

## THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION AND SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS: LESSONS FROM THE ATLANTIC COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN REGIONAL EVALUATION

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**Abstract:** Empowerment or participatory evaluation has gained significant popularity in the last few years. However, there is considerable variation in the manner in which the terms are used and in the politics that underlie and inform such practices. This article, which reflects upon the authors' collective experience with the Atlantic Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) regional evaluation, argues for empowerment-oriented evaluation strategies informed by emancipatory politics. In particular, the authors examine the implications an emancipatory ethic has for their understanding of the terms *participatory*, *empowerment*, and *social change* within the context of evaluation research.

**Résumé:** L'habilitation et l'évaluation participative sont des concepts qui gagnent en popularité depuis quelques années. Cependant, la façon d'utiliser ces termes et les politiques qui régissent ou orientent ces concepts varient considérablement. Le présent article, qui reflète l'expérience collective des auteurs dans l'évaluation du Programme d'action communautaire pour les enfants (PACE) pour la région de l'Atlantique, présente des arguments en faveur de l'adoption de stratégies d'évaluation axées sur l'habilitation et appuyées par des politiques émancipatrices. Les auteurs examinent en particulier l'influence que des politiques émancipatrices peuvent avoir sur la compréhension des concepts de «l'évaluation participative», de «l'habilitation» et du «changement social» dans le contexte de l'évaluation et de la recherche.

Over the past few years a great deal has been written about empowering or participatory approaches to program evaluation. The lethargy that seemed to envelop the evaluation industry in the 1970s has been replaced by an enthusiastic exploration of the potential of evaluation strategies governed by more democratic and egalitarian principles. In 1998 the American Evaluation Society devoted an entire issue of *New Directions for Evaluation* to the subject, and in 1999 *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* followed suit. Although the roots for this interest can be found in the work of such writers as Stake (1975), Patton (1987), and Guba and Lincoln (1989), the movement has found its most articulate and readily accessible expression in the work of Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman (1996).

Popular terminology such as *empowerment evaluation* and *participatory evaluation* tends to hide significant differences among practitioners, both in how words like *participation* and *empowerment* are defined and in the politics and perspectives brought to the evaluation process by researchers. At one end of the spectrum are those practices that restrict the concepts of participation and empowerment to techniques that foster the involvement of participants in the evaluation process, particularly in terms of data collection. Here the emphasis is still very much on an "objective" exercise rather than a "political" activity. At the other end of the spectrum are vastly different approaches that view empowerment and participation within the context of emancipatory politics and the pursuit of collective social change. Here evaluation is perceived as a key tool for social/political activism.

This article, which represents the reflections of government managers, community workers, and the principal researcher, examines the regional evaluation of the Atlantic Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) in an attempt to move evaluation beyond technique and into the realm of the political. As such, we aspire to locate the project, at least in its intent, at the left end of the spectrum where participation and empowerment are embedded in an emancipatory ethic. The paper begins with a brief introduction to traditional evaluation and empowerment-oriented evaluation research, followed by an elaboration of the context within which the evaluation of CAPC was conducted. We then go on to explore how our collective experiences with CAPC have redefined our understanding of empowerment-oriented intervention and evaluation. In particular, we will examine the implications that an emancipatory ethic has for how

we construct the concepts of “participation,” “empowerment,” and “social change.”

## TRADITIONAL EVALUATION

The emergence of broad-based social intervention in the 1960s produced a flourishing and highly eclectic evaluation enterprise. Mass spending on social programs necessitated public accountability and empirical evidence of effectiveness. Hence, the role of evaluation research was not only to measure outcomes against stated objectives, but also to assess the value of the programs themselves (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In advanced capitalist societies, evaluation research quickly came to play a key role as government decision-makers sought a scientific basis for actions related to social interventions.

From the onset, the dominant forms of program evaluation were conducted from a positivist perspective and based on some variation of experimental designs seeking to establish before-program, after-program, in-absence-of-program types of causal relationships. Researchers adhering to such evaluation approaches refer to controlled experimental designs as their ideal (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In these models rigid instruments, like structured questionnaires and behavioral indices and scales, are popular forms of data collection, and program participants are constructed as the “objects” of inquiry. The main audience or reference group for this type of impact evaluation is a managerial or professional elite, and the role of the evaluator is that of a disinterested technician who generates objective data through the application of scientific principles.

Interpretive approaches to the evaluation of social intervention were also developed, although less commonly used (House, 1980; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Evaluators using an interpretive approach hoped to gain an understanding of program impacts and effects from a variety of perspectives. The emphasis would be how the program is “known” to the various parties involved. This type of evaluation is concerned more with establishing what the impacts and effects of a program are than with measuring the extent of presupposed impacts and effects. Whether or not a program “works” is judged from the perspective of those involved, in particular, those for whom the program is intended: program participants. Interpretive approaches produce descriptive information as opposed to statistical measurements of effectiveness. Observation and in-depth interviews are the most commonly used data collection techniques. Externalization of

procedures and reproducibility are not major concerns. In interpretive evaluation models, the program participant is perceived as a stakeholder or informant and the primary audience is the funder or program manager. Here, the evaluator takes on the role of an information broker who describes the different values and needs of those involved (House, 1980).

## EMPOWERMENT-ORIENTED EVALUATION

Empowerment-oriented approaches to evaluation emerged during the 1980s as a result of significant changes in the philosophical orientations of activist elements within the health, education, and social welfare sectors. Inspired by the emancipatory language of critical adult educators, feminist pedagogical theorists, and social action researchers, program planners and implementers began to challenge well-established behavioristic and individualistic approaches to intervention. In their place emerged new strategies that were designed, at least in intent, to enhance the capacity of the “disempowered” to effect social change on their own behalf. This empowerment-oriented discourse was characterized by a commitment to social justice and fueled by a respect for people’s capacity not only to create knowledge about their own experiences but also to recommend actions for change. In Canada, this shift in interventionary thinking is very evident in the work of the Health Promotion and Programs Branch of Health Canada, which has, since 1986, based its program development strategies on the principles of citizenship, participation, and empowerment (Epp, 1986; World Health Organization, 1986).

In pursuing more democratic and social justice-oriented interests, evaluators soon realized that the intent of these initiatives was beyond the informative capacity of traditional evaluation strategies. Differences in epistemological assumptions and research ethics often reduced the ability of evaluation research to fit comfortably within frameworks where an interventionary practice had emancipatory intentions. In these situations an evaluation could at times stand in direct opposition to an intervention by virtue of its “lack of fit” (Farrar & House, 1986; Fischer, 1985). Those active in empowerment-based intervention programs came to demand evaluation strategies consistent with emancipatory principles and practices. For example, in its 1989 Atlantic regional evaluation of the Nobody’s Perfect Program, Health Canada was probably one of the first government departments to insist on an evaluation approach that was

more respectful of program participants' existing knowledge and role in the evaluation process.

In developing more egalitarian and empowering approaches to evaluation research, evaluators originally looked to the interpretive social sciences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These strategies, which rely heavily on the collection of qualitative data, were later combined with participatory research models being used within international community development and adult education projects. The "typical" empowerment-based approach to evaluation became one whereby those for whom the program is intended are active contributors to all aspects of the research process, from the structuring of research questions to data collection to analysis to validation of conclusions and the drafting of recommendations. The intent of this type of evaluation is to empower participants by increasing their research skills and producing information that will enhance their capacity to strengthen and improve their programs and take collective action on key issues affecting them. Within such evaluation frameworks the evaluator is a co-researcher and facilitator intent on contributing to the empowerment of program participants (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998).

Although these research endeavors obviously constitute a major shift in evaluation principles and practices, it can be argued that they are nonetheless limited in their adherence to an emancipatory ethic. If we create a continuum of evaluation principles from a traditional, status quo oriented, objective activity to an activist, social change oriented, political activity, we can see that most efforts fall somewhere in the middle.

<b>TRADITIONAL</b>	<b>— —&gt;EMANCIPATORY</b>
Participant as object of research	— —>Participant as researcher
Evaluator as methodologist	— —>Evaluator as social activist
Evaluation as measurement of effectiveness	— —>Evaluation as tool for social change
Individual change	— —>Collective and systemic change

Fetterman et al.'s (1996) work, for example, which has given much-needed credibility to empowerment-oriented research, exemplifies this middle ground or mix-and-match approach. Fetterman's particular evaluation strategy puts a lot of emphasis on participants as researchers and evaluation as a tool for action, but the evaluator is still primarily a methodologist and facilitator, and recommendations for change are confined to the project/programs under review. (See Collins, 2000, for an excellent discussion on the need to problematize the construct of participation.) What is missing is the recognition that social change can only be achieved through an interplay of human agency (individual and collective action) and social/political structures. The emphasis to date has been on the former, particularly in terms of program participants. The measure of whether such research models are participatory is limited to questions like: Have participants increased their capacity for action? Are projects user driven? Are participants actively involved in decision-making processes? What we do not explore or evaluate is the extent to which participants in an empowerment-based project or program have been able to or, perhaps more accurately, been positioned to effect social change in broader social/political structures and systems. In other words, although we are interested in assessing the impact of program/structures on the behavior and attitudes of a disadvantaged population, we do not consider the possible impact, in terms of knowledge and experience, this population can have on the distribution of societal resources and institutional arrangements.

This article examines our attempts, within the Atlantic CAPC regional evaluation, to move empowerment-oriented evaluation to the more political end of the spectrum. Like most evaluations of this genre, the project began very much in the middle of the road. However, as the evaluation activities unfolded, we gained valuable insights regarding how an evaluation could be structured to align itself more closely with emancipatory ethics.

## THE COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

The Community Action Program for Children is an intervention program that seeks to improve the health and well-being of young children (from birth to age six) and their families, particularly those families who require additional support because of difficult life circumstances, such as families living on low income, single parents, those without friends or relatives nearby, and geographically isolated families. CAPC projects are community based and focus on

the specific, self-identified needs of local families with children from birth to six years of age. A typical Atlantic CAPC project involves a family resource center within a central community with outreach sites in rural or remote areas. Generally, CAPC projects offer a variety of parent/caregiver, child, and family (parent/caregiver and child) focused programs and activities. In Atlantic Canada, at the time of the evaluation, there were 40 CAPC projects operating from more than 185 sites and offering over 485 specific programs.

CAPC family resource centers tend to adopt a range of empowerment-oriented intervention strategies. Central to this is the application of a user-driven model for project development (where project participants and staff together decide how the project will run, what programs they will access, and how resources will be allocated). This builds a comfortable environment that facilitates participant ownership and provides a variety of learning and sharing experiences for parents and children. By developing spaces where families can spend quality time with peers and staff and representatives from relevant community organizations (partners), CAPC increases parents' opportunities for sharing positive parenting strategies, for developing linkages to the broader community, and for collective support and action.

Adherence to broadly accepted community development principles is also evident within the family resource centers. This community development, bottom-up approach is critical to CAPC's overall success. It helps projects find solutions to persistent problems based on the unique nature of each individual community and the best fit between the needs of children and families within those communities and available community resources. It also facilitates increased interaction between key players, within both the project and the larger community.

### History of the CAPC Evaluation

CAPC is funded by Health Canada, Health Promotion and Programs Branch. As such, the Treasury Board requires periodic formal evaluation. At the time of the regional evaluation, the program was being evaluated at a national level through the use of standardized quantitative tools aimed at collecting comparable data from CAPC projects across Canada. The overall aim of the national evaluation was to measure the progress of all CAPC projects and the impact of CAPC programs on participating families. Because the national evalua-

tion provided a largely quantitative framework, the CAPC evaluation at the regional level adopted a more qualitative approach to add richness and depth to the quantitative information being collected at the national level. In Atlantic Canada, it was agreed that the CAPC community and federal and provincial government representatives in all four provinces would pool resources and expertise and work together to develop an Atlantic regional evaluation. A key condition that contributed to making collective work possible was the fact that there was already a history of federal and provincial government collaboration regarding community-based intervention programs. As well, most funded CAPC programs focused on the development and enhancement of family resource centers where goals and objectives were shared among the community organizations involved.

Because program participant involvement in both project management and program planning was recognized as a central component to success, evaluation activities also needed to be designed in a way that would ensure participant ownership. Evaluation-related activities needed to intersect comfortably with the family-positive mandate of CAPC, where family-, child-, and parent-focused programs were being designed and implemented in close consultation and collaboration with local families. Designing an appropriate framework and format for evaluation that acknowledges the involvement of participants at all levels presented unique opportunities and challenges.

From the onset of evaluation discussions, a clear focus on the need for the regional evaluation to mirror the principles of CAPC in Atlantic Canada was recognized. Therefore, community acceptance, involvement, support, and active participation in the evaluation process needed to be assured. A management team was mandated to build a rigorous evaluation that would identify actions and/or changes needed at the community level, while ensuring a comfortable environment and meaningful role for all involved, especially parents. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) model was identified as the most suitable framework for research activities.

Broad-based consultation and collaboration was a key to this evaluation. It began with the establishment of a management structure that included representatives from CAPC family resource centers as well as both federal and provincial levels of government. Furthermore, the community development principles adopted by local

CAPC projects were mirrored in the evaluation in that evaluation activities were user driven to ensure the needs and interests of participants were incorporated into both the design and implementation of the evaluation. Key to this was the involvement of parents in decision-making. For example, parents, staff, and volunteers helped define the overall research by identifying which questions were most relevant to them, which methods were acceptable and feasible, and what results were more meaningful. Hence, a bottom-up approach to evaluation was developed with an active partnership between community-based organizations, program participants, government officials, and researchers.

The evaluation process was intended to be a positive, shared learning experience wherein program participants could readily exercise and enhance their own experience and expertise, thus building a capacity to participate in the evaluation regardless of their personal or professional background or education. To accomplish this, the evaluation process focused on two activities in addition to the gathering of data: training in evaluation activities to enhance individual skill and understanding of evaluation, and the establishment of appropriate communication mechanisms to keep stakeholders informed of progress to date and to provide them with a mechanism for participation at key points in the evaluation process.

### Empowerment in Practice

As noted earlier, the evaluation process began with a relatively mainstream notion of what participatory action research entailed. That is, we expected CAPC parents and staff to participate in the evaluation and decide what was important and effective about their experiences with CAPC. We also assumed that parents would find the process to be both a positive experience and an empowering one. However, the management team and researchers did not expect a reciprocal empowerment process where their disciplinary discourses and basic assumptions about collaboration and participatory action research would be seriously challenged. As the evaluation progressed this stance, at worst hypocritical and at best naive, provoked a series of “critical moments” that ultimately led to a fuller understanding and practice of participatory action research within the context of empowerment evaluation.

One of the key critical moments in the evaluation occurred when the CAPC community members on the management team challenged

the language and assumptions being used in the report. In writing the first draft, the researchers used the standard language of evaluation and health promotion. Although they avoided terms such as *target population*, the researchers did not hesitate to refer to families as being “at-risk” and parents as having “problems” where intervention by others was justified. We looked at CAPC in terms of how the project “impacted” on parents and how the program was “effective” in terms of what parents learned and how they changed. In so doing, we constructed parents as passive and needy, objects whose behavior could be modified through an increase in knowledge and skill development. The discussions around language served as a much-needed wake-up call to both the management and research teams. Despite a genuine commitment to an empowering process, we had not realized that our immersion in and acceptance of institutional discourses could work in direct opposition to this commitment. Members of the management and research teams who were actively involved in the CAPC community challenged the rest of us to write about parents as active agents who not only used CAPC to build on the strengths they brought to the projects, but also effected positive changes to their individual and shared environments. This more accurately described what communities were witnessing at CAPC. It also prompted examination of traditional assumptions concerning what intervention programming entailed.

A second critical moment occurred when we realized that in our efforts to privilege the voice of CAPC parents, we had failed to construct an analytical framework that could afford that voice political meaning and energy. As a result, the experiences captured in parents’ narratives were divested of their capacity to inform the direction of political and social change. The problem arose in part because the analytical framework envisioned was not itself informed by an emancipatory interest. The framework had been developed along the lines of a traditional objectives achievement model, and hence did not have the capacity to see beyond the immediate project. As such, it could not readily respond to data that depicted participants as the producers of change or capture the emancipatory nature of the narratives collected. Under the original framework, narratives were first analyzed in terms of a set of preliminary themes that were established by the researchers and validated by teams of parents based on key areas of inquiry. The research/parent teams then read through the data, identifying key terms and phrases reflecting these themes. These phrases then formed the basis for large-scale qualitative analysis using the software package *Ethnograph*. The ana-

lytical framework thus focused on simplistic and anticipated results and did not allow for an analysis of emerging themes or a more agency-oriented reading of the narratives. As a result, the initial analysis was accurate in the sense that parents' responses were organized systematically and objectively. However, the analysis was not accurate in terms of understanding the emancipatory nature of participants' experiences within CAPC. A very good example comes from the analysis of the CAPC coordinator data. A simplistic reading of narrative data produced the finding that coordinators' primary concern with CAPC was the burden of administrative work. A more sensitive (and manual) reading of the narratives revealed that almost all of the coordinators had seriously reassessed their own attitudes and positions as a result of their involvement with CAPC. Many of them referred to the lessons they had learned in terms of the strengths of CAPC parents and the redefining of their own role in an empowerment-oriented intervention. This shared experience did not readily emerge as a theme because of the differences in wording used and examples given and in the structure of responses. It also did not emerge because the initial researchers did not approach the data from the perspective of an emancipatory interest. Yes, coordinators did express high levels of dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic paper burden, but not one would have suggested that this was the single most important dimension of their involvement with CAPC. By not incorporating an emancipatory interest into *how* we read the narratives, much of what was really important about the CAPC experience remained unarticulated. Once we applied the same perspective to the parents' narratives, we were able to discern a much more dynamic relationship between parents' involvement with CAPC and collective social change, particularly from the perspective of population health. For example, parents' experiences with CAPC greatly enhanced our understanding of the role and centrality of determinants of health such as social support networks, as well as providing new insights into the institutional arrangements that help or hinder the creation of spaces for people to effect positive change to other determinants of health, such as social environments, healthy child development, and personal health practices and coping skills. It is important to note that in bringing the population health model to the table, the evaluation issue was not whether, and to what extent, CAPC met the objectives of the model, but rather how parents use program models like CAPC to contribute to and effect change in the determinants of health. It is somewhat ironic that the analytical framework originally used and that proved to be so stifling came about because we were committed to the original research questions

crafted by the parent/research teams. In keeping with a participatory approach, we did not want to evaluate CAPC from an “outside” perspective or one not initially validated by parents. Yet, in so doing we denied the CAPC community the opportunity to demonstrate the experiential life that CAPC parents can bring to our understanding of public policies (such as the population health model) and academic discourses.

These two critical moments opened our eyes to the fact that as researchers, practitioners, and government representatives committed to empowerment-oriented interventions and evaluations, we could not continue to carve out an objective place on the sidelines of the process. In doing so, we were not allowing the meaning of empowerment to go beyond the right to participate. We were not recognizing that the impact of CAPC parents could go beyond changes in project and individual parenting behavior and into the realm of social and structural changes. Although 8,000 pages of parents’ narrative spoke eloquently and meaningfully to collective empowerment and agency, the evaluation, in both its original analytical design and language, was unable to capture and channel this energy. Our limited reading of what it means to be participatory and empowering had effectively stripped these terms of their emancipatory intent.

Thus began the struggle to determine where we, as practitioners, government representatives, and academics, did fit in, and how our actions could support rather than undermine the empowering potential of programs such as CAPC. Some of the insights gained came early enough to be reflected in the final report (Health Canada, 1997). Others gradually emerged as the research and management team began to prepare articles and conference papers discussing their experiences with CAPC (Bernard, Raven, Rivard, Samson, VanderPlaat, & Vivian Book, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; VanderPlaat, 1998b, 1999, in press). Three years later, we are still using the CAPC evaluation to work through our collective understanding of what empowerment-oriented intervention and evaluation is all about. In particular, we continue to grapple with the following issues: First, in any empowerment-oriented intervention and evaluation, who are the “participants” and what does *participatory* mean? Second, what do we mean by *empowerment*? Who empowers and who gets empowered? Third, what does *social change* mean within the context of an empowerment-oriented intervention?

### Who Are the “Participants” and What Does *Participatory* Mean?

In the language of social intervention the term *participant* is almost always restricted to those people for whom the program is intended. It is their attitudes and behavior that are the focus of the program and the target for change. When this restrictive definition is applied to CAPC, program participants were defined as primarily mothers who choose to access CAPC and, to a lesser extent, program staff. Other players, such as the community partners and federal and provincial government departments, are usually referred to as “stakeholders” — parties with a vested interest in the program and its outcomes. From this perspective, program participants are at the center of the program, their attitudes and behaviors are the focus of the evaluation, and they are the ones for whom change is expected (and hoped for). In contrast, stakeholders hover around the periphery, acting as key informants to the process and those entrusted with assuring funders of the value of their investments. Our experience with the CAPC evaluation made us recognize that this position is untenable because it fails to recognize the emancipatory imperative that social change involves both human agency (political and social action) and engagement with the social structures that shape and constrain this agency. Non-emancipatory approaches also obscure the reality that community partners, jurisdictional representatives, program managers, practitioners, and evaluators are “systemic agents,” the human dimensions of these social structures. It thus becomes extremely important that we, as systemic agents, work with the populations we profess to serve to identify the disciplinary, professional, and bureaucratic barriers that prevent people from increasing their capacity for action. We need to recognize that by virtue of where we are located and our collective interests, we are all program participants — collectively we constitute a “community of interest,” where change is possible across sectors. For example, both the Atlantic regional evaluation of CAPC and the Ontario evaluation of its CAPC projects (Sylvestre, Ochocka, & Hyndman, 1999) point to the centrality of mutual support as the catalyst for empowerment and social change. However, to limit the idea of mutual support to what parents give each other greatly undermines the emancipatory ethic. A much more powerful model of empowerment emerges if all players, including systemic agents, become part of this supportive process. If, for example, practitioners, researchers, and government representatives allow parents to educate them regarding the constraints imposed by disciplinary discourses and systemic structures, intervention programs become a

two-way process for change. Consequently, program participation takes on a broader meaning that enables “specific intellectuals” (Foucault, 1977, p. 126) to use their privilege to dismantle oppressive discourses and social structures.

Recognizing this more inclusive notion of *participant* also changes our understanding of the term *participatory research*. Participatory research practices have tended to focus on methodologies that ensure that program participants (as traditionally defined) actively participate in the research process. That is, participants are invited to share research responsibilities and decision-making with those trained in this capacity. However, the role of the “researched” is not expanded accordingly. Even in the most empowering evaluation models, in which program participants can share the role of evaluators, they stand alone as “the evaluated.” The success or effectiveness of a project is judged purely by their actions and the changes they undergo. Impacts are not measured with regard to changes in social structures within which program participants act. The challenge, therefore, is to develop approaches to evaluation that are participatory in a much more holistic sense, by virtue of the questions asked, the analytical frameworks used, and the research subjects identified. It is here that traditional evaluations and even emancipatory evaluations tend to miss the boat in terms of what empowerment-based interventions could be extended to include. It is not just the individual actions of participants that need to be evaluated, but also the extent to which an intervention program can create an empowering environment that allows for interplay between the knowledge that comes from everyday experience and the social structures and discourses that institutionalize and address that experience. For example, in looking at CAPC we came to realize late in the process that we needed to shift our analytical framework from looking only at parents’ behavior to looking also at how CAPC, as an interactive or “communicative” space (VanderPlaat, 1998a), affected the community of interest’s capacity to change and be changed. By putting the CAPC model in the center of the evaluative gaze, we could then begin to look at what parents, staff, community partners, and government departments were able to effect, individually and collectively, in terms of the program’s overall goal, that is, the health and well-being of children and families (see also Collins, 2000). This focus necessitates that we look not only at parents’ actions but also the actions of everyone else involved. In other words, the dual role of researcher/researched is extended to the entire community of interest.

## Who Empowers? Who is Empowered?

A more inclusive understanding of *participant* and *participatory* also provides us with an alternative way of thinking about the term *empowered*. Traditionally, project participants are considered to be the people in need of empowerment. Program designers, managers, and evaluators remain outside the circle. In so doing, most of us know better than to claim an ambition “to empower,” and by limiting our participation we absolve ourselves of being accused of playing a manipulative and paternalistic role (VanderPlaat, 1999). We also do not recognize a need to be empowered. The assumption is that by virtue of our privilege, we can exercise our agency freely. Inherent in this is the belief that for those with privilege there are no barriers to overcome, no attitudes to change, no lessons to learn. A number of theorists have pointed to the arrogance underlying this assumption, and urge us to recognize that we are profoundly affected and constrained by the disciplines and institutional settings from which we emerge (Bové, 1986; Gore, 1992; Lather, 1991). Just as a mother’s capacity to parent may be adversely affected by her experiences, so may our ability to engage in meaningful social change be affected by our unwitting acceptance of and compliance with restrictive and oppressive practices within our own institutions. Thus, as government bureaucrats, community-based professionals, and practitioners and evaluators, we help to create disempowering discourses that can inaccurately describe peoples’ lives and upon which we develop ameliorative and often oppressive prescriptive remedies. Therefore, it becomes critical that the evaluative discourses we use to inscribe the activities and effectiveness of programs and that in turn influence public policy and distribution of institutional resources accurately reflect the everyday lived experience of those involved. In other words, we want to ensure that empowerment-oriented interventions and their evaluations construct participants as “agents who speak the discourse rather than the objectified subjects of which it speaks” (Brodkey & Fine, 1991, p. 105). Our capacity to foster change is therefore dependent on our ability to recognize where those changes need to be made, and the only people who can guide us in this are those whose interests we claim to champion. Just as we can help to empower participants to share skills, knowledge, and resources, so too can program participants empower us by articulating and sharing their understanding of their lived experiences. As program participants learn to give voice to their realities, we must learn to listen. In other words, the community of interest — program participants,

staff, government funders, community partners, managers, and evaluators — all have a capacity to empower and be empowered.

### Who and What Changes?

The above discussion has obvious implications for how we perceive, anticipate, and organize social change. Traditional evaluations focus on the behavioral and attitudinal change of program participants. In other words, we are interested in how participation in an intervention changes the individual. What we pay less attention to is how an intervention creates a space that allows a collective, a community of interest, to effect broad changes to the social institutions and structures that surround and affect them. The need to recognize that this is where the real social change capacity of empowerment-oriented interventions lies is also articulated by Sylvestre, Ochocka, and Hyndman (1999) in their discussion of the “spin-off” projects resulting from CAPC projects in Ontario.

The implication is that the real impact of CAPC projects in a community can go unrealized unless proper, sensitive evaluation procedures are used to capture the unpredictable ways in which large-scale projects influence the communities with whom they work and create partnerships. (p. 48)

A central question that needs to be asked of an empowerment-based evaluation is, not “How has involvement with a program changed parents’ attitude and behaviors?” but rather “What changes have parents and others within the community of interest effected through their involvement with the program?” In the CAPC evaluation, once we started thinking of program participants in this way we were able to pull, within the last moments of evaluation activity, what had been seen as anecdotal and “spin-off” information into clearer focus within the framework of a population health model. In particular, we were able to use parents’ narratives to demonstrate how program participants effected positive change in their environment and social support networks as well as in the more individualistic determinants of health. Likewise, once program participants started seeing the purpose of evaluation in this way — “look *what* we have changed” as opposed to “look *how* we have changed” — they stopped seeing evaluation as a judgmental and intrusive activity. Instead, parents began to view evaluation and the evaluation skills they had

learned as a means to further the activities and aspirations of their projects and to create and contribute to social and structural change.

## CONCLUSION

In refining the practice and design of empowerment-based evaluation strategies, it is important to bear in mind that such approaches are most meaningful when the interventions/activities under review are also guided by the same interests, and there is a genuine declared commitment to democratic social change and justice. From our perspective, it is just as inappropriate to use empowerment-oriented evaluation strategies to assess interventions based on the traditional medical model as it is to use mainstream approaches to evaluate empowerment-based social programs. The match between intervention and evaluation approach needs to be custom fitted. Care must be taken to ensure that the language of empowerment evaluation is not misused to make traditional intervention and evaluation practices more palatable within today's participatory approach to programming. Rather, as our experience with CAPC demonstrates, the practice of empowerment evaluation based on emancipatory ethics requires researchers to recognize that social interventions can change not only individuals, but social structures and systems as well. We have found that the success of a social intervention is more appropriately judged by what happens in the overall environment than by what happens to individuals and organizations in the collective. Under a true empowerment model, the participants become agents for change, the evaluators and bureaucrats become their collaborators, and collectively they challenge and change the systems within which we all live.

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