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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of peer debriefing to assist evaluators in their efforts to address project-end dilemmas and presents the implications of findings in this area for program evaluators and qualitative researchers. Peer debriefing has been defined as the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer to explore aspects of the inquiry that otherwise might remain only implicit in the inquirer's mind. In the past, peer debriefing has been used chiefly in the data gathering stage of qualitative research analysis. This paper considers its use in the final stages of a program evaluation, specifically in the evaluation of a curriculum in a large state university. The experiences of the peer debriefer, the principal investigator of the evaluation, and the evaluation project director are presented as first-person accounts. Their reactions indicate that the chief usefulness of peer debriefing seems to be its use in clarifying questions of role, whether it is used in data collection or as a study ends. Issues of gender, power, organizational politics, and the use of expertise are likely to appear as a study is ending, and peer debriefing is worthwhile in deciding how to interpret and use evaluation findings. (Contains 20 references.) (SLD)

USING PEER DEBRIEFING IN THE FINAL STAGE OF EVALUATION WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THREE IMPRESSIONIST TALES

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> ***...debriefing is a useful--if sobering--experience to which to subject oneself; its utility, when properly engaged, is unquestionable.***
> Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 309

Like qualitative researchers, many program evaluators are faced with dilemmas as they end their evaluation projects. They grapple with how their findings should be used, as well as how to exit the study in a caring and graceful manner. What are evaluators' roles at the end of a project and what issues might they struggle with when helping evaluation clients implement their findings? One way to assist both evaluators and researchers with these dilemmas is through the use of peer debriefing, a method which has been used for establishing the credibility of qualitative research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paper discusses the use of peer debriefing to assist evaluators in their efforts to address project-end dilemmas and presents the implications of these findings for program evaluators and qualitative researchers.

Issues That Arise in the Final Stage of Evaluation or Research Projects

Both program evaluators and qualitative researchers have documented the possible problems that may be encountered in the final stages of evaluation or research projects. Patton (1990), for instance, stated that as research draws to a close, the researcher must address questions of how feedback is to be given, to whom, and of what nature.

In another context, Mirvis and Seashore (1979) underscored the difficulties researchers may encounter in organizational research. When dealing with people in their normal organizational setting, complete with previous power and role relations, researchers often become "entangled in a network of multiple roles" as well as the "ambiguous and conflicting expectations derived from them" (Mirvis and Seashore, 1979, p. 766). Often, organizational members derive power from particular perspectives and interpretations which are not amenable to change (Bradshaw-Camball, 1989).

Likewise, program evaluators have encountered obstacles when involving "stakeholders" in the interpretation of evaluation findings, as recommended by advocates of participatory evaluation (e.g. Cousins & Earl, 1995) or fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In attempting to implement fourth generation strategies, for example, O'Neill (1995) found that stakeholder participation was limited by existing organizational power imbalances. As O'Neill stated, organizational power imbalances will not "just go away in the spirit of good-will engendered by an evaluation" (1995, p. 19).

Despite any existing "good-will," it is well to remember that relationships between researchers and organizational members are dynamic, shifting, and often involve conflicts of values, interests, resources, skills, control, and politics. One major source of tension can be different values regarding interest, time frame, and the use of

findings (Chavis, Stucky & Wandersman, 1983). Program evaluators discussing the use of evaluation findings with their clients may face real dilemmas about how to work through these conflicts and tensions.

Suggestions for how these issues should be addressed vary. Yin (1984) states that review by key informants may be helpful as a study ends, but primarily to ensure validity. For example, Brandon (1994) developed a procedure for involving students in a review of the evaluator's recommendations for curriculum improvement. Israel, Schurman, and Hugentobler (1992) suggested that it may be necessary to develop ground rules and guiding norms for committees and to develop processes for addressing values conflicts. Yet few scholars have discussed ways in which to address the tensions and political realities which may arise as an evaluation project or research study ends.

Thus, both program evaluators and qualitative researchers face similar dilemmas in the final stages of their projects. They can easily become entangled in a variety of ethical and methodological dilemmas as they attempt to conclude a evaluation or research project. These dilemmas have major implications for evaluator and researcher roles, which in turn may have significant effects on the use of findings (Israel, Schurman & Hugentobler, 1992).

Cassell (1980) has suggested the use of peer debriefing in facing these dilemmas. She suggested that fieldworkers grappling with complex ethical and interpersonal

issues at the end of a research project might undergo a debriefing which would encourage them to examine the relationships between researcher and participants, as well as ways in which the data might be presented. As a guiding principle, she recommended that participants "be treated at all times as ends in themselves, never merely as means" (Cassell, 1980, p. 35).

Background

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 308) have defined peer debriefing as "the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind." Generally, this process has been recommended to qualitative researchers as a tool for thinking through their research while they are collecting data. Few researchers have employed the debriefing process in the final stages of the research process, even though this appears to be a phase that is just as fraught with interpersonal, theoretical and ethical considerations as previous stages.

Peer debriefing has been described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 308) as a useful technique for establishing the credibility of a study. They asserted that peer debriefing has four general purposes. First, the process helps keep the inquirer "honest" by probing for meaning, bias, and understanding. Second, debriefing provides an opportunity to test working hypotheses that may be emerging in the

inquirer's mind. Third, it provides an opportunity to develop and test next steps in the emerging methodological design. Fourth, it provides evaluators or researchers with an opportunity for catharsis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed several possible pitfalls or dangers in the debriefing process. The investigators may become discouraged by the sense that their insights and judgments are not what they should be. Debriefers may become too influential, especially if they demand adherence to particular methodological procedures. Peer debriefers are cautioned to be careful and empathic, to avoid discouragement, and to be flexible in their approach, avoiding extreme criticism.

Purpose

In the past, peer debriefing has chiefly been used in the data gathering stage of qualitative research studies (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In contrast, this paper explores the use of peer debriefing in the final stage of a program evaluation and as a possible tool for the final stage of qualitative research projects. Specifically, we examine the use of peer debriefing in the final stage of the evaluation of a curriculum in a school of a large state university, when the evaluators were meeting with their clients, the curriculum planners, who were making decisions about curriculum changes based on the evaluation findings. The experiences of the peer debriefer, the principal investigator of the evaluation, and the evaluation project director will be presented in the manner of impressionist tales (Van Maanen, 1988), first-person

accounts in which the writers are pictured as active participants in the evaluation. Van Maanen (1988, p. 102) states that "impressionist tales present the doing of the fieldwork rather than the doer or the done . . . [and are] a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined...[by keeping] both subject and object in constant view." Because our explicit purpose is to examine the use of peer debriefing and its usefulness as a tool for the later stages of program evaluation and qualitative research projects, the use of impressionist tales seems a logical choice.

We present three tales. First, we offer the tale of Joanne, the peer debriefer, then Paul, the evaluation principal investigator, and finally Marlene, the evaluation project director.

Upon the completion of their curriculum evaluation project, Paul and Marlene were asked to meet with the school's task force, whose purpose was to review the curriculum evaluation findings and, based on these findings, to identify, discuss, and recommend changes to a curriculum policy-making committee. The task force committee consisted of three program planners and two students who had volunteered to serve on the task force. Other faculty, who would be affected by the curriculum changes and who would be central to the process of implementing them, participated in one meeting each when the committee addressed their particular area.

When the committee was convened, Paul and Marlene asked Joanne to serve as

peer debriefer to help them sort out their roles in the task force committee meetings. The three decided to meet directly after each task force meeting, when they would debrief the meeting's events and the role conflicts and tensions which might arise for them. A series of four peer debriefing meetings were held.

The peer debriefer in this study was chosen for her expertise in qualitative research and her background in higher education curriculum. Although there is no precise formula for how a debriefing session should be conducted, Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 308-9) asserted that the debriefer must be "in every sense the inquirer's peer, someone who knows a great deal about both the substantive area of the inquiry and the methodological issues." The debriefer must be neither junior to the researchers, lest her input be disregarded, nor senior, lest her inputs be considered mandates. In this case, the debriefer was the evaluators' peer; all three were faculty members in one college (although in different departments) of the university. This provided interest, expertise, and yet enough distance that the debriefer had no stake in the outcome of the evaluation.

In the case we present, the central questions that emerged in the debriefings were about Paul's and Marlene's roles in facilitating the use of the evaluation findings. Curriculum development is not only an academic process, but a highly political one (Conrad, 1990). It can be fraught with pitfalls, including resistance, misinterpretation and misuse (Aiken, Anderson, Dinnerstein, Lensink and

MacCorquodale, 1990). Thus evaluators may find themselves struggling with both the interpretations and the implications of their findings for curriculum improvement.

By demonstrating how peer debriefing was used in the final stage of an evaluation project, we seek to expand present theory on the uses of peer debriefing to (a) help evaluators and researchers understand their participation in the use of their findings and (b) expand theory on the uses of peer debriefing in both program evaluation and qualitative research.

The Peer Debriefer's Tale: Wandering in New Territory

On the first day I was to meet with Paul and Marlene, I struggled my way across campus to the school, one in which I had never set foot. I knew it was on the other side of the campus from the College of Education (my home), but both its building and its curriculum were unfamiliar to me. Once inside the building, feeling hot, sweaty and slightly disoriented from climbing four flights of stairs, I spied a drinking fountain. "Ah hah," I thought, "an oasis in an unfamiliar desert!" After taking a long cool drink, I looked down only to discover that the water was running all over the floor around my feet from a hole in the drain pipe! Sure now, that someone would come soon to eject me from these surroundings, shouting, "Get out, stranger," I scuttled off to find our meeting room.

After finally locating the room in the back of an office full of secretaries, I sat and waited for Paul and Marlene, trying to remind myself of just exactly what I was

supposed to do when they arrived from their task force meeting. What was it peer debriefers did again?

As it turned out, my first struggle was simply to figure out what was going on, in other words, "Who's on first?" The situation and all the players were initially unfamiliar to me, so I needed to understand rather quickly exactly what was happening and who was involved. I felt a lot of pressure to be useful as a peer debriefer and to ask intelligent and relevant questions that would facilitate the thinking of the evaluators. This was difficult because I had never met any of the other task force members besides Paul and Marlene, so all I had to go on were the names of strangers without faces. Initially, I asked a lot of questions about who was on the committee, what their role was, etc. But I felt guilty taking up time asking Paul and Marlene to tell me things they already knew. I was supposed to be helping them, not getting them to help me. Yet, given Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion that the peer debriefer should probe "for meaning, bias and understanding," I began to realize that my struggle to understand what was going on helped my colleagues to clarify what they thought was going on.

Second, I struggled to ask questions that would facilitate Paul and Marlene's reflections on the meetings, on the process of utilizing the evaluation findings to improve the curriculum, and on their role in the meetings. While they were defining their roles as evaluators, I was defining mine as a peer debriefer. This questioning

process also helped them decide how their participation in the meetings would be the most effective and useful.

Third, remembering Lincoln and Guba's cautions, I tried to be useful without being too influential. I did not see it as my role to tell them what to do. Still, if I had insights and useful suggestions, I believed that should bring them up. When Marlene said she was going to behave differently in the next meeting as a result of our debriefing session, I panicked. What if I was wrong and, because of my suggestions, things are worse? It would be my fault! Furthermore, what did I know? I had just arrived on the scene. The last thing I felt was enough expertise to be making suggestions about what she ought to do. Again, upon reflection, I realized that the debriefing process had merely functioned to help Marlene clarify her role and to understand better what was going on in the evaluation meetings. Armed with a clearer understanding of the situation, she made more informed choices about how she might conduct herself in the future.

It became clear to me as we proceeded that deciding how to use evaluation findings occurs in a highly political context fraught with a multitude of questions. Mostly Paul and Marlene were sorting out their roles as evaluators. There is, at present, little role definition for curriculum evaluators who are attempting to translate evaluation findings into curricular changes. In addition, there status and power factors which influenced the proceedings in the task force meetings. Issues such as

the higher degree one held, gender, and number of years of seniority all entered into the roles people played in the committee meetings. The evaluators were also grappling with their roles vis-a-vis each other. For example, Paul was very sensitive to Marlene's need to be heard in the meetings and would step back to let her talk. He felt she had more knowledge of the project than he did because his evaluation role was to oversee the project part-time, while Marlene, as project director, dealt with the curriculum full time. Yet Marlene described Paul's image in the eyes of the study's participants as the "evaluation guru." So Paul ended up spending a lot of time exploring exactly what his role as principal investigator for the study should be. He talked about "stepping out of his boundaries." Yet there really were no boundaries for him that I could see, except self-imposed ones. In this situation a peer debriefer can help someone to explore those "boundaries."

I discovered from my reading that role definition is of particular concern to evaluators (see Pittman & Maxwell, 1992). Pittman and Maxwell claim that role definition may be the "participatory juncture" at which "evaluation research seems most contested" (1992, p. 759). Among the necessary qualifications needed to succeed here are "an improvisational approach to participant observation" and "a comfort with ambiguity" according to Pittman and Maxwell (1992, p. 759). This need for an improvisational approach extends throughout the evaluation process, beginning again as a new stage in the evaluation emerges and continuing when

evaluation findings are being reported and implemented. In addition, the role negotiation extends not only to the evaluators, but to the evaluation clients as well. In this case, although the core group of people attending remained stable, the entire committee seems to have been engaged in role definition with positions changing not only from meeting to meeting, but within each of the meetings.

Much of our time in the debriefing sessions was spent discussing what particular role the evaluators should take in helping to implement the study's findings. It is at this point that role definitions may be most poorly defined and most contested. Given the extensive need for continual definition during the implementation phase of evaluation, it is here that a peer debriefer may be most useful. I was chosen as a peer debriefer for my knowledge of qualitative research, but I think ironically it may have been my knowledge of organizational life, with its accompanying political and power dynamics that may have been the most useful in this situation.

I tried to help the evaluators clarify what was going on not only through our peer debriefing sessions, but through providing some readings on organizational politics, and on power and gender dynamics in organizational settings (see Kanter, 1977; Morgan, 1986). Both evaluators reported that the readings were interesting and helpful and one of them wanted to read more on the topic.

All in all, I loved being a peer debriefer. I learned a lot about curriculum evaluation and implementation, and the experience took me into a whole new world

within the university. Being a scholar of higher education and its organizational dynamics, my role as peer debriefer provided me with an entirely new case study to ponder. In these situations I think everyone learns. I left with renewed respect for the peer debriefing process and convinced that the utility of this process for everyone involved is unquestionable.

The Principal Investigator's Tale: How Much Curriculum Expertise Was Necessary to Participate Effectively?

My primary responsibility at the university is to do both program evaluations and research on evaluation. Some of my research has focused on the levels of program expertise that evaluators should have if they are to participate effectively in developing recommendations for improvement (Brandon, 1994), and in discussions about the use of evaluation findings, an issue of role definition. Little attention has been paid to these topics in the program evaluation literature.

When the task force meetings began, I had to decide about the extent I should participate in the task force meetings. On the one hand, as principal investigator of the evaluation, I expected to participate and knew that the school participants welcomed my involvement. On the other hand, I felt that my limited knowledge about the school's operations constrained my participation. My primary evaluation responsibilities were to negotiate evaluation contracts, conduct long-term planning and evaluation design, provide guidance about evaluation procedures, report

evaluation findings, troubleshoot, and oversee Marlene's activities. These responsibilities did not engender opportunities to gain extensive firsthand knowledge about the politics of the school or its curriculum. My knowledge was largely limited to what I had learned second-hand from Marlene, who had worked closely with the curriculum's planning committee and most of its divisional chairpersons and had observed many curriculum events.

My initial decision was to participate in the task force meetings by contributing only to discussions about evaluation methods and findings. I made suggestions about curriculum changes when I was confident that they were based on a strong empirical foundation, but I was less likely to make suggestions about school management and administration issues.

However, I soon began to fear that my self-constraints might have unfortunate side effects. I expressed my concerns in the peer debriefing sessions. I told Marlene and Joanne that I did not want to be perceived as ineffectual or unwilling to contribute to the task-force discussions. Also, I was concerned that I might be seen as lacking in leadership skills and abilities and lose some influence in other settings (such as in meetings in which I reported evaluation findings) if I seemed passive in the meetings held to decide how to use the evaluation findings.

Because of the structure and format of the peer debriefing, my sessions with Marlene and Joanne helped my address my concerns about my participation in the

task-force meetings in at least four ways. First, our thoughts and feelings were energized because the debriefings took place immediately after the meetings with the school. Also, I was able to review the meetings at times when I was most likely to be fully engaged in the issues. When sorting out the psycho-social aspects of organizational life, it is most constructive and productive to deal with issues when they are fresh.

Second, Marlene and I had equal status and influence in the peer debriefing sessions. Differences that might have affected our interaction during evaluation-project meetings did not emerge during peer debriefing, resulting in increased, equitable discussions. I was free of the psychological constraints of "being the boss" and could reflect on issues of my role than I normally did day to day.

Third, the three of us had formed a notable camaraderie; the meetings therefore provided a safe place to express thoughts and feelings about potentially ego-threatening topics such as my concerns about the side effects of limited participation. In the cocoon of our debriefing sessions, I was able to sort valid evaluation issues from fleeting emotional responses. Furthermore, the luxury of allocating uninterrupted time to a reflective task was sufficiently novel to keep the debriefings attractive.

Fourth, as debriefer, Joanne offered immediate feedback from an alternative perspective, helping me consider whether I placed too many constraints on my

participation in the task force. With her help, I confirmed my opinion that evaluators should participate extensively in meetings to use evaluation findings only if they have the appropriate knowledge. That is, I became comfortable with the limits I placed on my participation. Also, the enhanced level of comfort probably made my participation more appealing to the evaluation clients attending the meetings. Because Marlene had thorough knowledge (at least for an evaluator) of curriculum workings and was attending each of the meetings to review the evaluation findings, I decided to limit my attendance to only those meetings at which my assistance was clearly required.

The Project Director's Tale: Other Voices, Other Views

As noted earlier, the mandate given the task force was to recommend ways to improve the curriculum based on the evaluation findings. This was a tall order for its members: two external evaluators and a group of program planners with personal commitment to different parts of the curriculum. It was immediately clear that the evaluation findings most salient to one planner were not necessarily most salient to another. Moreover, as a group, the planners held divergent views about which parts of the curriculum should be changed and how that change should be accomplished. Given this diversity, at the outset I had little measure of the possibilities and preclusions of the task we were about to undertake.

In fact, I had given almost no thought to the specifics of change, for I had

expected my responsibilities to the curriculum development endeavor to end when Paul and I presented our evaluation findings and recommendations to the policy-making committee. Indeed, I had not expected to be invited to participate in the newly formed task force, the group that would actually hammer out the details of curriculum change. Although I welcomed the challenge, I had several concerns.

First, my role on the task force was not well explicated by the school's policy makers. As an evaluator, I thought I was to collect and interpret information about the curriculum, not make decisions about curriculum change. Would I now be asked to make such decisions, thereby blurring the line between curriculum evaluation and curriculum development?

Second, although I was confident of my knowledge of the school's curriculum, I was less certain of my knowledge of its culture; that is, its people, places, occasions, and dynamics. My professional home was elsewhere, in another of the University's schools. Thus I rarely observed the informal interactions among students, faculty, and staff in this school.

Finally, I expected the transactions of the task force to be highly political, driven as much by personal persuasion as by academic merit. I was unsure of how I should proceed in this milieu for I wanted to participate in the discussions while simultaneously maintaining my identity as politically independent.

Singly and together, these issues would affect the way I negotiated my role as an

external evaluation member of the group. When I walked into the first task force meeting, I felt considerable ambiguity about what I would do and how I would do it.

The interpersonal transactions of the task force were as politically charged as I had anticipated. When Paul and I left the first meeting to join Joanne for our initial peer debriefing session, my attention was still riveted on the events that had just transpired. I felt I needed time alone to sort these events. I was not ready to attend another meeting, not even a peer debriefing session. Ready or not, Joanne was waiting.

Given my reluctance to talk about the events of the meeting before sorting them out for myself, I was somewhat surprised at how quickly they fell into place in the debriefing session. Even as Paul and I answered Joanne's opening questions about "who's on first," the sorting began. As we told her about the players and the plays, the issues that had been only implicit and somewhat muddled in my mind became increasingly explicit and examinable.

For example, in the early task force meetings I experienced some conflict about the extent to which I should participate in shaping the curriculum. I was not a curriculum developer, therefore I did not believe it was my prerogative to directly alter the students' educational experience. I believed that my role on the task force was to illuminate the qualities of the curriculum so that planners would have the information they needed to judge its effectiveness for themselves. They, in turn,

would make decisions based on these judgments. Thus, I did not think it appropriate for me to influence practice directly by suggesting specific curricular change. Yet, when the decision-making process stalled, as it often did, I struggled with the temptation to offer solutions.

I took this struggle to a debriefing session where Joanne, Paul, and I talked about the conflict I felt and examined the implications of several lines of action. Armed with a clearer understanding, I decided to continue to explore problems with the curriculum planners but refrain from offering solutions. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, the peer debriefing process helps to keep one "honest." Indeed, it kept me on the course I had tentatively set for myself before the task force met. I felt more certain of my original decision and, consequently, more comfortable with my position on this issue in subsequent task force meetings.

The concern I felt about my knowledge of the school's culture was alleviated in the first debriefing session. As Paul and I described the task force--its purpose and people--to Joanne, I quickly realized that I had a better understanding of the cultural dynamics than I had thought. Joanne's initial probing had a positive side effect; it helped me integrate the pieces of information I had about the program and its people into a more coherent whole. It also alerted me to conversational nuances as task force members with different academic interests negotiated their respective roles within the group.

Without a doubt, the most challenging issue for me was how I would navigate my way through the political shoals of the task force meetings. While I did not want to make curriculum decisions myself, I did want planners to attend to the evaluation findings and recommendations. Thus, I wanted to make statements that were clear and sensitive to their needs. I believed that their responses would be influenced in part by how effectively I communicated with them.

Perhaps more importantly, I wanted to insure that the planners attend carefully to my message. Whether or not I could capture their attention would, I thought, be affected by their perception of my status and power within the school. This was somewhat troubling, for I was the most junior faculty, and the only woman, on the task force. I also was an outsider-- that is, not a member of the school's faculty.

Joanne, Paul, and I talked at length about communication and sources of influence such as expertise, opportunity, and personal attributes (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980). On the one hand, I felt my evaluation knowledge and the broad spectrum of information I had collected about the curriculum gave me a substantial measure of credibility. Expertise was indeed valued by this faculty. On the other hand, I felt my influence was somewhat compromised by several personal attributes--junior faculty, female, outsider. As we discussed my apparent assets and liabilities, I found the courage to experiment with several different interactional approaches in the task force meetings and the distance to examine their effectiveness. The debriefing sessions

provided a refuge to which I could turn for empathic dialogue about my role in the politics of change played out in the task force meetings.

In summary, with input from Joanne and Paul I came to see the transactions of the task force from a variety of perspectives. This was extremely useful as I moved back and forth between the two venues, exploring emerging issues in the safety of the debriefing sessions, then returning to take my place in the more challenging setting of the task force meetings.

Conclusions and Implications

Difficult questions arise as evaluators and other researchers come to the close of a study: What are the responsibilities of evaluators and researchers to the study and its participants at this point, and exactly what is their role in the interpretation of the findings and the developing of recommendations for change? If evaluators and qualitative researchers have done a proper job of building trusting, close relationships with their participants, how are they to conduct the last phase of their particular project? Do they simply drop everything and exit when the research is done? Do they stay and help find ways to use findings?

In our case, all three participants in the peer debriefing struggled with issues about roles. Joanne was concerned that her suggestions to Paul and Marlene about how they might participate in the curriculum task force meetings might exert too much

influence. Paul was concerned that his lack of extensive curriculum expertise made him unqualified to participate in decisions and that his reluctance to participate might affect his influence in other components of the evaluation. Marlene was concerned that her role in the task force was ill-defined, that she was insufficiently familiar with the culture of the organization, and that she was unsure how to navigate her way through the political shoals of the task force meetings, a problem compounded by her status as the most junior and only woman on the task force.

Together we learned in the peer debriefing about the benefits of attending to issues of role definition as a study ends. Joanne learned that the debriefer can help the evaluators discuss and define their roles in the task force without exerting undue, improper influence. Paul confirmed his belief that it was appropriate and feasible for him to restrain from participating in all curriculum decision making during the task force meetings. Marlene used the peer debriefing sessions to decide that her role was not to make suggestions about solutions to curriculum issues and that she could successfully experiment with various ways of interacting in the meetings which appropriately highlighted her expertise while understanding the impact of her status as a less senior, female outsider. Without the debriefing sessions, these conclusions might have been long in coming.

The chief utility of peer debriefing seems to be its use in clarifying questions of role, whether it is used during data collection or as a study ends. However, as

illustrated in this case, issues of gender, power, organizational politics and the use of expertise are also likely to appear as a study is drawing to a close and researchers work to interpret and help organizations use research or evaluation findings. We conclude that to deal with these issues, it may be wise to select a peer debriefer with expertise in organizational theory. As O'Neill (1995) so wisely noted, organizational power imbalances will not just disappear no matter how much goodwill organizational members may feel. Evaluators and researchers always enter and must work within the constraints of existing organizational politics. Therefore, a peer debriefer who understands power and role dynamics in organizations may be very helpful as evaluators and researchers consider the use of findings.

Whether the evaluator or researcher is deciding how to use the evaluation findings or simply struggling to interpret them to participants, a peer debriefer can aid in clarifying the issues encountered. They may need someone to help keep them "honest" as they struggle with many external forces with political interests in evaluation or research findings. They may also need assistance in thinking through or testing working hypotheses that are emerging from the findings. Finally, they may be in need of opportunities for catharsis as the frustrations and political realities of both communicating and implementing research findings are faced.

This process is one of great benefit to those being debriefed, as they are provided with someone to "think with" them about the process of reporting research findings

and helping participants to understand the potential usefulness of these findings. As a neutral ally, the debriefer provides safe ground for those being debriefed to explore the potential impact of particular efforts within the particular organizational setting. Debriefing sessions provide the space and reflective time needed to report research results with care.

In short, peer debriefing seems to be very useful in the final stages of an evaluation or research project. Here a peer debriefer, particularly one with an understanding of organizational issues, can help researchers face questions of role, use of expertise, and existing power dynamics as she works with organizational members to help them understand and make maximum use of evaluation or research findings.

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