

empowerment evaluation. Foundation B found that the process increased the capacity of

the staff in that "they gained new skills that could be transferred to other kinds of work, or

to improve the work of that particular organization." Although Foundation A recognized

that the skill level of a nonprofit could not equal that of a Ph.D., this foundation felt value

was attained in the form of increased analytic skills, clarity of objectives, and a focus on

researching for best practices. Foundation E said, "I find much more growth on improving the strategy and program design side once people have to confront the evaluation question, they circle back and improve their programs, which then often makes evaluation a lot simpler." This funder reported that one grantee ratcheted up their quality control after the process, "not because the funder told them to, but because they realized it was good business." Foundation C reported better program outcomes "because suddenly the organization was making much better decisions based on data and not based on outdated protocol."

Empowerment evaluation can also enable organizations to better compete for funding. Foundation B reported that grantees had used data collected in grant writing and had been successful in securing funding from other sources. Foundation D feels that even the act of promoting self-reflection within the organization can lead to this end:

> We believe we are helping to create a culture of accountability and self-assessment, so that any funder who wants to put money on the table, recognizing that this is a potential grantee that "gets it" in terms of, "if I get your money, I can be accountable to a set of results, and I know how to do that", we think that's pretty sellable.

3. Benefits for Foundations

Foundation staff felt that not only does empowerment evaluation benefit grantees, it provides direct benefit for foundations as well. This benefit may be a wiser expenditure of funds, as Foundation A hoped for through the process, or an increased ability to influence policy change with the weight of data-proven outcomes rather than just political ideas, as with Foundation C. Foundation B discussed that by having an ethnographer rather than an

outside evaluator build trust and work closely with the grantees, the foundation gathered more valid and accurate data for decision-making. "I don't know if folks would have bared their souls and opened up some of the weaknesses in their communities to folks they didn't really know well", this foundation stated. Finally, a foundation can be better poised to make programmatic changes if it engages in ongoing data collection and reflection with its grantees. Foundation E said, "the biggest benefit for the trustee to see some value is the real time adjustments…Trustees are impressed when you identify a problem and address it."

Important Elements for a Successful Evaluation

1. A Nonprofit That is Committed to Self-Improvement

Foundation staff reported that in order for empowerment evaluation to provide benefit, a grantee must be a learning organization that is open to self-reflection and focused on improvement. Foundation C effectively described this sentiment that was echoed by other foundations:

> It's critical for any organization that expects to achieve results on an ongoing basis, to be self-learning and self-reflective and self-evaluating….I think you look for an environment where learning is part of the culture and is a positive part of the culture…If you're not in an environment where change is OK, if you're not in an environment that actually reinforces and supports change for better behavior and better outcomes, and there's no motivation to do it, the evaluation is going to be useless.

One indicator of this openness to change, according to Foundation C, is attention to the voice of the clients, particularly poor people. If that is not present, "we see that as an organization that's not going to be open to anyone else's opinion, evaluator or otherwise."

Foundations recognized the need for an organization to be committed to the process. Foundation D said, "Investment is a huge key… I really believe there has to be that whole commitment and opportunity for people to take on self-assessment, and to be accountable to a set of results, and be able to support that." Foundation A stated that "part of the characteristic that we would look for in a project director would be somebody who understands the value of capturing outcomes." There also needs to be a willingness to learn: "there has to be a handful of residents who are willing to take on the extra challenge of becoming conversant in data information." (Foundation D)

2. Clear Roles & Expectations

Foundation staff discussed the importance of ensuring "clarity of roles, and trust between the people in those roles." (Foundation D) According to Foundation C, "unless there's an up-front, defining and common set of values and principles about what this work is trying to achieve, I don't think it's necessarily going to work." Looking back, it was a lack of clarity and consistency about what questions were most important to answer that somewhat compromised the outcome of Foundation B's evaluation.

Foundations discussed the importance of a good relationship between evaluator and program personnel involved. Foundations C and D both talked about the necessity of having someone involved who is:

> In a bridge role, that can speak the language of the researchers and data-geeks, but can also speak in a compassionate and insightful way about the concerns of the residents and other stakeholders…in such a way that it's not a technical-fest, but a real exchange of dialogue. (Foundation D)

Foundation B said a key component of the evaluation "was the match-up with the evaluation staff. And then regularity in meetings, and frequency. One-shot deals did not work."

Challenges

1. Limitations of Rigor

Most foundation staff agreed that empowerment evaluation does not produce an evaluation with the same level of rigor as might a traditional evaluation:

> One evaluation associate totally missed the ball and coded a whole slew of surveys from one community wrong. And so that whole data set had to be tossed out. (Foundation B)

> In a foundation, I think we're not ready yet to take the risk of leaving evaluation just to local people…we've had experiences of farming out an evaluation and just getting gobbledy-gook back from a local site-run effort. (Foundation D)

In response to this concern, three staff reported employing a two-tiered evaluation, in which evaluators collected their own data while simultaneously facilitating data collection by program staff, providing a backup source of rigorous information.

One foundation also experienced a loss of objectivity when several evaluators began to shift into advocate roles as they became close to the programs:

> Part of what [the evaluators] want to do is build relationships with the people in the community so they can get the best information, so when that happens you can't really be objective anymore, because you start to want the best for these folks. (Foundation B)

In contrast to the views of these foundations, two foundations spoke of the ability of empowerment evaluation to provide an evaluation of *greater* quality and rigor than more traditional methods. Although Foundation C admitted that the process can compromise some methodological control, an even better evaluation design occurred through "our contacts and our communications with sites on their local work." This foundation also felt that "you may not know things for 100% certainty, but being 60% certain in this business isn't that bad." Foundation A felt even more strongly when asked if empowerment evaluation compromised objectivity:

> I think that's a bunch of hooey. This is not science, this is not petri dishes, these are human beings that are participants in programs…you can only get so objective in this work anyhow, and only have so much scientific rigor to it…with empowerment evaluation, you get the rigor at the front end because asking about what going to measure up front & whether following best practices.

2. Limited Resources

Resources were consistently cited as a significant constraint to implementation of empowerment evaluation. For example,

> I think there's huge challenges, particularly in poor communities and low-functioning organizations to do this, when they're struggling for funding, so there's a lot of organizations that face huge challenges in being reflective ….the burden of the evaluation task can sometimes overburden people who are struggling to get a program up and running. (Foundation C)

> Nonprofits are too up to their eyeballs in delivering services without enough to do it well, to sit back and gaze and say, hmm, how could we do this better. They're under fire all the time….When I first told board members that we would take 10-15% of the grant and allocate that to the evaluation piece, they're like, you got to be kidding me! We could do programming with that!…That's the same thing that nonprofits come forward with. (Foundation A)

A high level of technological and research capacity in place before the evaluation can make implementation substantially easier and more effective. Otherwise, Foundation D says, "people are really challenged with building a data infrastructure to support that where there wasn't one before, and getting people to recognize the importance of having one." No matter what the level of capacity at the grantee level, staff reported that empowerment evaluation is more expensive to fund than traditional evaluation. Although all staff cited the high expense as a consideration, Foundation A felt that because you get what you pay for, it is a wise investment.

3. Initial Resistance from Nonprofits

All foundations had experienced some initial resistance from nonprofits. Foundation A put it well, saying that because the process is so new to the nonprofit world, grantees meet empowerment evaluation with disbelief:

> I wouldn't call it resistance, I would say that they're just so unfamiliar with it. It's like they want to dance with us, but they don't know how to do the twist or whatever. They're willing to come to the dance, and they want to hug us, but they really don't know how to get their hips or their feet quite right.

Because nobody has ever asked them what they need to better manage their performance, nonprofits consider evaluation to be something they should dread and something someone else should be responsible for, according to Foundation E. Because of this:

There's almost universal reluctance at the beginning, ranging from I'm too busy, I don't know enough, or I'm not an expert, but that usually diminishes once they get into the conversations about what they need, because they realize an outside expert can't answer that….When it's framed about what do you need to manage your own business better, people kind of get excited, it's really about what they need. For the most part I find once you force people to reflect on what they need, I find nonprofits pretty sharp about it. (Foundation E)

4. Evaluation Tied Up in Funding

Foundations spoke about the challenge of truly involving program personnel when the evaluation is linked to program funding:

If people know they're just going to lose their grants, they're not going to fix them. They're going to hide them. Our whole challenge is to use evaluation to reveal flaws and problems. (Foundation E)

The problem that I worry about is when I go too far, because it will be very hard for the program people to say, you know, this is our program, you're the funder, because they're afraid that then they won't get funding again. (Foundation A)

Some foundations deal with this fear by not even using the word *evaluation* in order to make the process less threatening. Yet Foundation C emphasized that evaluation is not and should not be risk-free:

We've had problems where people I think play along, but then aren't willing to be accountable when even their own data tells them they're not performing … we try too hard to constantly make it safe for people to participate, neglecting the fact that accountability exists.

Another issue is that when evaluation is tied into foundation funding, it promotes dependency upon the funder to mandate that evaluation be done. Foundation C asserted:

We've got to break the interconnection between accountability to the money

versus accountability to learning and outcome results. And as long as people think
of it as a foundation requirement or a funding requirement instead of a learning
opportunity, the motivation is wrong, and therefore will not live on beyond the
funding.

The Future of Empowerment Evaluation for Foundations

In considering advice for other foundations, subjects acknowledged the importance

of careful self-reflection on the foundation's own focus and values before it decides to

engage in empowerment evaluation with a grantee:

The biggest advice I would give to a foundation would also be about how the
evaluation evaluates its work…I'd have the foundation first start with the question
of how will the foundation judge its success, and figure out what kind of
information the foundation needs to track in real time. (Foundation E)

There's no point in a funder trying to sell or fund empowerment evaluation if it's
not a learning organization that's empowered itself. I think the values mismatch
would just be too great …it's not just to go off and do empowerment evaluation
without having a real discussion of how your grantmaking model supports
it…The foundation needs to look closely at the costs and benefits, and be "very
upfront about the costs and benefits and the risks…what happens when things
look bad, are you going to walk away? (Foundation C)

Foundations also shared insight on the potential future of empowerment evaluation.

Foundation E expressed little optimism for the future of the approach, saying "I think the

political climate we're in is going to increase high-stakes evaluation and performance

measure evaluation." Foundation C had a strong belief that:

We need to break apart the whole evaluator and evaluation preconceived ideas of
what they are and who they are, and understand that evaluators may have a broad
set of skills that can be applied different ways. Why not call an evaluator when

you're doing strategic planning?…I think we need to change the frame on everybody needs to do empowerment evaluation to everyone needs to monitor their own performance and improve themselves.

Foundation D discussed the importance of foundations continuing to support less traditional research that a university would steer clear from:

You need foundations…that would attract university people, and that would be interested in supporting research that a university wouldn't…there's still some bridging of gaps that have to happen there so research and evaluation studies aren't only valued because they're rigorous, or they have one sort of relevance. You know, what about studies that actually demonstrate the power of practice, capacity building, and that as a factor in changing people's lives?

In conclusion, foundation personnel interviewed believed in the pursuit of encouraging grantees to improve performance through self-reflection and accountability to results. These individuals were optimistic about empowerment evaluation's ability to benefit nonprofit organizations, despite its complexities and challenges.

EVALUATORS

Three evaluators associated with two of the foundations were interviewed for their perspectives on the successes and challenges of the process and on the impact of empowerment evaluation on nonprofits.

The Evaluator's Previous Experience

The evaluators had a range of previous experience with coaching empowerment evaluation. It was the first time Evaluator A had specifically used empowerment

evaluation, although this evaluator had worked with the concepts in the past. Evaluator C, on the other hand, had rarely done an evaluation that couldn't in some way be considered to be empowerment evaluation. Evaluator B reported using methodology consistent with the values of empowerment evaluation, yet considered endeavors to be closer to traditional methods rather than to empowerment evaluation.

Evaluator C mentioned how the evaluation field as a whole has shifted strongly towards incorporating stakeholders in the process. Now, according to this evaluator:

> Programs expect to be a part of an evaluation. In other words, they don't just expect to be evaluated anymore, in that kind of traditional, outsider way. They expect to be at the table….I think there are more and more evaluators talking and thinking this way than there were…even if you look at federal programs announcements, or grants announcements from foundations, or from federal agencies, more often than not they are saying it has to include qualitative methods, it has to involve community stakeholder participation, they may be buzz words, and maybe they're just being thrown around, but hell, they're there. They weren't there in the early 90's even.

Empowerment Evaluation vs. Traditional Evaluation

Evaluators all reported a strong belief in the benefits of empowerment evaluation as compared to more traditional evaluation, even Evaluator B who claimed greater alignment with traditional methods. They felt empowerment evaluation produced better results:

> You get better data. It's a more valid way of doing evaluation because if you involve all of your stakeholders in the evaluation…you understand the program better, you have more trust and confidence in the people involved, therefore what they tell you is more open, honest, upfront, therefore your data are more valid, and you're more likely to find a fit between program theory and what you see in terms of outcomes.(Evaluator C)

Evaluator C discussed an experience that a client had had with another evaluator, where the evaluator completely neglected contact with program staff or clients, and as a result performed an evaluation that had nothing to do with the program. "That's where that lack of validity comes in", said Evaluator C. Evaluator A agreed that traditional evaluation can lead to inadequate outcomes, such as:

> …poor follow through, and poor completion, and falsifying data, and, well, we're just going to tell them what they want. And then what you end up with is an organization that is not open and honest, not really examining itself, not really delivering what it should be delivering. (Evaluator A)

Evaluator B saw the benefit from a cost perspective, reporting that without involving the program personnel in the data collection, there would not be enough money to gather data. This evaluator saw empowerment evaluation as equally rigorous compared to more traditional forms, and said "I think the only way that it compromises, I don't think particularly from their biases, but more of their incompetence in collecting data."

Level of Stakeholder Control & Involvement

Empowerment evaluation, if applied in practice as it is defined in theory, would give an organization full ownership of its own evaluation. Although all three evaluators reported involving agency personnel in most aspects of the process, the data analysis and reporting in every case was done by the evaluators, demonstrating somewhat of a discrepancy between theory and practice.

Evaluator C stated that true participatory and empowerment approaches are "rarely done very thoroughly" because it is so difficult to involve participants to the full extent:

> Often we invite communities, or programs, to be as much a part of the evaluation as possible, but sometimes they don't want to be. There is a point where they just kind of want me to do my job, and they've got a million other things to do, and me constantly inviting them to help develop measures, help come up with questions for interviews, they will openly say, look, we're not the experts in this, we trust you, do your job.

In Evaluator A's situation, the agencies were not at the point where they had the necessary capacity and skill level to take full ownership. Evaluator C reported that it is beneficial to be realistic about the agency's skill level up front and negotiate roles and expectations about what they will need help with. There will always be research and statistical skills that program people do not have, and should not be expected to have or learn. This evaluator felt that "they're not going to learn how to do multiple regression, or really rigorous qualitative analysis, and that's where there is need, room, whatever, for experts" to maintain quality of the methods and analysis.

The evaluators did report engaging stakeholders to the extent possible. Evaluator A negotiated with the agency over time, but never told the program "this is what you need to do." Evaluator B reported that the hands-on people were involved, although "I wouldn't say the higher-ups necessarily have been particularly involved." Evaluator C discussed the importance of the evaluator as an equally invested member in the process: "we attend all the meetings, and we always do things like, we help set up, we're just a member of the team, we're just like regular guys, if you need the windows washed give me a sponge."

Evaluator C recognized that there is still confusion in the evaluation world about what exactly defines empowerment evaluation and other participatory approaches in practice:

> I know that things like community-based participatory research, empowerment evaluation, appreciative inquiry, all of that, they become almost brand-named to where you say this is how we do evaluation, but I don't always know what people mean when they say that's what they're doing. It's like brand-naming something, and it takes on religious values or something. We don't really all know what we're talking about yet.

Need for a Self-Reflective & Data-Capable Agency

Evaluators reported that in order for the process to be most successful, an agency should both demonstrate an interest in self-reflection and have some basic data collection capacity already. Evaluator C stated:

> I think there's an issue of, sort of, readiness…there are definitely certain types of people and organizations that are more ready, more able, more willing to be partners in an empowerment evaluation or any kind of evaluation… I think often it's they're looking to do an evaluation not because they have to, not because they're required to, but because they really truly want to, and they find it to be an interesting, intellectual learning process as much as anything, and they're capable of getting excited about it.

If an agency does not show initial excitement about the evaluation, this evaluator said, "they may not be the best people to work with, because it probably means that they won't share information with you, they won't partner in that true sense. And if you can't partner with me, and I can't partner with you, then there's nothing empowering or learningful that is really going to go on." One example Evaluator C provided of an agency

that experienced great success was one that already

> …had a lot of ideas about what they thought they wanted to show off about their program, about what they wanted to learn in terms of lessons or weaknesses in their program…they were already collecting what they called "hope stories" from their clients.

This statement highlights not only the need for a nonprofit to be interested in evaluating itself, but the benefit of having data collection systems already in place. According to Evaluator B, if these skills and desire are not already in place, the evaluation will not do much to benefit the capacity of the agency:

> I think the ones who kind of had it still have it, and the ones who didn't have it have kind of fumbled along and they're still having difficulty….I think it's a question of attitude, orientation, time on their part, time that they're willing to put to this, actually looking at and examining what they're doing.

Evaluator B felt that in order for the process to be a success, the agency needs "some kind of a decent data management system", and those that did not have this in place experienced "very limited success."

Challenges

1. Resistance from Agencies

The evaluators all expressed that they had experienced difficulty at times when agencies were not invested in the evaluation questions. This is particularly relevant in a collaborative consisting of many agencies, as while they may be measuring success for the collaborative, the questions may not be relevant to their individual organization. Evaluator

B spoke of a varying level of commitment across agencies in a collaborative depending on

personal relevance of the evaluation questions and an interest in the bigger picture of the

collaborative's goals:

> I think people just have a traditional way of working, and if it doesn't involve
> collecting the kind of data we need to really examine the program, it's difficult to
> get people to get in line with that….one of the particular people who does a lot of
> work in the program, it was difficult to get her to understand why that was even
> important…some of the people get it, I think, very nicely, and other people just
> don't get it at all.

> Evaluator A reported that when agencies hesitate, it takes

> …a lot of reminding that we don't know whether this intervention works or not,
> and we need to learn whether it works in order to improve it, and in order to
> improve the outcomes, and also to document what works so we can get it funded
> in a sustainable way long-term.

Agencies are likely to resist the data collection if they do not feel the evaluation

questions are useful, as with Evaluator A's report that "there's been a little pushback over

time in the amount of data collected and they asked to drop the questionnaires they were

having agencies fill out that they felt were not that useful."

Evaluator C discussed how difficulties can result when an agency sees the evaluator

as an extension of the foundation, upon which it is dependent for funding:

> We're always a bit of an outsider…if there's ever an us and them, we're part of
> the them…they may feel, and I do sense this sometimes, that they can't tell me
> what to do, even though I'm always saying, tell me what you want me to do…I
> think they retained some suspiciousness about the evaluation, and what our real
> job is.

Evaluator C also spoke of the resistance present in one agency fifteen years ago, when "a major obstacle was getting the grantees to even be OK with the idea of evaluation -- they were terrified, they thought that they were going to be graded, you know, all the usual stuff, they thought they were going to lose funding."

2. Limited Resources & Skills

All the evaluators felt that limited resources and skills were large evaluation barriers. Because empowerment evaluation is a resource- and time-intensive undertaking, nonprofit agencies that already may be struggling for funding can have a difficult time because the field is:

> …funded in such a tight way, and a lot of these centers are having financial issues, I don't think they really have resources to do much, they have very slim administrative budgets…they're struggling to stay alive, stay afloat. (Evaluator A)

Evaluator B stated, "The main challenges had to do with sort of organizational capacity issues, and management issues more than anything else." Evaluator C felt that empowerment evaluation can in fact burden rather than empower, and the distinction

> …depends on the situation of the organization…I can think of examples where it might be burdening them with tasks that they either don't have the skills for or can't do, but then again it also depends on the extent of the evaluation.

It's important not to overburden agencies with data collection that they will not be able to gather effectively. Evaluator B said:

That's been one of the challenges for us, is that whole design question, designing

a form that has two features to it: one is a form that will get the data we want, and need, the other is will it be easy for them to fill out.

Outcomes: Increased Capacity for Nonprofits

Although Evaluators A and C were generally optimistic that empowerment evaluation leaves nonprofits better off than before, Evaluator B was more skeptical. Evaluator B felt that even though some agencies are likely to continue to use evaluation techniques, those agencies either collected data previously, have a financial incentive to collect information for billing purposes, or "have a sense of professional responsibility" that was present before the evaluation. If the agency did not have an appreciation for evaluation and data capacity prior to this evaluation, Evaluator B states that as a result of the evaluation, "I haven't seen any impact at all."

Evaluator A was hopeful that evaluation will be something that agencies will continue to use both to understand outcomes and to identify clients who need services:

> I think they really have an appreciation for data, and the power of data, and I think they really appreciate that the kinds of instruments that we're using show that [clients] are getting better and changing, and I think that makes them feel very positive about it…I think that whole issue of how do you use data to improve the quality of services, I think they've got that at this point. Whether they will continue to seek new ways to do that, I can't say at this point yet. Certainly, I think that there is a capacity there and an understanding that this is an important aspect of their operation.

Evaluator A had seen increased capacity on other evaluation projects that may emerge in different ways:

> I always feel it's a valuable learning experience for folks, and I've been doing this for a long time, so I hear from people years later about how this was a good

experience, I learned, when I went to my next agency, I told them what I did, that kind of stuff, so I think there's general capacity building one way or the other in doing this work even though I think it can sometimes need extra resources to sustain it long-term....I think in general capacity has increased in organizations in every experience they have with using evaluation data to increase capacity, whether it's sustained specifically the way it was set up or not.

Evaluator C discussed one instance where an initially resistant program director had since become a major evaluation proponent. This evaluator believed in the benefit of empowerment evaluation as a means for changing the way organizations think and operate:

I think they do grow and change through evaluation when they are made a part of it, and when they are partners in the evaluation…there are several examples of organizations that have never done anything before and now they're all doing results-based accountability…that has actually become a word that people, you know people who run agencies…all talk about…Five years ago, who'd have thought that.

All the evaluators agreed that data collected in the empowerment evaluation enabled agencies to better gain grant funding by using results for grant applications. At the same time, Evaluator B only projected that the agencies *should* be in a place to better leverage their funding, and Evaluator C, said that even though there had been success with obtaining funding, "I can't tell you it's absolutely causal."

Advice to Foundations

Evaluators discussed how important it is for a foundation to carry out in practice the collaborative principles that they subscribe to in theory:

One of the things I see happen with foundations is that they latch onto something like empowerment evaluation and say they're doing it, but in fact have an agenda

that they want to accomplish…it comes over very, very badly in community agencies if foundations are pushing things, that *they* really want the agency to come to a conclusion that's important to the agency, for the agency to incorporate. The word empowerment, the concept of participation and the concept of grassroots and community-up level involvement, I think sometimes foundations like the idea of it, but less often like what communities come up with. And my advice to foundations, is if you're going to go down this road, you've got to go down the road, you've got to work in a partnership with the community agencies and you can't be pushing agencies toward a road if you don't like what the agency has come up with and they want to focus on, then all of the sudden you yank your money, or try to push some to do it your way, I've seen that happen. (Evaluator A)

Evaluators also mentioned that the burden on the agency should be a major consideration. A foundation must be realistic about the amount of responsibility that can realistically be put on a nonprofit agency, and ensure the necessary level of support. Evaluator C felt that the process is well worth doing, yet

…it is worth really doing some hard thinking, and this may be an issue for the field of evaluation as much as anything, but I think foundations could well be a part of that thinking, of what are the boundaries of what can reasonably be sort of turned over to agencies, and what either can't be or shouldn't be or it's too much to ask of them.

Evaluator B spoke of the importance of allocating sufficient time and providing agencies with adequate support:

I would say just make sure you give plenty of time to work directly with the people. Plenty of time and effort, that it's not easy, particularly when they're not oriented in the right sort of way. So give plenty of time, plenty of attention to spending time with folks in terms of designing forms that are easiest for them to fill in.

In sum, while evaluators recognize the barriers of resources, skills and commitment that can prevent a nonprofit from taking full ownership of the process, they generally feel

that a well-implemented empowerment evaluation enables agencies to gain new skills

through self-reflection.

NONPROFITS

Seven nonprofits associated with the four foundations were interviewed. Although

most were staff members of the nonprofits, Nonprofits D and E were instead employed as

consultants to manage a collaborative of nonprofits. Thus, they were able to speak about

what they saw occurring for the agencies, but did not have the same insider perspective on

the nonprofit that an internal staff person might have.

Previous Evaluation Experience with Foundations

Of the seven nonprofit staff interviewed, all but one had never had a similar

experience with another foundation. Only Nonprofit A reported receiving a previous grant

that used a participatory evaluation, an experience the nonprofit said "kind of highlighted

that we didn't have to be the experts."

Other nonprofit staff had either never been involved in an evaluation or had

experienced only more traditional evaluation. The most striking difference with

empowerment evaluation, nonprofits noted, was the process of continual feedback:

> In the past some foundations that I have worked with have in fact not done an
> evaluation…with [this foundation] process, it is different, they ask for an
> evaluation halfway through the year. (Nonprofit D)

> I think in the past when I've been involved, it hasn't been that tight. In other
> words, there might be an evaluation component built in…but it hasn't been done

to the degree that we are more often checking in, more often talking about the
evaluation on an ongoing basis, and more often reporting back to the funder as to
how we're doing on a much more periodic and spelled-out basis…I haven't seen
the rigor of that in other evaluations that I've been involved in. (Nonprofit E)

The Process

1. Alignment of Questions with Nonprofit Goals

For the most part, nonprofit staff reported that the measures used in the evaluation
were largely dictated by the needs of the foundation rather than by the questions of the
nonprofit. The challenge in many of these cases was that a collaborative of several agencies
was being evaluated, making it difficult to match evaluation questions with individual
agency needs.

Nonprofit A expressed some frustration about feeling disconnected from the
evaluation process:

There was one tool that they used that… we didn't know the significance of why
we were doing that…if we'd had known what the purpose was then we might
have had that mindset in implementing our programs… maybe two, three years
into the grant we were told what they were doing …in the final report where there
was a writeup on the various projects, that seemed to be an area that was reported
on, and we didn't have a clue that it was relevant to the project.

Nonprofit B similarly reported measuring what the foundation requested rather than
what was useful to the agency, and said the one thing that would have been useful for the
nonprofit to know was an impossible aspect to measure. In the experience of Nonprofit D,
where the purpose of the evaluation was to generate knowledge for the field, researchers
were hired to develop appropriate measures based on a review of other research. Because

of the need for a more rigorous, method-driven study in this situation, Nonprofit D felt it would not have been possible to involve staff members in the development of measures: "I would say the staff really were not familiar with the instruments. They couldn't come up with them."

Nonprofit G stated that not only did it measure what the foundation required, in some situations the foundation did not give clear directives ahead of time about what outcomes they wanted tracked, leaving the nonprofit thinking, "why didn't you tell me that three years ago?…we wait a year and it might be something else." This individual assumed the role of buffer between the foundation and the agency in order to package requirements in a way that staff would accept them, "so that folks here think, oh, that's a really good idea, we would be doing that anyway. It sounds really artificial, but in some ways it is selling something….At some point, I believe the community will say no." Nonprofit G additionally expressed concern that resident voices were not included in the process:

> When you have an organization that's saying local decision-making and resident voice is important, then why are we not listening to the residents, we're so busy with all this other stuff that we need to do, what would the residents say that we should be measuring?…That's the very point of [the project], did you ask them?…And yet the foundation isn't doing that themselves.

Nonprofit C was the only respondent who reported truly gaining value from the outcome measures:

> It was mutually beneficial, what the foundation wanted to know was very much what we wanted to know, which basically was what impact were we having…We never felt like the inspector general had come, we always felt like they wanted to know what we wanted to know, and that there could be corrections based on if they found out that something doesn't work too well.

Because this evaluation was of an individual agency rather than a collaborative, this factor likely impacted the evaluator's ability to align evaluation questions with what the agency wished to know.

2. Level of Nonprofit Involvement & Control

Nonprofits commonly reported involvement in the processes of defining goals, developing measures and collecting data, but said they turned the data over to the evaluators to analyze and report on. Most descriptions aligned with Nonprofit E's:

> I can't say it's totally done by [program staff]. We have an outside evaluator who, once we agree gets the data out of them and looks over their shoulders. I can't say it's *entirely* different [from traditional evaluation].

Some nonprofits were drawn less into the process than others. Nonprofit A, for example, recalled only that "I think at some point we were asked what would success look like", although there was involvement from agency staff and "significant people stayed through, particularly on the resident end, from beginning to end." Nonprofit E reported that while some agencies in the collaborative were committed to the process others were not, and for those agencies, "you've got to beat them over the head with the funding and everything else to get them to do it." Nonprofit G reported that if the agency's questions did not match with the evaluator's questions, the evaluator would forge a separate path rather than fostering collaboration:

> It comes across as, if the local site wants to have some input with regard to what it is we want and how we'd like to achieve it, and let's say [the evaluator] feels that it doesn't fit their criteria and/or standards, they do their thing and we do ours.

Nonprofit G also reported that one layer of data collection was "a bit of a stealth evaluation" driven by the foundation:

> Expectations are given at the foundation level with very little awareness or understanding of those of us who are being evaluated…. I think it's being done in a way in which it isn't involving the sites, and so at some point you're seeing where we might feel like we're a bit of a lab rat, where we really don't know what's being done to us.

On the furthest end of the participatory spectrum was Nonrprofit F, who reported a negative experience with "very minimal and often unproductive evaluation involvement….there was no training. There was very little anything." In this situation, the nonprofit's involvement consisted almost solely of developing a list of assumptions about why the project would work in conjunction with the foundation. This evaluation appeared to be largely a more traditional evaluation rather than an empowerment model.

Several reported viewing the evaluators as experts who should be in charge of the process. Nonprofit D, for example, said of the development of measures, "I was in consultation with them, but that was not my field, that was very much theirs." Nonprofit C saw the funder as the expert in the process, and said that they drove the evaluation, "they funded the evaluation, and they had the expertise…so it was just logical that they drive the process."

Challenges

1. Burden on Limited Resources

Nonprofits agreed that the evaluation put a burden on their limited resources, although those agencies that received adequate resources from foundations found the

burden to be less than others. Nonprofit A did not experience a resource challenge because the foundation purchased computers and the evaluator trained program users in statistical software. Similarly, Nonprofit B was able successfully collect and tally data because of an additional staff person that the foundation funded.

Even though Nonprofit D felt that the evaluation did not provide a resource burden because it was all grant funded, it had not been possible for the agencies to reflect upon the information collected for program improvement because "the agencies I think have all they can do just to exist." This viewpoint that the limitation of resources in nonprofits presents a real challenge was prevalent:

> What happened was when we went to the more complicated forms that needed a lot of tallying and everything, we were like there's no way…we don't have the time, we can't give you all the things you want, it's just too much counting….That was like another job. (Nonprofit B)

> [Funders] need to be cognizant of whether they're putting way too much work on a very small staff…I think they need to realize that some organizations don't have the capacity for evaluation. (Nonprofit C)

> Most of these organizations run on the skinny, there's not dollars to do it that they can allocate to it…they're trying to survive, and even though this might help them improve their programs I'm not really sure they're incorporating it given their resources….In the nonprofit world, these guys live day to day, and if you don't give them the resources to do it, they're not going to do it. (Nonprofit E)

> I can't tell you the workload, we get more assignments than we do have time….In this world of human services people are just busy. (Nonprofit G)

Nonprofit E spoke of the inadequacy of the evaluation during the initiative's first year because not enough money was built into the budget for the agencies to do anything, and "they basically said we don't have the resources, we don't have the people. As we put

dollars in, we've gotten it." Nonprofit G reported failure to build adequate evaluation capacity in part because the large pool of available resources had not been applied to evaluation for the agency. Nonprofit F experienced a great resource burden because the foundation did not fund the Ph.D. that the agency had to hire to develop evaluation protocol. This nonprofit stated:

> That was time-consuming and expensive on our end, and took terrific precious energy away from getting the pilot to work….we had to create our own evaluation systems, our own tracking systems, everything, we thought they were going to get a hand in it, we had to do all of it…we had to kind of beg, borrow and steal people to work.

Data collection capability was a resource difficulty for some nonprofits. Nonprofit E spoke of the difficulty of getting all organizations in the initiative on the same page in terms of collecting comparable data because of a range in data collection capability, while Nonprofit C stated that the evaluation showed the agency that "our data collection was not as, probably as stellar as we had wanted it to be."

Staff turnover was another challenge in some cases:

> Having turnover can severely impact any project…we've had some change particularly in some of our data collection people…the data we want doesn't end up being collected the way it was originally…so we've got to go in there and work with them to make sure the data continues to be collected. (Nonprofit E)

Nonprofit G expressed concern about the impact of leadership turnover at this point in the initiative: "I'll transition out, so I have five years of knowledge and information, who's keeping that? It will be gone."

Nonprofit A reported that some evaluators had come and gone:

Maybe one challenge that we had was our two people that were assigned to us to evaluate, that changed about three times…the difficulty is these are personality types, so we got who we got, and maybe some matches were better fits than others.

Fortunately for this agency, in instances of staff turnover "there was some continuity in that two staff people were present, active during the whole process, and they brought other people to speed."

2. Relationships & Understanding Data

Nonprofits expressed some challenges in the relationships they had with evaluators. and foundations. Nonprofit A reported that because evaluators sometimes speak a different language, it was a challenge to understand how the evaluation tools were relevant to organizational goals. Nonprofit F reported having a great deal of difficulty with the evaluators because of the evaluators' criticisms:

When you nitpick and come in with this critical voice, it spins all the staff into a defensive mode, shuts them down, slows up progress, and puts energy into fighting off the evaluator.

This nonprofit reported that staff said the evaluators were "just sort of in the way", and incorporated bias in their reporting: "there was a lot of negotiating this points and trying to weed out the bias from the facts. There were certain comments made that weren't even accurate." This nonprofit stated that "evaluation has a role, but when it's played out this way, it can screw up a project and do serious damage without adding any value at all." Nonprofit G similarly reported some difficulty with bias from evaluators, saying, "there

certainly isn't the amount of objectivity I would expect from someone who's really going what I would call to the evaluation side."

Interestingly, Nonprofit G reported that although it worked in a limited capacity with several evaluators, it did not have a "coach" helping it through the process. This aspect, the nonprofit believed, limited its ability to build adequate capacity for evaluation and analysis, and felt, "why are we not demanding this? Because we should be." Another aspect limiting Nonprofit G's ability to reflect on its data was inadequate sharing of results: "we've got all this stuff generated, it goes into a black hole. It goes away from us, and we don't get anything back…they only share the data they want to share when they want to share it."

Nonprofit D worked with a foundation that became very involved in the process, and as a result:

> Initially there was a little bit of grumbling like, why are they always sticking their nose in things, you know, agencies just give you the money and leave you alone to go do the work, but they were showing up at meetings and making comments…I would say over time as we got to know each other better, that tone really shifted to one of trust and seeing that they were helping us out, not criticizing.

Nonprofit F also had a challenge with the foundation, when the funder promised unrealistically to provide whatever resources were necessary to ensure success, a pledge they were unable to live up to. Yet nonprofits recognize the disadvantage inherent in the power balance between themselves and their foundation funders. As Nonprofit G stated: "it's hard to tell your funder and your employer no."

Outcomes

1. Capacity for Evaluation

Most nonprofits said they did not or would not incorporate what they had learned into future evaluation because resources, primarily staff, were a prohibitive expense. Nonprofit A, for example, reported doing the same amount of minimal demographic tracking both before and after the grant due to "minimal cash", and did not continue using the measurement tools from the evaluation. Nonprofit B, whose funding had not yet ended, expressed a desire to continue using the data collection instrument, but said "how we're going to tally them all is going to be a boggle…I'm certainly not going to tally them all." This nonprofit reported there had been no change in the way the organization evaluates itself. Nonprofit D similarly doubted that agencies involved in the initiative would continue to collect data due to lack of staff to process it.

Two nonprofits reported some change in data collection methods as a result of the evaluation. Nonprofit G stated that programmatic evaluation would continue past the life of the funding due to continued expectations for data, capacity built for data collection and results-based accountability, and co-investment from other agencies. As far as adequately reflecting on the bigger picture of the data, however, this individual felt:

> We lack the expertise, I would say, to take advantage of what we know, what we've learned, and be more thoughtful about our evaluation in general ….We haven't grown the sophistication with regard to evaluation that I would like to see….We still have to grow it, and we don't have really leadership to grow it.

Nonprofit C had already been evaluating itself prior to the grant, yet continued to use one instrument in particular that was developed during the course of the evaluation.

The nonprofit also had changes in its evaluation processes: "now we try much harder…to collect data information as we go along."

Nonprofit E provided an astute description of the dependency of continued data collection upon the capacity of the organization prior to the evaluation:

> Organizations [that] are much more used to having data and looking at themselves and doing quality management and things like that that they are supposed to be doing, I think they are more easily adapted and see the importance of the data. Some of our other collaborators…this is new to them, and difficult for some of them because they don't have the resources or the skills, and without money I don't think they will continue to do it, unless somebody wants them to do it.

2. Organizational Learning

One benefit that was widely reported by nonprofits was organizational learning, both about their program and about the benefits of evaluation. Nonprofit B reported viewing evaluation as more important as a result of the project, and that the program users who were involved in data collection "get to see the little things that are involved in a grant." Nonprofit G said of data collection, "We've created an appetite, and I don't expect that to be going away." Nonprofit C said, "I think it reinforced the importance of evaluation, and it reinforced the importance of accountability, which I think we knew anyway but it reinforced it", and stated that she has learned the kinds of questions to ask in an evaluation and has realized that "evaluation is an entire field." Nonprofit C also reported gaining new confidence from an evaluation that showed the program to be "a resounding success…all that was just very reassuring."

Nonprofit A reported that although the agency has "always had a value for

evaluation, I think that maybe what the initiative did was show the variety of evaluation tools and methods, so this would add to a repertoire of methods, tools." One of these new tools was the skill training that program users received around statistical software. Additionally, the evaluation allowed the organization:

> …to hear first-hand what [the clients] think of what it is that you've done, and what people think you could do differently, and what they say you could do differently is really quite telling in terms of what next steps might happen…I particularly like the continual feedback so you can actually change what you are doing, not just wait until the end of an initiative, you could act on what it is the people are saying.

Nonprofit D reported that agencies' ability to see through numbers that programs and service delivery have improved over time has "been instructive to them…I think they see, through numbers, that things have changed for them." Because the collaborative aims to create policy-level change through the numbers, Nonprofit D reports that "I think secondarily they're seeing that the data collection may help a whole lot more simply beyond themselves."

Even Nonprofit F, although the experience was a very negative one overall, found some useful learning came out of the process.

> I'd say the usefulness of that challenge was that all the objections anybody might have were being categorized, and we were beginning to see if we wanted to go to scale, if we wanted to go into policy worlds with this idea, this is the kind of opposition we'd be up against and we'd have to prove that this approach works in the face of these kinds of assumptions.

3. Programmatic Changes

The reports on the extent to which the evaluation led to programmatic changes were mixed. Nonprofits A, B and F reported that no program changes occurred as a result of data collected. Nonprofit D reported some changes in programming "that's coming largely, I think, through the program manager." Nonprofits C, E and G experienced the most amount of change in their programs as a result of the evaluation. Because the evaluation demonstrated that the program was a great success, Nonprofit C has modeled other agency work on this program, and additionally made some program corrections based on data. Nonprofit E similarly said, "it's made us change our program, made us look at our program, made us do something differently than we would have done", while Nonprofit G stated, "I could give you three or four examples of some very definite change in the way we've done some things" due to "continuous feedback and learning."

Nonprofit E described the benefit of having an evaluation as an ongoing component of the project on effective program development:

> The fact that we do this together in the beginning of things starting is probably the biggest positive…we have a lot more to help us change the project than we would have had if we had done it the other way…I think that the evaluations are a lot more helpful in the process than the ones that would have been done after the fact, and they are helping us shape the program as we go.

At the same time, this nonprofit discussed the challenge of using data in a meaningful way for program change when, even when you see something is wrong, you're not always able to fix it.

4. Obtaining Grant Funding

Several nonprofits reported an increased ability to gain grant funding as a result of the data collected. Nonprofits A and G obtained grants from other foundations with the data collected during the evaluation, in Nonprofit A's case specifically because of information unique to its service area. Nonprofit D reported that the lead agency in the collaborative had received three other grants as a result of the data collected, and stated:

> The reason why we are in pretty good position to potentially get additional grants, it's because we have data. And right now we're also working to try to get funding through the state legislature. And one of the reasons we're beginning to make some headway there is because we have data.

Nonprofit C was awarded with a larger, five-year grant from the foundation that funded the evaluation because of the success shown in the results. Additionally, this nonprofit was able to obtain grants from other sources as well: "we've also been able to use [the evaluation] when talking to other funders…to have the foundation very confident in us has been useful in seeking other funding from other organizations." Nonprofit C also explained that the evaluation enabled the organization to explain to funders that an evaluation of that magnitude was impossible without grant funding, and that smaller evaluations were more reasonable.

Advice to Foundations & Nonprofits

When asked what advice they would give to other foundations and nonprofits, nonprofit staff spoke of the need for provision of adequate resources, clarity in relationships, and promotion of a true collaborative process.

The most commonly stated piece of advice was that both sides ensure there is adequate funding for the evaluation. Nonprofit E, for example, said of nonprofits:

They have to expect that it's going to take work…and it takes money, and I think for any of them to be involved they have to make sure, if it's funded by a foundation or something, that there's dollars built in for them to do it.

Nonprofit E also gave similar advice to foundations:

Be willing to pay for it, you can't expect people to do this and not pay for it…if you don't, you're not going to get the stuff…If you as a foundation are really starting to look at where your money goes and how it's getting used and whether it's effective, then you have to be willing to pay the organization to help you do that…if you want that kind of evaluation you have to make it known upfront, help them get the right people to do it, and be clear on what you want and pay for it.

Nonprofit D spoke of the benefit of having a funder advocate for additional opportunities and resources: "what's made it easier is they're certainly in there pitching as much as we are…they've helped to create some additional opportunities for contacts." Nonprofit E similarly felt that if the funder spends time and energy on the process, the result is a better product.

Clarity and collaboration in relationships was another aspect given as advice to others. Nonprofit C stated of nonprofits, "I think they need to see it as a collaborative process rather than as a person with a big stick looking down on them…so it's not worry about getting a bad evaluation, it's about can we help you improve going forward, too." Funders can help this process, Nonprofit C stated, by letting the organization know that it will seek to help the agency improve poor performance rather than pulling funding. Nonprofit A says, "I'd say more up-front conversations…to be clearer" is a necessary

aspect for foundations to remember. Foundation F spoke of the need for good organization,

an established meeting schedule, and adequate training.

Nonprofit A spoke to the challenge of insuring benefit from empowerment

evaluation within a collaborative initiative by being clear:

> I think we should be real clear in terms of what our goals are, what does success look like to us, getting more information about the evaluation up front so you can then look at, does it get to what success looks like for you, are there differences between for the organization and what it might be for the initiative.

Overall, interviews with nonprofits reveal that the implementation of empowerment

evaluation differs from its theory-based form in that foundations determine what will be

measured, nonprofits do not engage in every aspect of the process, and lack of resources

frequently prevent the continued tracking of data.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Empowerment evaluation as detailed by this study overlaps considerably with other collaborative and participatory approaches in practice, a finding that supports previous research. The methods described by two of the foundations as utilization-focused evaluation and participatory action research are virtually indistinguishable from empowerment evaluation in both practice and outcomes. Not one of the evaluations studied here could be considered pure empowerment evaluation, as in no case did the nonprofit take ownership over every aspect of the process.

While it cannot be concluded from these limited data that an empowerment evaluation closer to pure theory form is impossible, findings indicate that limited resources, skills, and interest on the part of nonprofits are formidable barriers to full evaluation ownership. In a largely undercapitalized sector that struggles to meet ever-increasing needs, such an academic undertaking may appear wasteful when the same funds can provide more tangible benefit to clients. Nonprofit staff members are not typically experts in evaluation, and while they can be trained in skill and technique, they may feel they lack the capacity or the time to become competent evaluators. Finally, while interest in the process is a somewhat less formidable barrier, without commitment and openness to the evaluation the nonprofit will never recognize the importance of taking ownership.

Because the nonprofit agencies did not take ownership over data analysis and reporting, the process failed to create new capacity for continued evaluation. Clearly, if an agency does not learn how to analyze and synthesize its data, or did not previously have these capabilities, it will be unable to conduct a full evaluation after the grant has ended. If a foundation embarks on empowerment evaluation because it wishes to leave a nonprofit with the ability to conduct its own evaluations, the foundation should prepare itself for disappointment. Had nonprofits taken ownership over every piece of the process this may not have been the case, yet this again begs the question of whether full ownership is possible at all.

The failure of this study to find that empowerment evaluation builds capacity is complicated substantially by the difficulty inherent in measuring built capacity. Observable short-term behavior is only one element of this multifaceted and largely intangible phenomenon. Capacity building could also be defined in terms of a change in attitudes or understanding, and in this respect empowerment evaluation succeeds in creating appreciation for data. Although this outcome may not translate directly and immediately into further evaluation, experience with evaluation and recognition of its importance could lead to changes in agency management or program development years down the road.

One difficulty facing the sustainability of evaluation in the nonprofit sector is its inextricable link to funding. As long as nonprofits see evaluation as a funding requirement, they will view it as externally mandated rather than as an internal need. Even if foundations successfully demonstrate the intrinsic value of evaluation, it is still

fundamentally a measure of worth required by a body with the power to deny funding. The alleviation of this problem is no doubt a difficult undertaking, and perhaps an impossible one. Foundations can help, however, by emphasizing the ability of evaluation to improve programs. By engaging nonprofits as partners rather than subjects of oversight, over time the sector may come to accept evaluation as more of a valuable management technique and less of a process to be feared.

If the aim is to benefit the nonprofit, empowerment evaluation may not be a wise expenditure of funds for collaborative initiatives involving many agencies. In these cases the funders largely dictated measurements of initiative success rather allowing nonprofits to determine outcomes relevant to their individual agencies, limiting the benefit to the nonprofits. An empowerment approach in these situations can allow for deeper levels of data collection, real-time changes due to continual feedback, and valuable data for the foundation or lead agency, but it is not a particularly empowering process for individual nonprofits.

Another consideration when employing empowerment evaluation is that the rigor of data may be compromised as compared to more traditional evaluation. Results from this study support assertions by other researchers that program personnel may not be best equipped to provide data with a high level of rigor, evidenced here by the fact that some foundations were engaged in two-tiered evaluations to provide backup data and that evaluators did not feel comfortable turning data analysis over to the nonprofits. In one case the *evaluators* additionally compromised rigor by becoming so closely entwined with the nonprofits that they began acting as agency advocates. While this latter difficulty

could occur in a more traditional evaluation, because an empowerment evaluation coach's aim is to enable the agency to succeed by building trust and rapport, it is not surprising to see a level of affinity that can compromise the evaluation's objectivity.

Although this study demonstrates that empowerment evaluation falls short of its lofty goals, some evaluation is still better than no evaluation. As long as evaluation is not forced upon an agency and does not overburden its resources, an increased awareness of the value of decision-making based on data can only improve nonprofit operations. True, the same funds could be put instead towards greater service provision. But if nonprofits truly wish to attain sustainability, they must be willing to measure their progress and base programmatic decisions on those measurements. Aside from donor support, nonprofits do not have natural mechanisms of self-regulation, and if they fail to take a step back and view their operations objectively through evaluation, they stand to compromise the power of their limited resources. The benefits of evaluation feedback are apparent in the fact that several nonprofits in this study made program changes as a result of data gathered. In a situation where a nonprofit is ready to engage as a partner and the evaluation is adequately funded, a foundation is no doubt benefiting the agency in some capacity by engaging it in empowerment evaluation.

The question for a foundation thus becomes one of costs and benefits. Is such an expensive undertaking worth the effort? It depends upon a foundation's motivations and expectations. If the aim is to build capacity for future evaluation within the nonprofit, foundations should recognize that an agency is unlikely to gain full ownership over the process, and this type of capacity will fail to come to fruition. If, however, the foundation

sees value in strengthening nonprofit belief in the benefits of evaluation, in gaining

greater agency cooperation through participation, and in making real-time adjustments in

programs based on data, it may want to consider a participatory approach such as

empowerment evaluation.

Limitations of this study include potential bias due to personal reporting and a

certain level of inconclusiveness regarding outcomes from respondents who had not yet

completed their evaluations and could only speculate on future behavior. The study also

cannot state with certainty that variation in outcomes was not due to other unexamined

environmental factors. There is a finite ability to generalize findings from this small

number of partnerships to the field at large. A wider sample of foundations and

nonprofits should be included in future research in order to determine whether

partnerships in which a nonprofit assumes full ownership do in fact exist. If any cases of

implementation are discovered that more closely fit with the theory of empowerment

evaluation, it should be determined what factors enabled complete nonprofit ownership

and what level of capacity was built from these evaluations. A final limitation of this

study that should be considered in future research is the difficulty in measuring built

capacity. Although it will no doubt prove a difficult undertaking, more intangible and

long-term aspects of built capacity, such as funding sustainability and ability to respond

quickly to change, should be examined to enable a more comprehensive conclusion

regarding the ability of empowerment evaluation to build nonprofit capacity.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT 1: FOUNDATION STAFF

Thank you so much for sharing your time and experiences with me today. This interview will take approximately 1/2-hour to 45 minutes.

1. Why does your foundation support empowerment evaluation? Did you have problems with outside evaluators? Is your motivation to build nonprofit capacity, or to get an evaluation?

2. Do you continue to use traditional evaluation as well? In what circumstances do you choose empowerment evaluation over traditional evaluation? Are there certain environmental factors that you feel must be present in the nonprofits with which you engage in empowerment evaluation?

3. How have nonprofits generally responded to the process? Has there been any resistance, and if so, how did your foundation deal with this?

4. What resources have been necessary? What did you provide and what did the nonprofit provide? How involved was the foundation in the whole process?

5. Is empowerment evaluation more expensive to fund compared to traditional evaluation?

6. What were the biggest challenges in the process?

7. What have been the benefits for your foundation?

8. What were the main outcomes for the nonprofits? Do you feel they were left with increased capacity to perform future evaluation? Do you feel the process produced a good evaluation?

9. Some critics feel that the value of an evaluation is compromised when an organization is allowed to evaluate itself. What do you think about this? Do you feel the empowerment evaluations you have been involved in were adequately rigorous and objective? How do you compare its results to those gained from more traditional evaluation?

10. Do you feel that the empowerment evaluation was worth the effort? Why or why not? Would you do it again?

11. What have you learned from your involvement with empowerment evaluation? What have been the key elements that have made the experience successful/unsuccessful?

12. Where do you see the future of empowerment evaluation for foundations as going?

13. What advice would you give to another foundation that is interested in engaging in empowerment evaluation with a nonprofit grantee?

14. I would like to contact a few of the nonprofits and evaluation coaches you have worked with to discuss their perspective on the process. Would you be willing to provide me with the names and contact information for a few organizations and evaluators with which you have engaged in empowerment evaluation?

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT 2: EVALUATOR "COACH"

Thank you so much for sharing your time and experiences with me today. This interview will take approximately 1/2-hour to 45 minutes.

1. Was this your first involvement in empowerment evaluation? Do you do more traditional evaluation as well?

2. How do you feel empowerment evaluation compares with other forms of traditional evaluation? Do you feel the results are adequately rigorous and objective in comparison?

3. Are there certain environmental factors that you feel need to be present in a nonprofit from the onset to undertake successful empowerment evaluation? How do you evaluate the nonprofit culture and its level of readiness? What factors cause evaluation results to vary?

4. Did all stakeholders at the nonprofit become involved? How do you ensure that all necessary parties are involved (i.e. clients, community members, staff)? Do you typically involve clients in the process? Or just staff? Did you end up taking more direction over the process than was planned?

5. Have you been confronted with conflict during the process, for example conflicting priorities? How did you deal with this?

6. What are the key elements that have made the process successful/unsuccessful?

7. What are the biggest challenges in the process? Have you faced difficulties caused by inadequate resources?

8. Were there any instances of staff turnover during the evaluation process? How were they dealt with? How do you ensure that future staff turnover will not eliminate the organization's ability to conduct future evaluation?

9. Were the foundation's expectations for the process & outcomes reasonable?

10. What have been the main outcomes of the process? Do you feel the process leaves nonprofits with increased capacity to perform future evaluation? Do you feel the process produced a strong evaluation?

11. What advice would you give to other foundations and nonprofits who are interested in engaging in empowerment evaluation? In particular, what should foundations know?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT 3: NONPROFIT STAFF

Thank you so much for sharing your time and experiences with me today. This interview will take approximately 1/2-hour to 45 minutes.

1. What has been your experience with foundations regarding evaluation in the past? How do you feel this situation was different?

2. What processes for evaluation/self-assessment does your organization have in place unrelated to receipt of grant funding?

3. In this evaluation, were you measuring what your organization was interested in, or what the foundation wanted to know about your programs? Did you feel the foundation or evaluator were telling you what to do, or did you have control over the evaluation?

4. Did you employ client input in the process? Were all relevant stakeholders involved, and did they stay involved?

5. What were the biggest challenges during the process? Were there any situations of staff turnover that compromised the process? How did you deal with challenges?

6. What aspects do you feel made the process work/not work?

7. What resources were necessary from your organization? Did the process put a strain on your resources? If so, how did you deal with this? Do you have resources to continue doing evaluation after grant funding has ended?

8. Was there anything about the way the foundation or coach related to your agency that made the process easier or more difficult?

9. What were the main outcomes of the process? What did you do with the evaluation results? Did you receive continued funding from the foundation? Did you find it easier to gain funding from other foundations? Do you continue to use the evaluation techniques learned? In what ways and for what purposes?

10. Do you feel the process changed the culture of accountability of your organization?

11. How do you view the results of this evaluation as compared to more traditional evaluation? Do you think it was adequately rigorous and objective?

12. What do you feel are the most important elements for a nonprofit to concentrate on if they are to embark in empowerment evaluation? What should they keep in mind? How about a foundation or evaluator coach?

13. What have you learned from your involvement with empowerment evaluation?

14. Do you feel that the empowerment evaluation was worth the effort? Why or why not? Would you do it again?

15. What advice would you give to another nonprofit or foundation that would like to engage in empowerment evaluation?

APPENDIX D
STUDY RECRUITMENT SCRIPT 1:
TO DETERMINE WHOM TO INTERVIEW

Hi, my name is Sarah-Kate Sharkey, and I am a graduate student at the University of Oregon. I am running a research project for my Master's thesis studying how foundations support empowerment evaluation for nonprofit grantees. I'm contacting you because I have identified your foundation/nonprofit through _____ as a participant in empowerment evaluation, particularly through your _____ Initiative. Who would be the best person to speak with about this process?

APPENDIX E

VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT: SPEAKING WITH THE INDIVIDUAL MOST INVOLVED IN EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION

Hello, my name is Sarah-Kate Sharkey, and I am a graduate student in the University of Oregon Public Policy & Management Department. I am running a research project for my Master's thesis studying how foundations support empowerment evaluation in nonprofit grantees. I'm hoping to explore how foundations currently support this practice, how foundations and nonprofits deal with the challenges, and what both parties perceive to be the outcomes. I'm contacting you because I have identified your foundation/nonprofit/consulting firm through _____ (web search engine/foundation name) as an organization that participates in empowerment evaluation. I understand that you been personally involved in the empowerment evaluation process? [Have the individual verify that he/she has been involved in the process.]

Because of your involvement with empowerment evaluation, I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. I know that you are very busy, but this study has the potential to provide benefit to other organizations interested in becoming involved in empowerment evaluation. I cannot, however, guarantee that you will receive any personal benefit. Your participation would involve only one interview lasting approximately 30- to 45-minutes. If you decide to participate, I will schedule this interview with you for a time that is convenient for you. During the interview I will ask you questions about your views on empowerment evaluation, the process you were involved in, how you dealt with challenges, and what you felt were the benefits. The interview will be tape-recorded with your permission. In order to maintain your confidentiality, I will identify your responses only by your job title and the type of organization for which you work (foundation, nonprofit, or consulting firm). You may choose to keep your job title confidential if you wish. I will be identifying your organization only with a pseudonym or number, but will not reveal its name. Once I have transcribed our interview into written form, I will erase the audiotape of our interview, and your responses will be identified only by a number that is linked to your name and organization in a spreadsheet accessible only by myself. This spreadsheet will be destroyed when the report has been completed. Your participation would contribute to the growing body of knowledge on empowerment evaluation.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact myself, Sarah-Kate Sharkey, PPPM Department, 1209 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, 541-345-8813, email at giddings@uoregon.edu, or my academic advisor Renee Irvin at the same address, 541-346-2155, email at rirvin@uoregon.edu. If you have questions regarding

your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Office of Human Subjects Compliance, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, (541) 346-2510. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be provided with a copy of this consent script for your records via email or regular mail, depending on which is more convenient for you. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship or job with _____ (Foundation partner / organization for which you work). If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Would you like to participate?

If yes: Thank you so much. When will be a good time for you to do a 1/2-hour to 45-minute interview? We could do it now or at another date. *Schedule an interview. If now is a good time, finish this script and move directly to the interview instrument.* Will it be all right if I audiotape the interview? *Obtain verbal consent for audiotaping the interview.* May I identify your responses by your job title? *Obtain verbal consent.* Should I send you a copy of this consent script via email or via regular mail?

If no: Thank you so much for your time. Is there another staff member who has been involved in empowerment evaluation who you think might be willing to speak with me? Also, is there a nonprofit with which you worked that you think might be willing to speak with me? *If yes to either question, obtain contact information.*

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