

Ethics and Power in Action-Evaluation

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If conflict resolution perspectives and practices are ever to become normative in international relations, criminal justice, and other arenas where eliminating violence is a concern, the conflict resolution field has a number of tasks ahead. One of these is the development of methods to accurately and consistently define and evaluate the success of conflict resolution efforts. Ideally, these methods would bear out and enhance the values of the work itself without forsaking the need for measurement. Antioch University's Dr. Jay Rothman and his Associates have developed one energetic, rigorous, and organized answer to this dilemma, "Action-Evaluation".

The current Action-Evaluation literature of descriptions and reports reveals a fundamentally sound set of nascent evaluation traditions (essays by Jay Rothman, Deborah Bing, Marc Ross, Susan Allen Nan, Suzanne Ghais and others can be found at <http://www.aepro.org>). Action-Evaluation is an evaluation method that strives to make explicit the goals, reasons and strategies of an intervention. Each stage of the project informs the next so that post-project assessment culminates rather than initiates evaluation. In the same spirit, a critical look into questions of power and ethics in Action-Evaluation processes can yield greater clarity of identity and inform ongoing Action-Evaluation theory development.

Action-Evaluation Described

Rationale

Action-Evaluation traces its conception to the moment five years ago when Dr. Jay Rothman received a phone call from a foundation about to cancel support for a conflict resolution initiative because of doubts about its efficacy. Having seen an op-ed piece that Rothman had written on conflict resolution's contributions to the Oslo accords, the caller asked him to illustrate further that conflict resolution can be "successful." The need for evaluation processes suited to the particular field of conflict resolution had registered. (Rothman, 1997n)

As John Paul Lederach writes, "Peace building activities do not always correspond smoothly with the categories of thinking established for relief, development or other social projects. Building peace is often more about creating space, developing relationship, persevering in spite of overwhelming pessimism, and being flexible enough to respond to emerging opportunities, meager as they may be (1997, p. 131)." The dilemma of traditional evaluation places interveners in the uncomfortable procrustean position of justifying their efforts, after the fact, in terms of criteria shaped at the beginning of the project or by a funding agency's charter. This exercise not only carries the distasteful connotations of the Day of Judgment; it does not contribute on the whole to human knowledge by documenting a learning process. It simply replies to an external set of concerns that may be or may not be relevant. And yet no one contests the need for some gauge of efficacy for conflict resolution programs.

Rothman thus began with the desire for a process that would, first, enable comparison with similar endeavors and,

second, measure projects against internally set ideals. Assessment is essentially comparison; it involves placing a set of indicators relative to another set--what new capabilities and structures exist that were not observable at a previous point in time, for example. Because it is easier to compare numbers to other numbers than to find measures for the quality of processes and capabilities, funders sometimes prefer numeric indicators as standards. Unfortunately, this often means aiming only for those results that can be readily quantified. Action-Evaluation opens the space for broader dreaming by measuring goals shaped by the dynamic nature of the problems tackled rather than the expediency of tangible indicators.

Claims of success in the conflict resolution field have been poorly defined and documented for lack of "empirical data" that can be compared to other data generated by the same "systematic, 'user-friendly,' and highly replicable" methodology (Rothman, 1997n, p. 1). Organized and accessible data would allow practitioners in conflict resolution to learn from others' mistakes and successes. Replication of the evaluation methodology would contribute to the systematization of information and standards characteristic of an academic or professional field. In other words, it would increase the legitimacy of conflict resolution itself. The probable benefits of recognition and "legitimacy" (funder support and broader adoption of nonviolent and efficient conflict resolution strategies) probably outweigh any possible drawbacks (elitism, confining bureaucracy, or co-optation into mainstream norms).

The participatory nature of AE suggests that legitimacy can be gained without compliance to norms of hierarchical organization or gunboat diplomacy. James H. Laue writes of the danger in conflict resolution that "persons who wish to promote the status quo might only see this as a little softer way to get what they want" (1996, p. 17). AE may be vulnerable to abuse of this sort, but the fact that, formally, stakeholders define the baseline serves as a built-in safeguard. With regard to internally generated standards Rothman writes,

The foundation of the methodology continues to be the belief that if stakeholders (especially conveners and participants and when useful funders) can richly articulate their goals, then monitor and refine them self-consciously throughout the life of an initiative... they will have established *measurable and contextually relevant criteria for success*. [emphasis mine] (1997r, p. 1).

Opening the question of who sets standards is revolutionary, very much in keeping with the added wish for a process that would fuel the field's vision of social change. See below, under "Naming intra-process balances," a discussion of the challenges of identifying the "stakeholders" who will set baseline criteria. See also "Assumptions" for a discussion of the basic value AE places on opening questions that are often simply "understood," rather than discussed.

The basic rationale behind constructing a new evaluation methodology, however, had to do with efficiency. Instead of an afterthought that subtracted energy, why not an evaluation process that supplemented the work itself, becoming part of it? AE thus aims to serve as a "seamless connection between evaluation processes and conflict resolution" according to Dr. Rothman. (1997n, p. 1). The hope is not non-disruptive assessment procedures, but rather, better peace building. Rothman sees evaluation as having "formative" as well as "summative" utility; the power to shape goals as well as recount them (1997i, p. 2). He modestly asserts that "with the right kind of evaluation methodology, good practice can be improved." (1997n, p. 2.) In a paper presented last year at the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution, he asked whether interveners hope not only for immediate improvement, but also for long term results like participants who go on to think more critically, be more rigorously self-aware and more able to distinguish "useful approaches to conflict from less constructive ones." (1997n, p. 2). The question implies both that "clients" should not be the only parties thus affected and that interventions need to be more geared toward accomplishing these long-term results.

A corollary is that the habitual activities of practitioners should be directly linked with realization of the project's ultimate vision. A disjuncture in daily chores and project goals can rob practitioners of a sound sense of purpose and, ultimately, energy. Aimless movement may be recreational, but when accomplishing specific outcomes is desired, it debilitates. Kinesthetically, forward action requires the coordination of body and eye. Imagine the effects of faltering focus in horse jumping, pole vaulting, or even speeding around curves. By making explicit or "outing" goals throughout the life of a project, as AE prescribes, participants can tailor actions to them and perform those acts as steps towards their realization. Motivation seems to flow more effortlessly when vision is clear.

"Outing" also means reaching some agreement about desirability of outcomes. Another way AE can improve practice is by promoting clarity regarding the values that engender goals.

If evaluation is truly to partner with good practice, it must be designed to address fundamental questions not only about whether goals have been achieved, but whether the goals themselves are really what ought to be promoted (Rothman, 1997n, p.3).

Asking not only "what?" and "how?" but also, "why?" means the beautifully engineered strides described above are directed toward worthy ends! AE promotes the examination of underlying assumptions, potentially improving not only the salience, but also the quality and utility of goals.

Design

Several "Action Evaluators" associated with Dr. Rothman's effort are currently applying AE to conflict resolution projects around the world. AE practice typically proceeds as follows. At the outset of a project, the Evaluator collects goals from "stakeholders:" funders, those organizing and convening the intervention, and the participants themselves. Stakeholders define what needs to be done by the program, why it is seen as important, and how it is to be realized. The collection shapes the "baseline" of the project, a set of goals on which future transmutations are based. The collaborative nature of the goal setting ensures that expectations are clear for all involved in the intervention, differences are not glossed over, and that the goals are realistic and suitable to the context.

An on-line computer-tracking program preserves the information. Built from the Filemaker Pro platform, it is designed to systematize the process and organize data, within and across different projects, for ongoing monitoring and comparative analysis. Each template indicates the particular project (country and town for example), which group of stakeholders (conveners, participants, etc.) is represented, the stage of the project (baseline, fieldwork, etc.) and which question is addressed (what, why, or how), with a field for each respondent's comments (Bing, 1997). This technology is intended to be a set of consistent categories for research purposes while providing the flexibility necessary for each unique project.

The action-evaluator can then track how the goals of various stakeholders evolve, and use these goals to help design the intervention and evaluate it along the way and at its conclusion. Traditional evaluation is not sensitive to the evolutionary nature of goals. Criteria for success (the baseline) change as projects advance. For example, the Associate for the project in Estonia noted that an initial goal of "institutionalizing democratic structures" became "self-sufficiency for Estonians to resolve future problems without assistance." At a later stage still, "self-sufficiency" was more specifically expressed as "NGOs earning their own money" (Bing, 1998, pp. 4, 13). A baseline rarely alters drastically over the course of a project. Rather, indicators in keeping with the spirit of the baseline emerge as specific ways to measure success.

AE provides a blueprint for tracking goals that, barring miscommunication, is simple enough to execute. Although the demands of peace building can restrict time for discussion and reflection, the Action Evaluators thus far associated with Rothman's research initiative have prioritized use of the on-line tool and the philosophies of AE. Their endorsement speaks well of the methodology, but more research into AE's cost-effectiveness is necessary. AE requires continuity of personnel, extensive communication among stakeholders and time for concentrated thought, all of which can be translated into monetary terms. More difficult is affixing a numeral to comparative quality of outcome, a factor that must be weighed in any calculation of relative value.

Assumptions

AE, properly applied, encourages stakeholders to break goals down to their underlying axiologies, revealing the values and assumptions driving the project. For example, conveners might explain the goal of exploring psychological aspects of history by making explicit the assumption that a traumatic past must be dealt with in order to address the future. Or it might be stated that democratic political structures are superior (Bing, 1998). Making explicit is a core value in AE.

Administrators might shy away from excavating assumptions, fearing a fruitless academic exercise of endless epistemological discussions. Outing assumptions, however, is usually worthwhile. Naming the "obvious" and thereby demonstrating how much common ground already exists can loosen stalemate among stakeholders. As well, invisible fault lines can be identified early, preventing misunderstanding or "working at cross-purposes." The group naming process creates a common language as a by-product; stakeholders find themselves "on the same page." Increased cooperation often results. Susan Allen Nan reports on the project in Georgia and Abkhazia that conveners later regretted cutting corners in defining underlying theories of practice in order to save time. Much more time was spent later in addressing unexpected resistance in the training they were conducting together. Conveners agreed that reaching an understanding prior would have smoothed the way considerably (1997, p.2).

Marc Ross inverts this premium on explicitness onto the tool itself and describes four assumptions undergirding AE. First, Ross notes the emphasis on participation. AE's belief that people will commit more to a vision they have helped create than to one created by others is almost a truism. The result is not only "worthier" goals, as discussed above, but also greater dedication to the project and stronger bonds between co-creators. The development and creation of the AE methodology also manifests what Ross names "the participation hypothesis" (nd, p.4) in that those who apply it are sought out as advisors in the process rather than treated as consumers of a finished product.

Secondly, as has already been shown in the above discussion of baseline evolution, Ross notes AE's underlying proposition that goal setting is an "iterative, incremental process" (nd, p. 5). Peace building occurs in rapidly shifting environments where perfect information is rarely at hand and once-and-for-all decisions are not as appropriate as constant adjustments based on most recent intelligence. AE creates a framework in which it is possible to be responsive to new information and priorities, rather than dependent on decisions from remote powers.

Third, Ross shows that AE assumes goals are socially constructed. For Ross, this simply means that goal making happens in the context of people in relationships with each other. People agree on meaning through the back and forth of dialogue. While this assertion might seem relatively innocuous, it can evoke threatened responses from people who prefer a positivist approach to knowledge. Again we glimpse AE's revolutionary potential; placing power with participants is to validate their collective experience and displace it from controlled and external meaning making. AE moves the center from outside to inside the project. The most important implication for the

evaluator who is nurturing processes is that the social context needs tending as much as the tasks taking place within it. Interpersonal as well as technical skills are called for, as they are in the conflict resolution profession generally.

Fourth, Ross describes how "theory and practice are interrelated, not separate phenomena" (nd, p. 6). In the same way that every action or goal is recognized as having an underlying theory about reality, every cerebrally generated theory is expected to have utility in practical terms and to maintain viability through the unforeseen vagaries of real experience. Argyris and Schon articulated this already ancient principle in 1978 with the book *Theory in Practice: increasing professional effectiveness*, in which they describe the necessity of "integrating thought with action" and "the old ideal of a working relationship between research and practice" (p. 3). The book helps identify the process by which we decide what to do in new situations (theory building) and documents how sensitivity to feedback from others provides valuable information in that process.

In addition to these assumptions, AE literature appears to hold a place in its ethos for project-oriented thinking. The tendency to think in terms of isolated and transient initiatives by experts, intended to serve as direct replies to complex problems, plagues the conflict resolution field and, by extension, AE. Perhaps appropriately, conflict resolution practitioners often reduce situations to bite-size chunks that a three-day or three-year plan can cope with. The result is a beginning-middle-end model applied to ongoing deep-rooted conflicts. The model limits the effectiveness of outside intervention, since restructuring social patterns of interaction requires time and is best accomplished through a relationship of trust with the parties involved.

Another potential drawback is that the view that projects make the world go round can endanger the ideal of empowerment/participation by elevating the project as a bestowed panacea. Better projects create better societies from worse ones. What prevents this work from presenting as a triumph of funder's values over the darkness of projectlessness? To the extent that delivery of projects as consumer items maps reality in dichotomous terms of helpers and needs, it perpetuates assumptions of cultural superiority and inferiority.

Since the whole premise of AE is to build from the input of all stakeholders, identifying arrogance might seem unfair. AE literature promotes a quest for synchronicity and synergy, not an imperialist mission! See "Culture and power" below for a more complete discussion. At the least, let it be acknowledged that the conviction that brief visits to foreign communities for the purpose of resolving conflict through managed episodes will improve the world is indeed a premise, however sound.

A Finnish scholar identified a similar underlying premise she called "American pragmatism", the belief that actions steer the course of events. For different results, change the action. Actions "work" or "don't work." The less frequent question is whether actions jibe with principles (Ghais, 1997). Perhaps the wish to have impact on the environment is universal. Religious ritual has been said to arise from the wish to believe that one's actions can control events. Yet there are probably cultures that judge the value of actions more deontologically, or in terms of duty, than axiologically in terms of value of outcome, and commensurately see outcomes as less dependent on actions.

AE procedures are based on principles (participation, explicitness), but these are justified by their instrumentality. AE may not wish to discard instrumentalism, but it cannot hurt to explicitly recognize it as an assumption, probably springing robustly and directly from the task and achievement-oriented culture of the United States. Practitioners may find (if recognition ushers in skepticism and revision) that tempering a task-oriented model with a greater emphasis on relationship obligations, as discussed below, adds maturity, power and breadth of cultural relevance to AE.

Ethics and Elicitive Process

Praise is due an evaluation tool so in touch with the realities of group dynamics, the natural life and evolution of projects, and the human learning process. With its space for shifting priorities and recognition of the social nature of goal construction, the design seems exquisitely ergonomic. Nevertheless, a perusal of the literature of AE has raised questions for me concerning power and culture. In the spirit of AE, I have consulted with a variety of sources (mainly John Paul Lederach and James H. Laue) as I reflect on what other wisdoms could be added to it. Essentially, I suggest a grounding of AE as a tradition in a context of both duty (relationship obligations) and also fidelity to the value of proportionality in power. The advantage of developing such norms has to do with my own assumption that means become ends. (See Gandhi, "There is no way to peace, peace is the way.") I offer the discussion below as a minor stakeholder in an ongoing, larger conversation.

Desired Ends

A helpful inquiry in any discussion of ethics is the issue of eschatology, having to do with the ultimate destiny of humankind and the world. What does AE assume will be the ultimate result of improved conflict resolution practice? Will there ever come a time when funded projects are redundant? At present, the majority of evaluations center on efforts funded by corporate foundations and governments. How did these bodies come to control such a disproportionate amount of the sum of funder/target population wealth? (And to what extent is that question taboo?) What do our rationalizations of that distribution tell us about the ultimate end of funding interventions? Is intervention in general designed to create fundamental shifts? Or is this, like any other system, designed to perpetuate itself and insure a similar future?

Many funding agencies agree that charity can in some cases serve to prop up the status quo by denying the need for change and focusing on ameliorative medicine. By definition, funders and interveners hold a deep commitment to redressing inequality. If it is important to be explicit and out-loud about anything, though, it is the difficulty of the struggle to be fully honest in and faithful to that commitment.

In fact, many of the projects and Associates that AE has attracted thus far specifically aim to release potential in local populations, rather than to create dependency (See Bing, 1997). I personally have yet to see in the conflict resolution sector, however, much discussion about how the work relates to the ultimate destiny of humankind. AE is no exception. If Conflict Resolution as a field had a baseline of criteria for success, what would it look like? Can AE help to provide across projects not just norms of evaluation for limited projects but also the capacity to frame and ponder eschatological questions?

At this point, I believe these questions have not been framed in AE, probably because they have no precedent or legitimacy in professional life, other than perhaps in the environmental movement and in religious traditions. But is important for a group to clarify its eschatology (the universal as opposed to simply project ends envisioned) prior to forming the project baseline. It is important for the same reasons that outing other assumptions proves helpful; cooperation is enhanced, goals are sifted, interpersonal bonds are strengthened, time is saved, energy is gained from sound sense of purpose, and hope is nurtured from clarity of vision.

I believe it is also important for at least two other reasons. "Development" and "progress" are the unexamined assumptions of the powerful, even overwhelming, "global" culture that produces and consumes technology at breakneck speed, without congruent traditions of evaluation. There seems to be no alternative to adopting what is expedient for the current five-year period, no space for reflection on the impact for decades and generations beyond. Designing that space into the AE process would go against the prevailing value on the present at the

expense of the future and essentially widen the "stakeholder" pool to include the people who inherit our physical and cultural artifacts.

The second reason eschatological discussion is important is that clear project vision is not enough--participants must be able to see how the project relates to larger meanings. A grandmother of conflict resolution, Elise Boulding, facilitates future visioning in workshops as a vital way of building peace, believing that it unlocks hope, motivation and creativity (Fisher, 1995). In my own eschatology, these qualities are desperately needed to avert a future outcome of unprecedented destructiveness. In the internal logic of AE, stakeholders are motivated when their own capacity to dream is precious to the process. By the same token, when the ante goes up, commitment deepens apace. Everyone can see her or his "stake" in ultimate destiny. Linking the micro project to the macro level can unleash tremendous dedication, as well as found self-fulfilling prophecy.

The task of institutionalizing "dream-capacity" may seem overwhelming for a process like AE, not yet an institution in its own right. But this formative, plastic stage is the time for AE to articulate its own ambitions as a methodology. I am intuiting the opportunity to root transformational practices like "long-term visioning" in a vehicle--AE--that has the potential to gain broad acceptance and popularity.

A category that recognizes links between project goals and larger goals is already incipient in AE. The concerns about replicability and with data sharing, for example, imply that projects can have influence beyond the circle of stakeholders by generating learnings applicable in other settings. In answering the "why" question at the baseline stage of the Estonia project, Vamik Volkan made explicit links between local success and a broader vision to make "life in Estonia better" (1998, Bing, p.23). But the need for goals with broader geographical and temporal reference points should be addressed more formally. To encourage a sense of obligation to unborn "stakeholders," I suggest creating and piloting a subcategory of the "why" question having to do with stakeholders' latent eschatologies.

AE and the Ethical Baseline

I would also like to propose that AE have two "baselines," one indicating criteria for success and one indicating ground rules of interaction to which stakeholders (especially evaluators) can hold themselves accountable; both mapped out through a participatory process. Laue and Cormick have proposed root values for the conflict resolution field as a whole: proportional empowerment, justice and freedom (nd, p. 206). These principles demand of all interveners a conscious self-questioning about whether their intervention in specific situations will empower weaker parties and lead to joint determination of outcomes. We find that, given the fallibility of even the wisest of outside 'princes and experts' (Benveniste, 1973), proportional empowerment is the only safeguard we may ultimately trust in the pursuit of justice and freedom (nd, p. 228)

Laue and Cormick's proposal is a good starting point for further evolution of the ethical baseline. Obviously by giving voice to all and recognizing the "stake" participants hold, AE is already in tune with the principles of proportional empowerment and freedom. Stakeholders are free to define their own futures. Rothman writes that both conflict resolution and action science "seek to serve 'emancipatory' interests by offering a critique of what is from the perspective of what might be" (1997i, p. 3). The place in the AE structure where proportional empowerment is most fragile, however, is probably within the role of Evaluator. (The funder-target issue is not structural to AE.)

The evaluator has the power to direct the process and frame the common denominator, shaping the baseline as an editor shapes copy. Rothman recognizes this: "By the way interveners help disputants frame and articulate issues, they influence what is attended to and how it is understood (Schon, 1983)" (Rothman, 1997i, p.4). This is in fact

another reason he values explicitness.

Regardless of how 'elicitive' (see Lederach, 1995) or 'problem-posing' (see Freire, 1970) they seek to be, educators' values, preferences and frames are highly influential. If nothing else, they are influential in the negative. The less trainers are explicit with themselves and those they are training about their own values, preferences and priorities, the less trainees can exercise choice [freedom] over what they learn and how they learn it. (Rothman, 1997i, p.5).

With the sensibility evinced in passages like these, evaluators in the AE tradition are likely to be aware of their power as the synthesizing voice. But perhaps the awareness should be institutionalized. An institution's standards affect the actions of its affiliates. In a study of nonprofessional nursing care in psychiatric settings, Eileen Frances Morrison found that "the organization has an impact on the behaviors of persons within the setting" (1990, p.36). She describes how a "preferred ideology within the setting" of authority and control in one hospital fostered norms of toughness out of keeping with the therapeutic purposes of psychiatric treatment (1990, p.36).

AE's "preferred ideology" of participation and inclusion are likely to foster proportional empowerment, but this outcome can be made more secure by building expectations into the evaluator role. Professional training generally includes familiarization with a code of ethics. Formalizing a kind of Hippocratic Oath for Evaluators would clarify the role and insure more "proportional" processes. A second way AE could better institutionalize awareness of proportionality issues is through adding the "Ethical baseline" to the discourse and the computer tool. AE is not an organization, but has the power to shape "organizational milieu" and individual behavior (Morrison, 1990, p. 37) in the settings where it is applied.

Eschatological awareness of future generations and Laue and Cormick's proposed root values for conflict resolution have helped to nest AE in the ethical context of relationship obligations. Other excellent proposals for the ethical baseline can also be extrapolated from the work of John Paul Lederach, a practitioner and teacher with fifteen years of intermediary experience in several international settings. A description of his, very similar, evaluation theory will cast AE into sharper focus.

Lederach's Guiding Assumptions

In the chapter titled "Strategic and Responsive Evaluation" in his most recent book, Lederach cites Jay Rothman and other authors to illustrate ideas that clearly imprint AE as well. Both Lederach and AE literature agree, for example, that theories of action undergird all practice that criteria of success evolve, that evaluation needs to interpenetrate practice, that it should be context-relevant, and that it should have long-term implications. The abundance of similarities reflects the reality that there is no linear path along which ideas can be traced--conflict resolution colleagues are freely mingling and also discovering similar lessons in their practice.

In his chapter, Lederach briefly describes the approach of Carol Weiss, who discusses "theory-based" evaluation. Weiss believes that "all social programs are based on implicit or explicit theories of change that suggest what will work, what is worth doing, and why" (1997, p. 134). Evaluation should surface and clearly voice these assumptions. This should sound familiar (see discussion of "outing" above). Weiss is concerned to share learnings among colleagues and gain insight into the larger meanings of social work. Policymakers and practitioners should be able to learn about relevant findings from other projects and to discuss explicitly which aspects of others' theories of change are supported by the experience of their own communities or the communities they are serving. AE data is maintained on-line to enable precisely this kind of cross-pollination.

Lederach also cites Hocker and Wilmot, who name three types of goals in conflict intervention. Prospective goals are set at the start, transactive goals manifest themselves during the life of the initiative and retrospective goals reflect the fact that we continue to make sense of an intervention long after it is past. In naming these three types of goals, Hocker and Wilmot are recognizing that "feedback mechanisms must be interspersed throughout the life of an initiative" (Lederach, 1997, p. 135) and that this feedback will reshape ultimate goals. The rolling and consultative process of AE recognizes various stages of goal development as well. As AE tracks the life of goals through time, it seeks the feedback necessary for improving criteria of success.

Lederach, through referencing Hocker and Wilmot, also explicitly distinguishes between the content goals that people fight over and the less visible relational goals that concern that people are to one another; "the influence, the distance or proximity and the level of interdependence that we seek and/or grant one another" (Lederach, 1997, p. 134). This attention to the relational may not, as discussed later under "culture and layers of conflict," be as thoroughly addressed by AE traditions. There is no specific space in the Filemaker Pro template, for example, for distinguishing tangible types of goals from less visible. Both are admissible, but neither is specifically sought.

Lederach fundamentally views participants as resources, not recipients. He uses an "elicitive" training model, which works from the assumption that people are the experts on their own specific conflicts. Trainers have the task of unearthing the expertise and facilitating its application. Lederach's colleague at Eastern Mennonite University, Ron Kraybill, introduces elicitive training by contrasting it with its antithesis;

One common style of training is the *prescriptive* approach.

'I am the expert. I know what you need to know to resolve conflicts. You don't know these things and I'm going to teach you.' This approach assumes that learners are ignorant, that trainers are experts who can prescribe for others what they need, that knowledge can be readily packaged and transferred from one person to others, and that the same solutions can be applied to similar problems anywhere in the world. These assumptions may be valid in math, science, or computers, but they are misleading when the subject is human relationships (1998, p.1).

This frame obviously has implications for the determination of "success," as AE also recognizes. Rothman argues for a baseline "elicited from within the value structure of the people involved" (Lederach, 1997, p. 133). Another point of agreement becomes clear as Lederach quotes Rothman; "evaluation... is not a neutral, external element. It is and should be an intrinsic aspect of peace building (Lederach, 1997, p. 129)."

Recall Rothman's question to those convened at the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution about desired long-term impact on "clients." Lederach too emphasizes long-term results; "We need... to view funding and evaluation less in terms of the realization of particular tasks and more in terms of creating the platform from which it is possible to respond creatively to evolving situations" (Lederach, 1997, p. 131). "Capacity-building" has become an important concept in the conflict resolution field. And both Rothman and Lederach are concerned to make evaluation an intrinsic part of infrastructure-directed work.

The only real difference between Lederach's approach and AE resides with emphasis. For Lederach, "peace building is about *generating adaptive and dynamic processes*... project oriented thinking may well limit rather than facilitate peace building (131)." He refers consistently to "process-structures," highlighting frequently that there is no such thing as a static social moment. That AE nourishes the long-term skills, (consensus-building, for example) which projects typically try to instill has already been demonstrated. The conveners of the Estonia project

emphasized capacity building to a notable degree (Bing, 1997). But AE itself does not quite break from the project frame and end-result thinking, at least to the extent that Lederach does. Again, a space needs to be made for cross-referencing with the long term in some way. I believe the power of greater relevance is to be gained.

Lederach also appears to focus more on the relationship-building nature of conflict resolution, suggesting an affective component, whereas AE makes no deliberate effort to isolate relational goals or distinguish them from content goals. Because peacemaking is so dependent on building relationships of trust, the Action Evaluator loses track of a significant index of progress by not attending to the affective component of a project. "Outing" this component is not always important. However, I feel there should be more discussion of relationship building in AE's theoretical base if its application is to manifest the emotional intelligence Argyris and Schon discuss when they describe sensitivity to cues from others (1978).

If AE shared Lederach's frame more completely, it would likely also build in more explicit categories for process-structure goals. Lederach outlines three "strategic indicators," or criteria of success relating to process-structure. First, have processes for greater participation across vertical and horizontal social divides been generated? Are these processes spawning mechanisms that "have life beyond the immediate need that gave them birth" (1997, p. 143-144)? Second, how well do these mechanisms cope with crisis? Third, how does the initiative relate to long-term goals for cultural change (1997, p. 144-145)? Note that Lederach's perspective supports the nesting of AE in a larger context, temporally and philosophically. How would this look in the computer template? I don't know, but I do believe it is important!

Asking the Power Question

Thus far, I have been referring frequently to the concept of proportional empowerment. Defining and discussing aspects of power as they relate to AE may help clarify what I mean by proportionality and demonstrate why it is so significant. Of course power cannot be, and in some cases should not be, distributed absolutely equally. Most societies accept authority as a valid construct in social structures. Proportionality hinges on whether power is *fairly* held by everyone involved in the evaluation and impacted by the project. In the trinity of proportionality, justice, and freedom that Laue and Cormick suggest, the three interpenetrate. Freedom to choose is essentially power, just as justice includes right distribution of power.

Both Lederach's and Rothman's approaches show a distinct bias for proportionality through elicitive processes. As elicitive approaches are, AE is about acknowledging and guaranteeing effective voice to everyone impacted by an intervention. AE attempts to hand decision-making power to the stakeholders. Yet the intent of AE alone cannot guarantee a balance of power. The discussion below should clarify some ways balance can be insured as AE takes root in the conflict resolution field.

Politics of Context

The first power issue has to do with external conditions and at what stages of conflict AE should be applied. Obviously, there must be a stable base upon which an AE process unfolds. AE cannot occur where the group has conflict at an escalated, antagonistic, or polarized level (some stages Lederach names, see MCS Manual). AE, to be authentic, requires an internally functional group and a reliable status quo externally. This is true of any project: conditions of mass murder, for example, suspend daily routines, although creative interventions are not precluded. But beyond feasibility concerns, it is important for ethical reasons to ask how, in the larger conflict (a small piece of which a given project may be trying to address) power is apportioned.

The answer will affect proportionality within. The conflict resolution process requires that all the stakeholders be ready to negotiate *common* criteria of success. Evaluators should be trained to be sensitive to the ways imbalance in the broader context impacts power balance within a project. For example, the cultural role of women, the ethnic arithmetic of the nation, or any history of subjugation is likely to have influence on the readiness of participants in a project.

Naming the Intra-Process Balances

Recalling Lederach's assertion that participants are resources, not recipients, a part of the ethical baseline should include a special effort at honesty about proportionality in the funder-convenor-evaluator-stakeholder-target web of relationships. AE assumes the presence of willingness in all the stakeholders to listen to and appreciate all the goals and motivations that each may bring to the table in order to negotiate the vision and processes for the project's crystallization. But only if every participant values interdependence will Laue and Cormick's standard of power balancing and common good be met.

Selection of stakeholders impacted by the project occurs at the behest of the administrators of the project, primarily the Action Evaluator. This, however fairly accomplished, is an exercise of power. Action Evaluators try in good faith not to abuse that power. In most of life we have no choice but to rely on good faith. No evaluation or planning process is immune to abuse. Yet it may be possible, by the structure of the process, to encourage a balanced exercise and distribution of power.

While AE grants framing and wording privileges to the evaluator, it neutralizes the effect of these through emphasis on the participation it grants the stakeholders. AE does not promote veneration of the evaluator, and values of interdependence and respect are somewhat built in to the ethos of the tool through recognition of a range of "stakeholders" and the necessity of communication among them. But in the absence of explicit recognition of power realities, AE cannot insure against oppression in the group process. Again, I suggest some standardization of job expectations and codes of conduct for the evaluator role, similar to the "Hippocratic Oath" recommendation above, which would include a discussion of power issues.

Perhaps a handy way evaluators might check themselves and implement proportionality in a project is the inversion of the AE tool for personal reflection. While I know of no such experiment to date, I can imagine adaptations of terms and concepts to serve the ends of self-evaluation. Self-scrutiny is important for all the actors in a project, both to clarify personal goals as they relate to project goals and to check inappropriate attitudes and behaviors, but it is especially important for the evaluator because of her or his pivotal role. The evaluator may not be the most powerful person in a project in every index, but they do control what goes "on the record" to a large degree.

Part of the ethical baseline for Associates in Rothman's research initiative could include the discipline of searching out the personal "what", "why" and "how". As it is, no separate category in the template separates private and project goals. Yet making private motivations public is of potentially vital interest to a project. And the template could be privately useful. Surely implementing changes as a result of feedback is just as important when the "project" is the self?

Culture and Power

Inextricably related to questions of proportionality is the role and understanding of culture in AE. It seems clear enough that culture is viewed as a resource rather than an obstacle. Rothman considers AE to be an 'appropriate technology' for conflict resolution in racial or ethnic conflicts especially, although he does not discuss the dimension of culture in depth. It is less clear whether AE is conscious of its own cultural identity. Several dilemmas could result.

Arising from a context that values expertise, cutting edge technology and forthright communication, to name a few biases, the process might call for, at least, reframing in other contexts. AE assumes that horizontality is an acceptable working condition in every culture or that most stakeholders are ready to voice their concerns. Do participants share AE's epistemology, or do their worldviews value an authority source very different from that of the ethos of AE, such as a holy book or charismatic leader? Does AE equip interveners to recognize and fit in to the democratic processes inherent even in those "traditional" settings that seem at first glance to have nothing in common with a consensus culture?

Cultural difference intersects with the issue of proportionality at many points. For example, the stakeholders may have varying degrees of confidence or ability to communicate in the arena the conveners have determined. Proceeding as if all stakeholders have the same ability to express their own needs and goals in the predominant mode has the inherent dangers of any assumption of equal power; exacerbation of imbalance being the worst.

These players can only be tapped for their important piece in the process if there is awareness of the discrepancy and the skill to modify the process to be appropriate to their styles of functioning. This might include multilingual and linguistic approaches and modalities of story, art, ritual and play. Techniques for interviewing children developed in action science and education might be helpful starting points. Storytelling forms like playback theater (in which audience members provide and then watch their own stories) might do more in one hour to heighten understanding and communication among stakeholders than many hours of table-talk or reading template fields. Using symbol often clarifies vision even for those comfortable with lexical communication. And even symbols much simpler than theatrical representation can be powerful catalysts for new insight (see Fisher, 1997). I am confident that associates of the AE initiative will bring creativity to adapting the tool to various settings.

Culture-specificity can also be identified the formality and linear quality of the design process. Questionnaires assume literacy and fluency. If information is exchanged or collected in meetings, linguists and rhetoricians tell us we can expect the styles of participants raised in cultures where this format is common to predominate and for their input to be more heavily weighted. Stakeholders who are unable for a variety of reasons to attend at all, will, of course, be even more underrepresented.

In cultures where appropriate leadership styles do not use the currency of collaboration and obedience carries a higher value than individual expression, the very premise of AE might be obscured. Sometimes modifying this norm is an underlying goal of conflict resolution and evaluation--especially in projects aimed at change through training and education. Victor Wooddell writes,

This is potentially a very serious problem with AE in particular, and action research in general. We are almost explicitly trying to teach program participants a new way of reflecting about themselves and their needs. This effort is based in very deeply held values concerning the nature that social progress should take. We generally don't question these values openly- when are we justified in trying to 'teach' a [less authoritarian] model of thinking and organization? Is the very idea of 'social progress' universal? Should it be? (personal email)

My own feeling is that the answer is context-specific. In every culture there are archaic arrangements or root

paradigms, no longer useful or even traceable to a pragmatic justification. They may be harmless routine or they may militate directly against the values of proportionality and justice. The risk of imposing out of a sense of cultural superiority is usually greater than the possibility that a cultural habit is corrupt. Without understanding the purpose the custom serves or once served, it is not advisable to try to undermine it.

Even if we think we understand the whys of a cultural trait, customs or ideals may have more than one purpose. Also, our tinkering with nature has proved that apparently useless or pesky processes and organisms often have immense hidden importance and that their removal has system-wide negative impact. This systemic frame can smarten up intervention, either by inhibiting interference or by indicating appropriate goals, course of action and strategy.

Adjusting frames is a challenge in cross-cultural interventions. Polarized, linear, Manichean or compartmentalized thinking is a traditionally Occidental thinking style, while circular, web-like, paradox-tolerant systemic thought is typically ascribed to the Orient or other non-Western sources. While both approaches contain superb strengths, there are particular types of oppression resulting from predominance of the former, as suggested in the preceding paragraph. Is AE more representative of Dichotomous or of Systemic thinking?

First in response to this question, AE is concerned, laudably, to make *explicit*, but, in so doing, terribly *discrete*. This is not to confuse mapping and tracking with compartmentalized thinking. But can we rely exclusively on verbal symbolism as we communicate? Does AE have a measurement for body language, for story, for metaphor, for the nuances of ambiguity in human opinion? Must stakeholders express themselves with verbal exactness that dissects meanings down to a kind of reductionist logic? Much depends on the personal style of the evaluator.

Second, there may be hidden dichotomies, perhaps between "conveners" and "other stakeholders." Given that the evaluator has such framing power to define and paraphrase, might there be a dichotomy between the evaluator and others involved? Or are stakeholders polarized into the camps: beneficent funder and target population? Both need to be put in the context of one interlocking system. For example, conveners can ask: Why are we the interveners rather than the helped?

Third, AE promotes a participatory and evolving definition of criteria for success (the baseline) in conflict resolution initiatives, rather than a point A to point B model. It takes the stakeholders in dialogue and relationship as its chosen context. Therefore, it might appear to derive from systemic thinking. Rothman partially bridged any dichotomy when he modeled AE on "social constructivism," in which "researchers are viewed... as agents in the social system they study by virtue of their engagement in the research itself" (1997i, p. 4).

On the other hand, there is little indication that the system AE takes into account and operates in necessarily extends beyond the world of the project. Does the tool encourage conscious understanding of how the project fits into a larger picture (see "Politics of context," above)? Does it, for example, picture funders in a broader map of relationship along several lines with participants, recognizing inter-impacts other than the line of foundation--NGO--target? A conscious articulation of personal identities, spelling out how each aspect of identity relates to those of other identities engaged in the project would make the picture larger, since each of us have affiliation with groups that cut across a wide range of systems and levels.

The limitations of AE's project-oriented thinking and the benefits of incorporating eschatological questions into the AE design (extending temporally the aspects of the system under consideration) were discussed above. Carol Weiss also emphasized the usefulness of sharing not just helpful trial-and-error successes but also what she called theories of action. Comparing philosophies necessarily enlarges the territory under consideration. AE would

benefit from a space or process within its template to render specific philosophical conclusions out of diverse data.

Culture and Layers of Conflict

A useful way to uncover cultural assumptions is through the lens of dimensions of conflict. Lisa Schirch discusses three dimensions (dissertation, forthcoming), all of which have potential place in AE's theoretical base. From a *material* perspective, conflict is over allocation of external resources. For example, perhaps two or more parties feel entitled to sit in the front passenger seat of a car. Intervention from a material perspective would focus on negotiation over who sits in the seat. AE as a tool has no particular theoretical bias toward a material perspective. But judging from data collected in the Estonia project, the theoretical base of AE *practitioners* recognizes but does not emphasize the material. For example, conveners and participants in the Estonia project identified the material goal "NGOs will earn own money in the future" (Bing, 1997, p. 16) as a capacity rather than a finite amount. The Evaluator mentioned financial difficulties in a target town as just one of several other, more social, problems (Bing, 1997).

A *social* or *relational* theory of conflict attributes conflict to poor social skills, primate competitiveness, or flaws in the organization of social structures. Intervention in the case of the car would be aimed at improving communication skills and fostering cooperative patterns among the parties. The "why" and "how" questions of AE do encourage awareness of the social. In hammering out the processes of an initiative, AE deals inevitably with the relational dimension and cannot help but encounter social structures. But AE leaves open the possibility that an Action Evaluator might tread heavily in, oblivious to the relationship loads a project might be channeling and ill-equipped to nurture social processes.

Nevertheless, the Estonia project developed goals that were mainly social in nature. Participants were reminded, when the process turned quarrelsome, that the communication skills they were developing were more to the point than the concrete outcomes of the project (Bing, 1997). Several conveners saw intervention in terms of adjusting communication patterns and social structures. Margie Howell indicated that "as a certified mediator and as a psychiatric/mental health nurse/ educator, I am convinced that cooperative, democratic processes (as opposed to competitive, adversarial processes) are essential to community building and ethnic integration" (Bing, 1997, p.22).

When a conflict is seen to have primarily symbolic roots, worldviews are clashing. Conflict is about perceiving reality differently and the points at which groups' identity construction processes collide. Intervention in the case of the car would attempt to make plain the meanings each party attached to sitting in the front passenger seat as well as their expectations regarding the rules of entitlement. AE has the potential to explore symbolic dimensions; the unacknowledged assumptions secretly guiding a project (or individual's behavior in a project). But the extent to which the symbolic dimensions of conflict within the AE process and the broader project context are explicitly recognized will depend on the Evaluator's, conveners' and participants' own awareness of them.

So far, awareness has been high. Margie Howell continued "It is also essential to understand and deal with the underlying psychological/ emotional processes accompanying the 'overt' work" (Bing, 1997, p.22). Her co-convenor on the same project, Maurice Apprey, specifically singled out symbolic issues: "To be able to work together they have to resolve their identity issues along the way and in so doing they have to transform perceptions of each other as assassins, traitors, victims, etc." (Bing, 1997, p. 22).

Without awareness of the symbolic dimensions of a conflict, Action Evaluators are more prone to impose their own unexamined meanings onto the situations they enter. AE should find ways to encourage this awareness so

that it is not dependent solely on the level of awareness that stakeholders bring. For example, incorporating into the three AE inquiries (what, why, how) subcategories that designate these three dimensions of conflict might make the goal discernment process of setting the baseline a bit more elegant.

Conclusion

AE Bridges the Evaluation-Practice Gap

The need for an ethical baseline in AE does not imply that AE as it stands is unethical nor detract from its considerable accomplishments. AE has the potential not only to provide an evaluation methodology relevant to the dilemmas of the field, but also to embolden and increase the capacity of conflict resolution practice. Built into AE's structure is the power to create sustainable transformation. Projects that aim to change how things get done in targeted groups may find that evaluation becomes inextricably part and parcel of forward motion. I remember a seasoned peacemaker teaching that to learn the far more important "skills" of trust and cooperation, people need specific "important" joint projects on which to collaborate. In the same way, evaluation becomes almost an excuse to promote better processes that can then generalize to other efforts. Ostensibly for measurement purposes related to external requirements, Action-Evaluation serves as a promoter of durable change.

A brief summary of the advantages of AE follows.

It is appropriate to the field because it jibes with elicitive training and the revolutionary bestowing of standard setting power onto ordinary people, not "experts." Also because it promotes critical thinking and self-awareness capacities in individuals (and, one hopes, by extension, promotes compatible social structures).

It allows cross-project referencing and data sharing.

It creates greater credibility for the conflict resolution field.

It streamlines projects for efficiency.

It sifts goals.

It is responsive to fluctuations on the ground (not dependent on remote decision makers.)

Summary of Recommendations

AE, though firmly rooted in established social sciences, is still evolving as a methodology. I would like to see the following further developed and clarified in Action-Evaluation literature.

* Can "power questions" become a standard part of the methodology? How can discussion of taboo power questions be encouraged throughout implementation? How are "stakeholder" and "convener" defined? Can the AE methodology be applied to the project of the self for the Evaluator and other stakeholders? Could spelling out personal identity be helpful in clarifying motivations and contextualizing underlying assumptions?

*In what frame is culture discussed in this approach? Could subcategories of material, social and symbolic

be added to the what, how and why questions of AE? Can the skill to convert AE's design into other (more symbolic) modalities be taught through AE's theory base?

* What is the Action Evaluator's profile? What are some of the ethical dilemmas of the role? Can interpersonal skill be taught through exercise of the role within limits of an oath of office? Is there any discussion of the skill set needed to "sell" a group on the AE process?

* Could AE include an "ethical baseline" in its parlance, based on proportionality and duty in relationships that would take it beyond short-term vision and project-bound goals?

Closing Remarks

AE warrants full incorporation as an evaluation approach to the conflict intervention field. It promises to aid the systematization of goal definition data in a more comprehensive way, it strives to be inclusive of all the affected actors throughout the intervention process, and it adds valuable blocks to the bridge between theory and practice in the field. AE might provide the field of Conflict Resolution with the unity and clarity of goals characteristic of successful businesses, neighborhood associations, social movements, governments and other group efforts remarkable for their excellence. Building an ethical foreground to the methodology consistent with its latent values through attention to questions of power and of duty in relationships will strengthen its legitimacy and relevance.

OUTLINE

I. Action-Evaluation Described [Factual reporting from the literature in its own terms]

- A. Rationale*
- B. The story of how the need registered*
- C. Dilemmas*
- D. The "seamless connection" ideal*
- E. Make the chores match the dream*
- F. Design*
- G. How things typically proceed*
- H. Examples from Estonia Final Report*
- I. Assumptions*
- J. Ross outs them*
- K. I add to Ross*

II. Ethics and Elicitive Process [Nesting AE in a moral frame]

- A. AE and the ethical baseline*
- B. Desired ends*

- 1 *In the project*
- 2 *Eschatology of the funding community*

C. Lederach's guiding assumptions

- 1 *Similarities — Elicitive training's similar values They share Jay Rothman, Carol Weiss, Hocker and Wilmot*
- 2 *Differences — more emphasis on: process-structures and (affective?) relationship-building*

III. Asking the Power Question

A. Politics of the context

B. Naming intra-process balances

- 1 *Honesty about the funder-target-evaluator-stakeholder-target web*
- 2 *Checks and balances (AE on the personal level as a method of self-reflection)*

C. Culture and power

- 1 *possible dilemmas*
- 2 *systems thinking in a linear model*

D. Culture and layers of conflict

- 1 *Isolating two or three.*
- 2 *Is AE responsive to all? For special consideration when setting baseline.*

IV. Conclusion

A. AE's bridging of evaluation and practice

- 1 *Summary of recommendations*
- 2 *Closing remarks*