What Counts? For Whom?

Cultural Beacons as Grassroots Communication Measures\*

by

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Abstract

Participatory, non-textocentric data collection techniques have proven viable in an array of projects across varied contexts (INSERT CITATIONS), yet the value of such techniques continues to be underestimated. We understand this marginalization as an outcome of “trained incapacities” (Burke, 1954, p. 7). Hence, this research is motivated by our observations that (1) traditional methods for gathering data do not wholly capture program-related transformations; (2) “other” ways of knowing and participatory forms of knowledge-generating yield legitimate data; (3) programmatic efforts and formal reports can be enriched by local wisdoms. Analysis of case studies from four international projects reveals overlooked indicators and grassroots epistemologies that support these assertions and document the utility of *cultural beacons—*culturally-embedded, user-defined measures for understanding communicative meaning(s), components, and sites of change. This article lays a foundation for continued exploration of cultural beacons by describing their attributes,,suggesting modes for establishing validity, posing questions for further research, encouraging reflexivity vis-à-vis research practice, and promoting partnerships between investigators and participants. This has implications for *all* stakeholders, including participants, staff, researchers, and donors.

What Counts? For Whom?

Cultural Beacons as Grassroots Communication Measures

*A team of Western researchers was gathering data on a multi-year programmatic intervention on infant mortality in a developing country. The team members approached local leaders, government health workers, and clinics but could not obtain reliable longitudinal data on infants’ rates of survival or demise. As the research team despairingly discussed their conundrum, a wise elder remarked: “We don’t have what you are looking for, but why not ask somebody to take you to the local cemeteries? In our culture we mark every grave with the birth and death year.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Why were the researchers oblivious to the fact that headstones in a cemetery constituted a longitudinal dataset?

Rhetorician and philosopher Kenneth Burke (1950; 1954/1984; 1969) wrote extensively about the symbolic, narrative, and dramatistic processes through which a society and its constituent actors develop worldviews. Drawing from Veblen (1914, p. 347), Burke (1954/1984) explained how these worldviews lead to *trained incapacities* –the loss of ability to think beyond one’s training (p. 7). Similarly, Erving Goffman (1959) contended that totalitarian contexts like asylums and prisons subject patients and inmates to a process of “disculturation” in which they lose access to the practices, wisdoms, and identities associated with life outside of the institution. While the external control wielded by corporate, academic, and other institutions differs significantly from the asylums and prisons that Goffman referenced, community members’ behaviors’ are strikingly similar. By internalizing a strategic sense of identification with the organization, departmental denizens control themselves and others to maintain order (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Parting from the view that power is exerted discursively, the stories and narratives that people tell and hear about themselves engender a sense of normalcy. In this capacity, discursive practices create and reify categories, institutions, regimes, and expertise so that experts order, understand, discipline, record, and experiment upon others (Foucault, 1964/1972). Burke (1954/1984) argued that “trained incapacities” (p. 7) or “occupational psychoses” (p. 49) lead to partial and fossilized scripts on behaviors and values, articulating not only the proper way to think, act, and judge, but also foreclosing the possibility that any other way exists. In the story of the cemetery, this is likely what had occurred; the researchers’ training had conferred an incapacity, blinding them to the cultural repository of user-generated data.

Trained incapacities can narrow the scope and even limit the validity of program evaluation and assessment in communication and other social science disciplines. For organizations that implement communication and social interventions, monitoring and evaluation have been and remain problematic. Financial pressure from donors to gather and report results according to specific impact metrics (Riddel, 1999), as well as lack of organizational resources and internal capacities to conduct multi-pronged research assessments, challenge organizations’ monitoring and evaluation efforts (Ebrahim, 2003a, 2003b). Not only does this “accountability myopia” shortchange capacity building and organizational learning (Ebrahim, 2005), but social change practitioners have increasingly recognized that these traditional indicators of participant knowledge, attitude, and behavior change do not adequately gauge program effectiveness (Smith, 1999; Airhihenbuwa & Obregon, 2000; Saegert, Benitez, Eizenberg, Hsieh, & Lamb, 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta & Basnyat, 2006; Dutta, 2008; Byrne, 2008). Moreover, participants’ lived realities are often absent from the data corpus.

Skeptics might argue that participants’ voices are included in contemporary research; after all, practitioners commonly administer written surveys, structured interviews, and guided focus groups. While all data collection methods, whether quantitative or qualitative, have strengths and weaknesses, they are inevitably bound by trained incapacities of design and bias. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups require participants to express in words their ideas and feelings. This embattled translation process limits full participation and circumscribes participants’ range and depth of self-expression.

The context of the assessment – often confined to a particular time and place – may leave out individuals who have other commitments and/or who prefer engaging in introspection differently (i.e., in alternative spaces and/or *sans* the tyranny of the clock). The content of the assessment may also limit the size of the sample and the quality of the data because engagement requires certain skills. For example, instruments that require reading and writing deny participation by individuals with low levels of mainstream literacy. Even when assessments are delivered orally, their language – often non-native, peppered with scholarly terms, and/or framed by deductive assumptions – may challenge individuals with different linguistic and/or rhetorical proficiencies. The process of assessment itself– entertaining critical questions and sharing personal truths with “outsiders” – may alienate individuals unaccustomed to such modes of discourse. The nature of a topic, such as culturally sensitive or taboo issues like human trafficking, gender violence, and sexual promiscuity, may cause discomfort around frank discussion.

Finally, varying agendas can affect data collection and impact appreciation. A theory-driven, deductive point of departure (etic) can help investigators to efficiently focus on established indicators and gather relevant data for answering pre-ordained questions; an exploratory, inductive orientation (emic) can help investigators to distribute focus across emergent indicators and gather unexpected data for painting a portrait. Established indicators have yielded data that have contributed to our wealth of knowledge and solutions. Yet, as the case of the cemetery headstones illustrated, overlooked indicators also can furnish legitimate data.

Agendas also influence interpretation, specifically in terms of whose expertise is utilized in sense-making – the investigators’ or the participants’. While learned outsiders can offer valuable perspectives on what’s happening on the ground, community members’ grassroots epistemologies also can explain, contextualize, or even illuminate the heretofore “invisible.” For example, Chambers (2010) described a “win-win in Bangladesh” (Jupp with Ali 2010) in which “…a team led by a consultant used an array of PRA tools, a listening study, and drama to generate value statements from members of the movement. The over 8,000 resulting key statements from groups and committees were ‘peppered with perspectives which had never occurred to staff’…The meetings mattered to the participants and were found valuable by them” (p. 38). Similarly, Minkler (2000) documented community members’ helpful input that “… at first seemed to make little sense from an epidemiological perspective. Yet, as residents described the logic behind their sorting, it soon became clear that their analyses were based on a sophisticated knowledge of the communities in which they lived” (p. 194).

Development and application of etic, mechanical instruments tend to reflect Western understandings of what constitutes data and how to collect it. Many Western scholars consider the “objective,” deliberate process of empirical observation, quantitative analysis, and rational reflection the sole way to generate credible knowledge (Lather, 1991; Conquergood, 2002). Further, many implicitly believe that knowledge’s value should be assessed according to its codification status. As such, information gathered outside the scope of formal research and/or uncodified in print is usually repressed, disqualified, and/or dismissed. This perspective in which unlettered knowledge is considered illegitimate has been described as “textocentric” (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). Counting and publishing can betray and exacerbate differentials in power. Echoing a Foucauldian concern, Wilkins (2008) declared, “A dominant group, controlling the production of knowledge, shapes the construction and distribution of numbers, in order to convey authority and legitimize certain perspectives” (p. 17).

Challenging Trained Incapacities with Participatory, Non-Textocentric Methodologies

Albert Einstein opined: “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Lamenting the overzealous use of strait-jacketed, rational approaches to problem-solving, Einstein believed in the power of the human imagination to break conventional molds and expand the solution space. In a similar, paradigm-challenging vein, Einstein was fond of telling students obsessed with mathematical formulations, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” Einstein’s way of grappling with trained incapacities then was to identify them, hinting at other ways of knowing and doing.

Other researchers and program evaluators have countered trained incapacities by introducing methodologies that attempt to elicit untrained ways of knowing. These methodologies tend to be participatory and non-textocentric—that is, the indicator of change is not captured by (and perhaps cannot by wholly captured by) textual methods. Performances (artistic, musical, oral, and visual) constitute one such method, and have attracted considerable attention in recent decades (Boal, 1979; Fals, Borda & Rahman, 1991; Singhal & Devi, 2003; Parks, Felder, Hunt & Byrne, 2005; Davies & Dart, 2005; Carr, 2001; Singhal, Harter, Chitnis, & Sharma, 2007). Participatory visualization techniques (e.g., participatory photography and sketching) accompanied by oral narratives and storytelling also have emerged in recent years as novel, audience-centered, and low-cost qualitative methodologies to assess participants’ perceptions and interpretations of a social change intervention (Singhal & Devi, 2003; Singhal, & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). According to Chambers (2010), participatory methodologies (PMs) “… are well suited to understanding and expressing the local, complex, diverse, dynamic, uncontrollable and unpredictable (lcdduu) realities experienced by many poor people” (p. 3). Importantly, PMs “…also have a powerful capacity to generate knowledge of realities, often otherwise inaccessible, for outsiders. This is well documented” (Chambers, 2010, p. 37; for a chronological list of prominent PMs, see Appendix A).

Participatory visualization was Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s tool of choice for his 1973 literacy project in a *barrio* of Lima, Perú. While he queried his economically disadvantaged participants in Spanish, he requested that they answer with pictures. In response to “*?Qué es la explotación?*/What is exploitation?", some people took photos of a landlord, a grocer, or a policeman (Boal, 1979, p. 123). One child took a picture of a nail on a wall. This photo seemed nonsensical to adults but other neighborhood shoe-shine boys strongly supported his representation. In ensuing discussions, the boys explained that their clients lived mainly in the city, not in the boys’ local *barrio*. Their shoe-shine boxes were too heavy to carry back and forth across town; so, the boys were compelled to rent from shop owners (usually at an exorbitant rate) a nail on a wall from which they could hang their boxes for overnight storage. To them, this picture of the nail perfectly represented "exploitation."

Participatory sketching was employed by one of the present authors to assess Minga Perú’s entertainment-education intervention in the Peruvian Amazon. Participants were invited to consider: “How has my life changed as a consequence of participating in the entertainment-education and community-based activities of Minga Perú?” Two pictures – a sketch of how their life was some five years ago (i.e., *antes*, in the past), and a sketch of how their life is today (i.e., *ahora,* now) – was meant to answer that question. Twenty-one-year-old Emira’s *antes* and *ahora* sketches, complemented by her narrative, were highly revealing (See Figure 1):

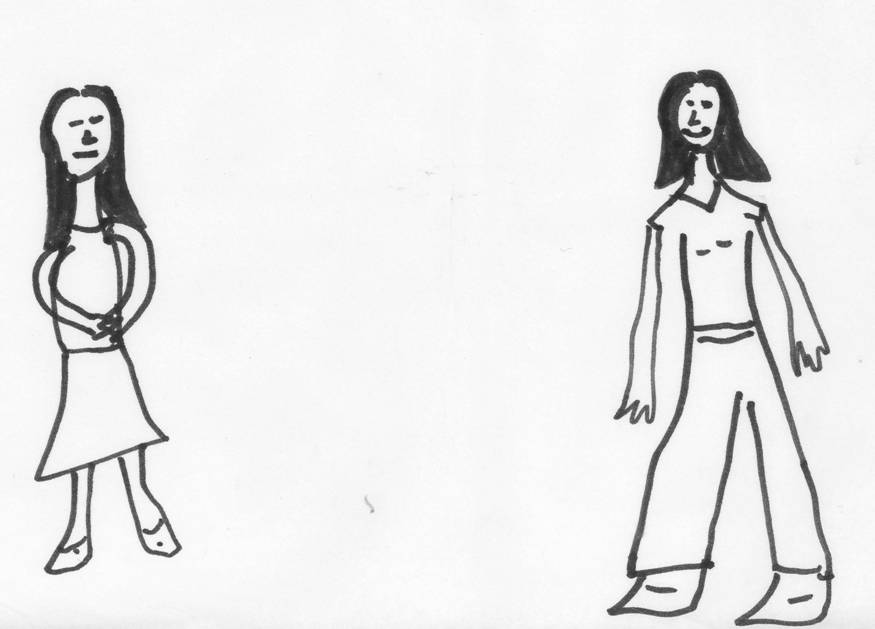


Figure 1. ***Antes* *Ahora***

Emira noted: “Previously, I was ashamed…sad. Now….I don’t feel ashamed any more.” [Pointing to the way she drew her breasts in the sketch she continued], “Now I am proud of my body -- my femininity. Before, I didn’t want to cut my hair but now….I cut it. Now I also feel capable to wear tight trousers….previously, I wore loose clothes. Also, I wear high heels.” Participatory sketching encourages participants to take the time and harness the tools that will allow them to tell their authentic, comprehensive stories. Production and oral explanation of these original images often motivate richer, deeper, more emotional sharing. Emira’s sketch and its accompanying narrative illustrate this methodology’s capacity to deliver highly textured, poignant, and nuanced insights on the meaningful, potentially long-term effects of an intervention.

Like participatory sketching, the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique solicits participants’ change-narratives (Davies & Dart, 2005). MSC has intervention staff ask participants to describe their experiences of program-produced change, articulating “the significance of the story from their point of view” (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 26). The MSC technique continues with staff members systematically selecting, verifying, and forwarding stories up the organization’s hierarchy for consideration as general indicators of change. Although a story may not continue its journey up through the organization, it still can journey out through the community to publicize local triumphs, foster a shared vision, and inspire neighbors. For example, DUTTA SUGGESTS AN EXAMPLE HERE. Like most participant evaluation and monitoring endeavors, MSC crucially collects data on unexpected outcomes, appreciates diverse participation, and facilitates organizational learning.

Such data collection usually emerges from a context of participatory action research (PAR). “...PAR, has increasingly been used as an overarching name for orientations to research practice that place the researcher in the position of co-learner and put a heavy accent on community participation and the translation of research findings into action for education and change” (Minkler, 2000, p. 192). Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller (2005) found that their “research with” rather than “research on” approach elicited unique insights that top-down methods would not have captured. Importantly, PAR is “an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives by nurturing community strengths and problem-solving abilities” (Minkler, 2000, p. 193). Ebrahim (2003b) cited two projects from Howard-Grabman (2000) that were actually able to leverage community participation—despite residents’ limited control over the projects themselves—“through tools such as participatory appraisal and asset mapping, which can, at least in part, reverse or moderate conventional relations of authority and power” (p. 819). PAR also can “sensitize both the community and the providers about the feelings and constraints of the other side. This ensures that the dialogue does not become adversarial, and that a relationship of mutual understanding is built between client and provider” (Singh & Shah, n.d., p. 6).

Participatory, non-textocentric methods allow insights into the world of respondents, revealing clues as to “what counts” in actual cultural contexts; they also can protect validity by inductively informing how we measure, what we measure, and with whose metrics we measure. Accordingly, many scholars and practitioners, like Freire and others mentioned above, have called for multiple and alternative ways of defining and generating knowledge (See also: Smith, 1999; Shiva, 2005; Dutta & Pal, 2010). In terms of knowledge product, they advocate recognition of “meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 146). In terms of knowledge process, they encourage techniques that attempt to involve all stakeholders in a process (Grabill, 2001; Grabill, 2007; Simmons, 2007), with the range of stakeholder participation depending on such variables as context, scope, and goals of a project.

Current Investigation

Driven by the desires to research credibly and behave ethically, as well as honor donors’ priorities and protect other stakeholders’ interests, investigators grapple with rationalizing philosophies, methods, and agendas. How do they, on the one hand, avoid (re)producing problematic patterns of exchange in which they privileged few gather resources – in this case, data – from masses positioned as ignorant and passive, while, on the other hand, avoid aimlessly and atheoretically observing when their unique experiential and educational background could inform design and analysis and, by extension, meaningfully enrich quality of life?

In the present article, we apply to program evaluation and assessment’s conceptualization and conduct Burke’s, Goffman’s, Einstein’s, and others’ challenge to question traditional ways of knowing and doing. We propose concentrating on data that are: (1) culturally-embedded – that is, so specific to a culture that they often seems “invisible” to outsiders; and (2) user-defined – that is, the participants recognize the value/ascribe significance to these data themselves. We do so by interrogating overlooked indicators and grassroots epistemologies, two intertwined ways of knowing that collectively can be referred to as “cultural beacons.” This term acknowledges their capacity to shed light on the unique features of people and places. Much like a beam in a lighthouse, cultural beacons also can guide outsiders, helping them to negotiate unexpected features of a landscape and establish moorings upon a solid base.

Our research asks:

RQ1: How does collection and analysis of culturally-embedded, user-defined data satisfy the demand to “study the rhetoric of the Other in its own terms rather than in ours” (Swearingen, 2004, p. 13) while contributing to a growing body of organizational knowledge (Ebrahim) for the benefit not just of donors but of other stakeholders?

RQ2. Which types of contexts and/or practices most commonly cultivate the emergence of culturally-embedded, user-defined data?

RQ3. How, if at all, can one establish the validity (both internal and external) of such culturally-embedded, user-defined data?

Method

To answer these questions, we present case studies from four field research projects: one in Northern Uganda during an assessment of a child protection project implemented by Save the Children;[[2]](#endnote-4) another in rural India during an assessment of the impact of an entertainment-education radio soap opera;[[3]](#endnote-5) a third in the Peruvian Amazon during an assessment of an NGO’s on-air and on-the-ground capacity-building initiative[[4]](#endnote-6); and a fourth in Dakar, Senegal, during implementation of a youth development program.

Some examples are derived from structured evaluation activities, and others emerged peripherally to formal data collection processes but we recorded them in our field journals and photographically. We analyze these examples according to the certain attributes of cultural beacons and illustrate their value as locally relevant, user-defined metrics. NEED MORE ELABORATION ABOUT METHOD, IN MY OPINION.

**NEED METANARRATIVE HERE INTRODUCING THE EXAMPLES AND CONSIDERING DUTTA’S POINTS IN THIS SECTION**

***Trees, Mats, Clotheslines, and G-nuts in Northern Uganda***

In a participatory sketching activity conducted in 2009 with female returned abductees (including several former child soldiers) in Northern Uganda, respondents emphasized the radical quality-of-life improvements they had experienced since participating in a group empowerment intervention. One respondent, Sylvia, noted: “We have a tree outside my home and when my friends come to visit we sit under the shade on the mat. We talk and rest.”

The reference to sitting under the tree on a mat has tremendous symbolic meaning in Acholi culture. Among the Acholi, having a tree next to one’s homestead is significant at various levels. It is a place where elders sit, with authority and a sense of well-being and composure, to tell stories. A mat signifies a place of rest, a place of greeting, a sign of welcome. The tree and the mat were ubiquitous in our respondents’ change-narratives (See Figure 2 and Figure 3).



Figure 2. The mat beneath the tree

In Betty’s sketch and accompanying narration, we also see the tree, the mat, and more.



Figure 3. Betty’s many possessions, including the clothesline to hang clothes

Betty noted: “In my big house I have a bed and a curtain. I can even sit on my mat under the shade. I have a tray to wash and dry my utensils. I have an *agulu* [water pot] to store and cool water and a wire to hang clothing.”

Betty’s sketch and narration also point to what she believes are important aspects of her personal transformation narrative. For instance, her explicit mention of being able to sit on her mat under the shade of the tree reveals her social standing and growth. Community members’ visits demonstrate their respect for her, while her hospitality and storytelling demonstrates her own self-respect. For Betty, physical and material well-being and hygiene is symbolized in the tray where she washes and dries her utensils, as well as in the wire where she can hang her clean clothes to dry. Akin to the ubiquitous mat under the tree, many girls drew and talked about the wire to hang clothing. They were quick to point out that, if mothers or children own only one set of clothes, they have no spare garments to hang on a wire. As such, a wire symbolizes material well-being, social status, personal hygiene, grooming, and self-respect.

Another cultural beacon was discovered in a field in Uganda during an off-the-cuff conversation. As the assessment team walked for several kilomenters in the Ugandan bush to see the girls’ magnificent gardens lush with g-nuts (peanuts), sim sim, sunflowers, and more. Two members of the research team pointed out that, along the road, there were whole g-nuts on the ground. Jimmy, a member of the local Save the Children staff, offered a simple explanation:

*G-nuts on the ground are a sign of abundance. Before, people were so hungry that if there ever was a g-nut on the ground, it would be eaten immediately. Now you also see birds in the campsites. They eat food scraps and, before, they didn’t use to come.*

This story was not part of structured research activities, but was nonetheless recorded by the research team as an interesting but peripheral observation. Whether through structured participatory research activities or during meta-research conversations and storytelling, a tree, a mat, a clothesline, and even peanuts on the ground can be rife with contextual, culturally-based meaning.

***Birthdays, Boyfriends and Bicycles in Rural India***

Members of a participatory photography exercise in India’s rural Bihar villages also developed a cultural beacon. The exercise was intended to assess impacts of an on-the-ground campaign and entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Taru*. Participants in the *Taru* project were asked to photograph and narrate visible signs of change in their communities after their involvement in pre-program publicity and active program viewing.

One respondent, 18-year-old Meenakshi, described a *Taru*-inspired birthday party for a young girl. After listening to a *Taru* storyline in which residents of fictional rural community Suhagpur celebrated a young girl’s birthday, a husband and wife decided to throw a party for their own daughters. Not long after this first party, a string of birthday celebrations for village girls were held. This practice slowly spread to surrounding villages, where *Taru* was equally popular. All the families in Bihar state’s Madhopur village were invited to the party, which was complete with balloons, music, sweets, and cake. While many girls all over the world celebrate their birthdays in a similar fashion, it is unusual in many villages in India. Residents of these villages do not remember or recognize a daughter’s birthday, even though a son’s birthday is traditionally cause for celebration. In fact, “relative to girls, boys receive better education, nutrition, and care; they have better mobility outside of homes; and are more pampered by parents, grandparents, and community elders” (Singhal, 2010, p. 1). Thus, this event, which might have appeared insignificant to outsiders, can be viewed as a sign of progress in Madhopur village; it was a cultural beacon.

Vandana, a 17-year-old listener of *Taru* from Village Kamtaul, offered another indicator of progress towards gender equality.Her submission to the participatory photography project was a picture of her, clad in jeans, standing beside a young man. While non-residents may glide past such a photo, insiders can appreciate its transgressive elements. Since conservative villagers deem jeans inappropriate, Vandana’s sartorial choice may reflect her independence – perhaps even her defiance – of traditional norms. For her companion, Vandana explained: "This is my boy-friend, a boy who is a friend. He studies in my high school…I feel comfortable talking to him and sharing my thoughts with him. If Taru and Shashikant [a male character] can be good friends, why can’t we?" Such reasoning and behavior is revolutionary as, according to community members, this is perhaps the first time in the history of Kamtaul village that a young woman invited a young man to stand beside her and pose for a photograph (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Vandana posing for a picture next to her male friend

Mukesh, a 22-year-old respondent in Arbipur village, also documented gender equality progress by snapping a photo of two girls walking next to a bicycle (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Girls using a bicycle to change gender norms

At first glance, the picture merely depicts two girls walking side-by-side with a bicycle. But the accompanying narration sheds light on its possibly deeper cultural significance: “These girls are trying to learn to ride a bike. After listening to *Taru*, girls are changing. By listening to radio these girls learn of new ideas and act on them” (Singhal, 2010, p. 16).

Whether Mukesh independently derived this interpretation or obtained confirmation from the girls is unclear. Thus, his observation toes a potentially problematic line in terms of speaking on behalf of others, particularly those who are lower in status due to ethnicity, gender and/or age. Cultural beacons, because they consist of participants’ own accounts, help researchers to avoid this very practice vis-a-vis participants. But in the case of this cultural beacon, it is a community member himself who might be imputing meaning to the participants’ story. Researchers can raise participants’ awareness to this phenomenon and encourage them, as they themselves are modeling, both to respect individuals’ right to make sense of their own experiences and to seek this input from the people directly involved. Researchers can also appreciate accounts such as Mukesh’s as secondary data, thereby recognizing its potential difference from the primary source’s as well as its richness as an additional layer of meaning-making.

***Intersecting Paths, Trees, Chicken Coops, and Fish Farms in the Peruvian Amazon***

As part of a participatory photograph and sketching assessment (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006), eight children from various riverine communities were asked to draw some of the changes that they had observed since Minga Perú implemented its on-the-ground capacity-building projects. While these projects primarily targeted adults, children were included in the assessment.

The sketch below (See Figure 6), representative of other sketches, shows houses, schools and churches—buildings important to children beyond the context of the Peruvian Amazon. Also clearly marked in this sketch are intersecting paths. The intersecting paths were a recurring theme, pointing to an early awareness about interdependence and communal living (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). Intersecting paths are a cultural beacon for children, who deem this sense of connectedness important.



Figure 6. This sketch demonstrates local respect for the natural

environment and communal living

The sun, clouds, birds, butterflies, and the river also appear in this sketch. In his accompanying narration, the creator of this sketch mentioned his depiction of 11 different kinds of trees and shrubs, dotted with colorful varieties of fruits and flowers. This boy’s attention to nature suggests that he perceives the natural environment to be important. The sketch (particularly its alignment of low-lying shrubs interspersed with trees in a contoured pattern) and in-depth conversations with all of the participating children confirmed the youths’ awareness of a Minga Perú-implemented agro-forestry project.

Several children’s sketches also featured chicken coops, fish farms, and agro-forestry work (See Figure 7). Such depictions show that, although these Minga Perú livelihood development projects have existed for only two years, children know about them and independently characterize them as salient signs of change. For these children, chicken coops and the like are locally relevant measures, or cultural beacons, that indicate progress in their communities.



Figure 7. Drawings of trees, chicken coops, and fish farms show children’s relationship with the livelihoods supported by Minga Perú

***“The Kitten Who Became a Lion” in Senegal***

Individuals’ behavior may represent a cultural beacon when its full significance, or its very presence, eludes outside researchers. Such was the case with Tidiane Thiang, 27, an audio/video specialist at Dakar, Sénégal-based non-profit le Réseau Africain d’Education pour la Santé (African Network for Health Education, or RAES). Prior to joining the implementation team for a new youth development intervention, Tidiane always kept his speech to a minimum. At meetings, he listened attentively and took copious notes; periodically, he would send a long email to the director that articulated his perspectives on the various topics of discussion. Such communicative behavior might be considered Tidiane’s “baseline.”

During the summer of 2010, Tidiane and several co-workers piloted Sunukaddu 2.0, an intervention intended to empower youths by supporting their development of skills that enable exploration, collaboration, and meaningful communication (Felt & Rideau, forthcoming). Not only did the program significantly impact participants but its effects upon Tidiane were also profound. During brainstorming meetings and curriculum workshops, he voiced his own ideas. When the program opened its doors, he challenged participants with critical thinking questions and rich cultural commentary. During a lesson on message dissemination, he spontaneously sprang from a corner of the room and translated a lengthy explanation of Everett Rogers’s Diffusion of Innovations theory (1962/2003) from (imperfect) French into participants’ native Wolof. And when unanticipated transportation and scheduling issues left Tidiane as the sole instructor for an entire day, he independently delivered – and innovated! – the curriculum, then enthused about his experience afterwards. In Tidiane’s own words:

“You gave me self-confidence thanks to these skills” (personal communication, September 22, 2010).

“My favorite skills are negotiation, self-awareness, and social awareness because they represent values that are and must be the basis for an equitable and responsible society” (personal communication, September 27, 2010).

Tidiane did not revert to his quiet ways after the program bestowed certificates of completion upon its participants (an element suggested and designed by Tidiane). Rather, he declared his intention to realize his filmmaking dreams by proposing a short video that would explain how to take the skills presented in Sunukaddu 2.0 and adapt them to an African, specifically Senegalese, context (personal communication, October 7, 2010).

When anticipated funding streams fell through, he was undeterred: “I will make it with my own funds because it’s a good subject for a film” (personal communication, January 8, 2010). Tidiane’s colleagues playfully nicknamed him “the kitten who became a lion,” a moniker that he embraced. On August 18, 2010, Tidiane Photoshopped his Facebook thumbnail so that the image of a roaring lion overlaid his polo shirt (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. Tidiane publicizing his newfound leonine identity

Tidiane’s experience functions as a cultural beacon because its full understanding, its very recognition, requires cultural participation. Had outside evaluators visited RAES and observed Sunukaddu 2.0 in action, they would not have noticed anything remarkable – a young instructor was simply teaching a lesson. The phenomenal nature of Tidiane’s speech would have been invisible to these context-less recorders and so this rich data, bursting with implications, would have been lost.

**Discussion**

Across these four international case studies, participants’ material possessions (e.g., mats, clotheslines, jeans), natural resources (e.g., g-nuts, agro-forestry features), and social behaviors (e.g., celebrating birthdays, befriending the opposite sex, riding a bicycle, speaking up, taking action) illuminated knowledge that often falls through the cracks: overlooked indicators and grassroots epistemologies. The two go hand-in-hand, for participants’ sense-making is necessary for appreciating the significance of an “invisible” artifact or action.

In Uganda, for instance, the sketches depicting clotheslines represent a rich, multi-textured measure of (1) personal hygiene (washing clothes), (2) quality-of-life (number of clothes on the line), (3) social status in the community, and (4) personal worth. In the respondents’ worldview, these artifacts have deeper significance and meaning than an uninitiated researcher may be able to grasp. The dozens of sketches depicting a mat in front of an Acholi house is an another example, for this representation signifies that one is at peace with oneself, is available to welcome and greet others, and is open to engage in a conversation: “Our elders used to sit under trees with all authority and composure to tell stories,” explained Jimmy, a member of the local Save the Children implementing team. The mat under a tree is thus a culturally robust measure of one’s psychosocial status, as well as an indicator of a person’s social networking patterns.

In India, the mention of girls’ birthday celebrations and the photographs of girls standing next to a boy or walking next to a bicycle are likely to be overlooked. But their local, culturally-embedded significance speaks to user-defined advances in individual girls’ self-confidence and community-level changes in gender norms and inclusivity. Similarly, in Perú, detailed children’s sketches show an awareness of their natural and built environments as they have changed for the better after adult participation in Minga Perú’s capacity-building programs. They suggest an acute sense of connection between people and institutions, i.e., church, school, other families, as well as a more progressive connection between people and environmentally-based livelihoods. In Sénégal, Tidiane’s emergence as a “lion” – speaker, teacher, filmmaker – might also have been overlooked by researchers who lacked cultural context and/or who focused exclusively on pre-determined metrics.

This begins to answer our first research question, which asked “How does collection and analysis of culturally-embedded, user-defined data satisfy the demand to ‘study the rhetoric of the Other in its own terms rather than in ours’ (Swearingen, 2004, p. 13) while contributing to a growing body of organizational knowledge (Ebrahim) for the benefit not just of donors but of other stakeholders?”

Culturally-embedded, user-defined data in the form of overlooked indicators and grassroots epistemologies (cultural beacons) yield nuanced data; they also enrich the complexity of monitoring and assessment by asking ”What counts, and for whom?” In giving stakeholders an opportunity to define the meaning and value of a project’s outcomes, they extend to participants the opportunity to name and influence their own reality. While ethical and political reasons support greater grassroots involvement in research (e.g., more democratic decision-making), activist-scholars argue that epistemological status (Simmons, 2007) and pragmatic power (Grabill, 2001) are the most compelling. Ultimately, recognizing the legitimacy of cultural beacons results in a more complex notion of knowledge-making. In this sense, it is useful to regard these intertwined ways of knowing as an emic addition to the prevalent etic lens. Allowing for both emic and etic perspectives helps us to account for multiple, concurrent, and contextualized worldviews, acknowledging the validity of multiple points of view. This combination of lenses also allows us to see knowledge as situated amongst individual agents, particular communities of practice, and wider networks. Moreover, it positions audiences as co-constructors of knowledge rather than as entities to be persuaded (for a review, see Simmons, 2007; Flower, 2008), and concedes that a complex sense of meaning is ridden with both potential and contradiction (Flower, 2002; Flower, 2008).

Cultural beacons also can enrich organizational learning and serve diverse stakeholders. Because cultural beacons have the potential to more fully illuminate programmatic impact, organizations can better ascertain the relative efficiencies of their efforts and ripple effects they might have engendered. Moreover, processes associated with participation can significantly benefit participants, delivering opportunities for developing skills, relationships, and self-efficacy in important areas. The utility and longevity of such assets contributes to value and the sustainability of an intervention.

Our second research question asked, “Which types of contexts and/or practices most commonly cultivate the emergence of culturally-embedded, user-defined data?”

The rich visual and textual data from assessments in Uganda, India, Perú and Sénégal suggest that participatory, non-textocentric research and evaluation projects facilitate recognition of cultural beacons. In terms of practices, deep listening and careful observation lend themselves to appreciating cultural beacons. Such endeavors ensure that, within the frames of qualitative techniques like sketching and narration, communicative nuances are noted. Deep listening and observing also can point to cultural scorecards outside these frames, as shown by the transformation of Tidiane. Relationship building practices, such as unstructured conversation, co-learning, visitation, and play, also can reveal cultural beacons and/or set the stage for cultural scorecards’ future emergence. For example, the present authors would not have discovered the significance of the g-nuts had they not opted to stroll with their partners, appreciate the environment, and genially comment.

Our third research question asked, “How, if at all, can one establish the validity (both internal and external) of such culturally-embedded, user-defined data?” Indeed, before cultural beacons can be introduced into communication research designs, their capacity to accurately and comprehensively represent change must be confirmed. First, in order to operationalize cultural beacons conscientiously, their reliability and validity as metrics must be established. Next, in order to operationalize cultural beacons optimally, their ability both to be embodied in quantitative data and to be represented quantitatively must be examined. Third, in order to operationalize cultural beacons innovatively, their relationship to new intervention methods must be explored. Finally, simultaneously with the preceding steps, researchers should strive to better understand the meaning, location, and individual/collective value of cultural beacons.

**Establishing Reliability and Validity.[[5]](#endnote-10)** The reliability and validity of cultural beacons can be estimated in certain relatively straightforward ways. For instance, a small sample survey of 50 to 100 participants can be carried out in a project area and then compared to a similar group in a non-program area. Test-retest reliability correlations can be computed for these groups using, for instance, different drawings (of a mat under a tree, or a clothesline) expected to measure the same construct.

One could also employ Likert-type scales of agree-disagree statements generated from unstructured interviews with the participants to "triangulate" a certain construct (e.g., a sense of reintegration with the community), or obtain a measure of reliability. This Likert measurement of theese constructs could then be correlated with external measures or observed changes (e.g., new micro-economic activities, such as selling fruits and vegetables, new enrollments in schools, and others) that one would expect as outcomes of the change programs. If the cultural beacons are valid, then they should be substantially and significantly correlated with these concrete, observed changes."  Studies can also be conducted to show the relative reliability and validity scores of the new measures with "old" or conventional measures.

Operationalizing and validating cultural beacons is achieved through triangulation and theoretical sampling; respondent groups are chosen for theoretical rather than statistical reasons and respondents are added until theoretical saturation (incremental learning is minimal) occurs (See Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1989; Boeije, 2002). However, qualitative methods neither pose nor test correlational or causal hypotheses and do not assess pre-post treatment-control change scores to make (or refute) claims within a certain confidence interval. Therefore, even if contextualized with existing archival documentation, the sense-making that follows is circumscribed within the qualitative scope of the data gathered and is not meant for generalization to other groups or larger populations.

**Diversifying and Transforming Quantitative Data.** While this article lauds non-textocentric, qualitative data, numbers can also tell a compelling story. According to Einstein, our challenge is to count what counts; it is only logical to assume that some worthwhile information comes in numeric form. This begs the questions: (1) Are there meaningful quantitative indicators that have eluded researchers’ scope?; and (2) Is it possible to translate activities, relationships, and even cultural beacons into quantitative terms?

Diversifying a corpus with non-traditional, quantitative data might facilitate triangulation at the very least; at best, analysis of these data may offer novel insights and allow certain phenomena to be modeled and predicted statistically. This is especially exciting for concepts judged difficult to quantify and/or imperfectly operationalized, such as “community cohesion.” Some non-traditional, quantitative indicators of “community cohesion” might include: the numbers of nodes and linkages within a community of practice (revealed by social network analysis); the number of unique visitors and total visits to community gathering places; the ratio describing intervention project participants’ usage of collectivistic language to versus individualistic language (e.g., “we” vs. “I,” “our community” vs. “my family”); and integrated connectedness to a community storytelling network (ICSN; for a review, see Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Since these suggested indicators are culturally-embedded and user-defined, they approach the threshold for recognition as cultural beacons.

Cultural beacons also can be transformed back into quantitative data. Davies and Dart (2005, p. 38) describe multiple processes for converting the sole cultural beacon they gather, participants’ stories, into quantitative terms. First, the number of individuals/objects/behaviors enumerated within a story (a cultural beacon) is quantitative. For example, a story might describe a street theater performance attended by 20 citizens. While the accuracy of such an estimate might need corroboration, this “20 citizens” figure can be interesting and valuable to multiple stakeholders. One can also tally the frequencies of specific change-narratives (such as the number of times that participants focus their stories on clotheslines, for example). This might motivate the pursuit of more data about this change (in this example, either the deliberate call for more stories about clotheslines or a citywide count of all new clotheslines) and so expose the depth and breadth of a particular effect. Additionally, the number of stories per provenance and/or associated with particular changes can function as measures of participant engagement and/or local program fidelity.

According to Wilkins (2008), “One central concern with numbers in research then is who has access to the production, distribution and interpretation of this knowledge” (p. 20). But numbers can be participatory.

“Local people have shown in innumerable instances that they can count, estimate, measure, compare and value in ways which generate numbers (Jayakaran 2002; Barahona and Levy 2003; Chambers 2008; Catley *et al.* 2008). They can put numbers on almost anything which they experience that is normally considered qualitative, including empowerment and social change (Jupp and Ali 2010). The insights, categories and relationships which they identify through PMs have been shown again and again to be more numerous, varied and relevant to their significant realities than those of outsider professionals. They can correct, validate and themselves generate statistics (Barahona and Levy 2003, 2007; Chambers 2008; Catley *et al.* 2008). And these can empower them in their relations with organisations and government” (Chambers, 2010, pp. 39-40).

**Pushing the Envelope by Scaling Horizontally.** In addition to developing new metrics for assessing social change interventions, forward-thinking scholars and practitioners also must craft new models and methods to guide the interventions themselves. In the 1990s, reconceptualizing the orientation of social change as bottom-up instead of top-down inspired massive revisions of social programs and delivery methods. Another round of program adjustment may yet transpire if this vision of social change is further modified. The previous reconceptualization merely adjusted orientation, not direction; yet, it is eminently possible that social change is easiest to diffuse horizontally, not vertically. That is, participants may take skills/experiences/innovations from one project and apply it to another lateral concern. For example, they may harness the self-efficacy vis-à-vis community organizing that they honed in a neighborhood safety intervention and use it to address local transportation issues. Encouraging this sort of practice – the efficient application of versatile resources – could maximize the impact of discrete projects, catalyze interaction effects, and expedite participants’ appreciation of gains in their overall quality of living. Since social problems neither exist in a vacuum nor separate cleanly from a host of factors, this hyper-local approach may be a more productive way to sustain change than widely disseminating a single-issue intervention.

Evidence of horizontal scaling may provide out-of-the-box quantitative data. For example, certain quantitative data might be pooled across spheres to create composite indicators, such as indices of “familial health,” “quality of life,” “rate of development,” and/or “civic participation.” These collated descriptors can provide holistic snapshots of individuals’ and communities’ real, lived experiences – in other words, cultural beacons.

**Deepening Our Understanding of Cultural Beacons.**

This is just the beginning. Further research on cultural beacons has the potential to reveal the origins, locations, and implications of cultural beacons beyond the scope of this article’s examples. In order to cultivate more cultural beacons for the purposes of stakeholder enrichment and scholarly development, we encourage communication scholars and researchers of other social science disciplines to: (1) engage research partners and participants in monitoring and assessment activities from the beginning of a project; (2) co-construct multiple means of both gathering participants’ insights and translating this rich data; (3) listen appreciatively to locally-defined ways of knowing; and (4) multiply document these metrics and findings, in print and non-textocentrically. Equally important, doing so will help to evade the “occupational psychoses” and “trained incapacities” noted by Burke (1954) and facilitate more situated, multivocal knowledge-making (Papa & Singhal, 2009).

Conclusion

Following such paradigm-questioners as Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and Albert Einstein, this research was motivated by our observations that (1) traditional methods for gathering data do not wholly capture program-related transformations; (2) “other” ways of knowing and participatory forms of knowledge-generating yield legitimate data; (3) programmatic efforts and formal reports can be enriched by local wisdoms.

Four international case studies revealed rich, culturally-embedded, user-defined data in the form of overlooked indicators and grassroots epistemologies, or cultural beacons. Cultural beacons emerge from a wide variety of data gathering techniques, encompassing but not limited to enumerated participatory methodologies, and tend to be associated with relationship-building practices. Cultural beacons provide rich and nuanced descriptive and processual insights for the edification of investigators, participants, and donors alike. Underscoring this point, Chambers (2010) related the following anecdote: “When workshop participants assessed the success or failure of the 341 development initiatives they had identified, it provoked Ton Deitz to observe (2009: 31) ‘It seems that many Ghanaians, whether literate or not, are experts in the subtleties of complexity thinking’” (p. 40).

While this article introduces the notion of cultural beacons, delineates their primary attributes, and points to their individual and collective value, the definitional and operational aspects of this participatory metric can continue to be refined. We encourage participant-investigator collaboration to attend to culturally-embedded assessment metrics, test their reliability and validity, and expand our traditional notions of what constitutes data in the communication discipline and more broadly in the social sciences. The field of social change practice and scholarship can benefit greatly by attending to continued research on cultural beacons as communication measures.

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**Endnotes**

1. This story was narrated by a Save the Children official in a workshop attended by one of the present authors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The projects *Life after the LRA: Piloting Positive Deviance with Child Mothers and Vulnerable Girl Survivors in Northern Uganda* and *Positive Deviance to Reduce the Trafficking of Young Girls in East Java, Indonesia* were designed and implemented by Save the Children using a community-driven, asset-based approach called positive deviance (www.positivedeviance.org) and necessarily called for an assessment that was in tune with the complexity, nuances, and sensibilities, including the notion of ongoing and self-monitoring. Respondents are not identified by their real names; names have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Where appropriate, Save the Children staff members are identified by their real names. For further information about this project and its assessment, see Singhal and Dura (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
3. *Taru* was an Entertainment-Education radio soap opera broadcast by the Indian national radio network All India Radio (AIR) during 2002-2003. Its purpose was to promote gender equality, reproductive health, caste and communal harmony, and community development. In 2004, one of the present authors led a team of co-researchers from Ohio University and Michigan State University to investigate the impacts of the *Taru* project’s on-the-ground efforts and radio broadcasts. For further information about this project and its assessment, see Singhal (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
4. Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization in the Peruvian Amazon, broadcasts a popular radio program, *Bienvenida Salud* (Welcome Health), in the Amazonas, and carries out several community-based empowerment activities for local women. In 2005, one of the present authors assessed Minga Perú’s contributions to reproductive health, gender equality, and social change through participatory photography and sketching activities. For more, in-depth information about this project and its assessment, see Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
5. We thank D. Lawrence Kincaid for providing us with suggestions on how one may compute reliability and validity estimates for cultural beacons. We also thank Mohan Dutta for reading this manuscript and providing strong insights for its improvement.

   **Appendix A**

   Chambers (2010) compiled a list of “some of the more prominent and widespread PMs in rough sequence of their substantial initiation and introduction from the early 1980s to the present” (pp. 19-20):

   Farmer Participatory Research (FPR) Immersions Participatory Seed Breeding Participatory Technology Development (PTD) Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

   Farmer Field Schools

   Participatory Forest Management (in India, Joint Forest Management)

   Participatory Video (PV)

   Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

   Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (late 1980s, early 1990s)

   Participatory Irrigation Management

   Appreciative Inquiry

   Most Significant Change

   Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs)

   Pariticipatory Learning and Action (PLA)

   Planning for Real

   Reflect 10

   Stepping Stones

   Report cards (Paul 2002)

   Participatory Budgeting (PB)

   Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS) 11

   Community-Based Development (CBD)

   Community-Driven Development (CDD)

   Internal Learning System (ILS) (Noponen 2007)

   Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) (Mayoux 2007)

   Participatory Human Rights Analysis (Jupp 2007: 108–9)

   Participatory 3-D Mapping

   Participatory Vulnerability Analysis

   ALPS (Accountability, Learning and Planning System) (David, Mancini and Guijt 2006)

   Community-Led Total Sanitation (Kar with Chambers 2008) Social audits Monitoring of service delivery Participatory Value Chain analysis

   STAR (Stepping Stones and Reflect) Budget tracking Reality Checks 12 Participatory approaches with Web 2.0 and ICTs [↑](#endnote-ref-10)