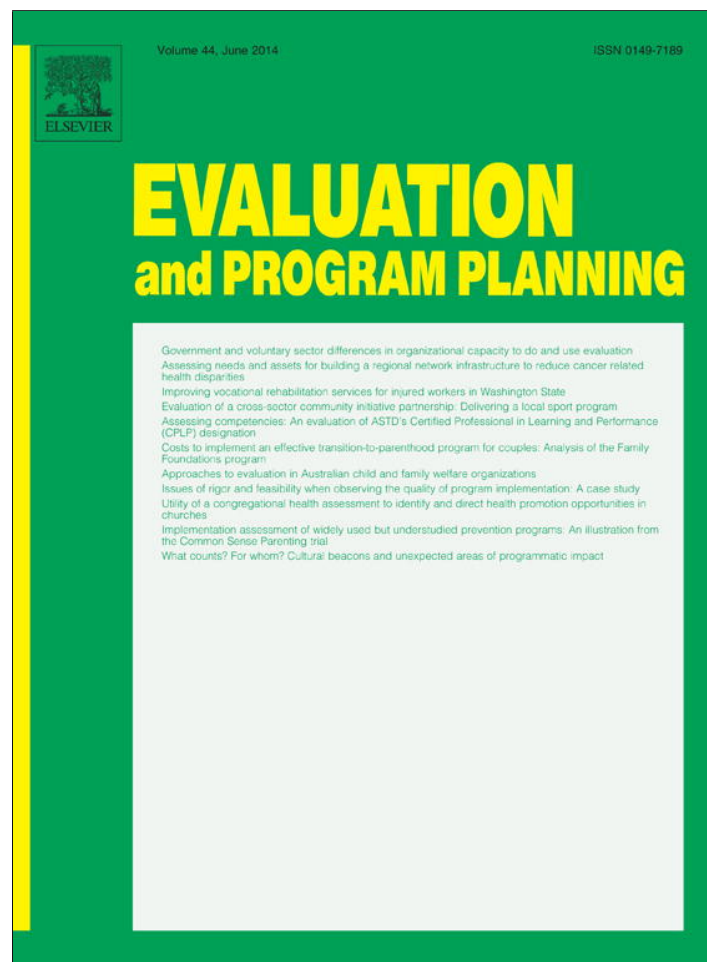


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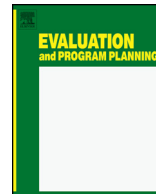
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What counts? For whom? Cultural beacons and unexpected areas of programmatic impact

Lucía Durá^{a,*}, Laurel J. Felt^b, Arvind Singhal^c^a Department of English, The University of Texas at El Paso, USA^b Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, USA^c Department of Communication, The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

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ABSTRACT

The present article was motivated by our observations that (1) current methods for gathering data do not wholly capture program-related transformations, and (2) grassroots ways of knowing yield legitimate data and can enrich programmatic efforts and evaluations. Accordingly, our work seeks to leverage grassroots knowledge in order to both recognize and respect *cultural beacons* (CBs) – culturally embedded, user-defined aids for understanding program-related change. Simply, these inductively gathered, locally identified CBs illuminate *what* to measure and/or *how* to measure it. Our analysis of participatory evaluations from four international, social change interventions offers four sites for detecting CBs: material possessions, community landscape features, social behaviors, and community-inspired art. We examine the methodological and relational contexts that facilitate CB discovery, discuss unexpected areas of programmatic impact, and utilize lessons learned across projects to make suggestions for continued exploration of CBs in monitoring and evaluation design and practice.

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1. Introduction

A team of Western researchers was gathering data on a multi-year programmatic intervention on infant mortality in a developing country. Team members approached local leaders, government health workers, and clinics but could not obtain reliable longitudinal data on infant death or survival. As the research team despairingly discussed their conundrum outside of a village shop, a wise elder remarked: “Why not ask somebody to take you to the local cemeteries? We mark every grave with the birth and death year.”¹

While this story has a happy ending, the cause of its conflict begs a question: Why didn't the headstone custom come up earlier in the research process? The answer, we believe, is that no matter how well designed, contemporary norms for evaluating social and

behavioral change interventions overlook and/or marginalize both collaboration and voice. Conducting field-based evaluations of social and behavior change interventions is difficult – very difficult. Investigators grapple with various philosophies, methods, and agendas as they negotiate (often conflicting) imperatives to research credibly, behave ethically, honor funders' priorities, and protect stakeholder interests. Within this complex context, investigators often apply a deductive perspective, using tested instruments (e.g., statistical or comparative analysis) to examine data (e.g., pre-/post-test survey and focus group responses) from participants grouped based on certain markers (e.g., demographics, role in the project). While deductive approaches have their strengths, they also have weaknesses. Additionally, relying upon a singular perspective – any perspective – predicts omission. In the case of field-based evaluation, as illustrated in the opening story, this omission usually pertains to grassroots epistemologies, or ways of knowing.

Grassroots epistemologies are internalized through day-to-day experiences, insights, and observations. They can be tacit – somewhat intuitive, difficult to verbalize, and held within peer networks. Thus, investigators and practitioners often fail to collect, comprehend, and value data that are (1) culturally embedded – that is, so specific to a culture that they often seem “invisible” to

* Corresponding author at: Department of English, The University of Texas at El Paso, 500 West University Avenue, El Paso, TX 79968, USA.
Tel.: +1 915 747 5199/915 487 9119; fax: +1 915 747 6214.

E-mail addresses: ldura@utep.edu, luciadura@gmail.com (L. Durá), felt@usc.edu (L.J. Felt), asinghal@utep.edu (A. Singhal).

¹ This story was narrated by a Save the Children official in a workshop attended by one of the present authors.

outsiders; and (2) user-defined – that is, stakeholders recognize the value/ascribe significance to these data themselves. We call such data “cultural beacons” (previously called “cultural scorecards” in Singhal & Durá, 2010 and Singhal et al., 2011). Cultural beacons (CBs), we suggest, can strengthen program evaluation by pointing to or illuminating culturally relevant data or tacit knowledge that requires local insight to be exposed. Much like a beam from a lighthouse, CBs can guide outsiders, helping them to negotiate unique and unexpected features of a landscape as well as establish moorings upon a solid base.

In the present article, we explore CBs in the context of program evaluation. We begin by suggesting that our “trained incapacities” preclude a holistic integration of deductive and inductive orientations toward data, rendering us blind to uncover CBs. We then explain what CBs *are*, including what they are *not*, elucidating how they differ from overlooked indicators, and we analyze the significance of twelve CBs we discovered in four unrelated program evaluations in Uganda, India, Perú, and Sénégal. We identify the sites and contexts in which CBs are commonly situated and suggest methodological and relational practices that facilitate the discovery of these CBs.

2. Researchers’ “trained incapacities”

The 20th century philosopher Kenneth Burke (1950, 1954/1984, 1969)² wrote extensively about the ways members of a society develop worldviews by participating in *symbolic* (discursive and material) processes. Drawing from Veblen (1914, p. 347) and 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, sensibilities, 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 Goffman referenced, members of these institutions tend to experience a similar phenomenon. By adopting organizational narratives reflecting values and conventions, departmental actors internalize a strategic sense of identification with the institution (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Identification with an institution’s discourse and organizational practices creates and reinforces a sense of normalcy in the form of categories, rules, and knowledge so that experts are systematic in the ways that they order, understand, discipline, record, and experiment upon others (Foucault, 1965, 1972). These norms, which on one hand “organize” an institution into being, lead to “trained incapacities” or “occupational psychoses” (Burke, 1954/1984, pp. 7 and 49). They become 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. This is likely what occurred in the story of the cemetery; the researchers’ training had blinded them to an unlikely cultural repository of user-generated data.

2.1. Social scientific research biases

Often, social scientific research training is informed by positivist understandings of which information deserves respect. Many social scientists consider knowledge that is expressed numerically, or quantitatively, to be the most credible (Conquergood, 2002; Lather, 1991) – ergo the saying “numbers don’t lie.” The prevailing tendency to quantify implicitly casts as inferior any knowledge that is

expressed linguistically, or qualitatively. Such a quantitative preference may reflect and exacerbate power differentials (Wilkins, 2011).

Similarly, social scientists who deeply value “objectivity” and its conventional wisdom maintain that preserving distance from research subjects is essential. Methodologies such as empirical observation are preferred over dialogic interpretation so that researchers do not identify too closely with participants and risk their “objective” gaze.

Lastly, many implicitly believe that knowledge value should be assessed according to its codification status, with codified (i.e., printed text) knowledge preferred over uncoded. As such, information gathered outside the scope of formal research and/or unpublished is usually repressed, disqualified, and/or dismissed. Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (2002) labeled this perspective that views unlettered knowledge as illegitimate “textocentric.” Similar to the term “ethnocentric,” this neologism describes the quality of evaluating other peoples’ communicative practices according to the standards of a text-based tradition.

Institutionalized perceptions of “what counts” tend to influence researchers’ training and subsequent practice, and then become trained incapacities that can narrow the scope and even limit the validity of program evaluation and assessment.

2.2. Design biases

Beyond the bias imparted during training, researchers also implement data collection methods that are bound by design bias. This is true of all methods, regardless of whether the data to which they relate are quantitative or qualitative; however, because scholarly tradition has tended to frame empirical research methods as (more) “objective,” it is worth examining how subjectivity can shape data collection.

Firstly, tools utilized in empirical research, such as 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, often eclipsing tacit knowledge found in everyday experiences. 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 without time constraints). The content of the assessment also may 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 who do not have basic proficiency in reading or writing. Even when assessments are delivered orally, their language – often non-native, riddled 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. Further, the nature of a topic, such as a culturally sensitive or taboo issue like human trafficking, gender violence, and sexual promiscuity, may cause discomfort and limit frank discussion. Finally, varying agendas influence interpretation in terms of whose expertise is utilized in sense-making – the investigators’ or the participants’. Social change practitioners increasingly have recognized that these metric-driven indicators of participant knowledge, attitude, and behavior change do not adequately or sufficiently gauge program effectiveness (Airihebuwa and Obregon, 2000; Byrne, 2008; Dutta & Basnyat, 2006; Dutta, 2008; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Saegert, Benitez, Eizenberg, Hsieh, & Lamb, 2004; Smith, 1999; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

² Burke was also known as a rhetorician and literary scholar.

External factors also challenge the scope and validity of empirical research. In the case of program evaluation, donors may exert pressure, financial and otherwise, to gather and report results according to specific impact metrics (Riddell, 1999); lack of resources for conducting multi-pronged research assessments may limit comprehensiveness (Ebrahim, 2003a, 2003b). As a result of this “accountability myopia” (Ebrahim, 2005), both capacity building and organizational learning are shortchanged while participants’ lived realities are effectively absent from the data corpus (Engel & Wilkins, 2012; Holland, 2013; Huesca, 2002; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). This omission of stakeholder perspectives is problematic if one believes that evaluation research should “...provide us a window into the messy complexity of human experience; account for history, culture, and context; respect differences in perspective and values; and open the potential for democratic inclusion and the legitimization of multiple voices” (Donaldson et al., 2009).

3. Call for an emic perspective

As we mentioned in the introduction, investigators often find themselves in a bind. How might they avoid (re)producing a problematic pattern of exchange in which a privileged few gather data from Others (see Said’s *Orientalism*)? Simultaneously, how can they gather “credible” data in an “objective” manner? Further, how can they satisfy the demand to “study the rhetoric of the Other in its own terms rather than in ours” (Swearingen, 2004, p. 13)? How do they find “meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 146) and that can enrich, deepen, or add value to programmatic evaluations? How do they determine *what counts, and for whom*?

An etic, i.e., theory-driven, deductive point of departure, can help investigators to efficiently focus on established indicators and gather relevant data for answering pre-ordained questions. Indeed, established indicators have yielded data that have contributed to our wealth of knowledge and solutions. Yet, as the case of the cemetery headstones illustrated, established indicators are neither always available nor exclusively sufficient; moreover, overreliance on established indicators can lead to underuse of emergent indicators.

Einstein was often fond of saying, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” We know that trained incapacities, institutionalized research norms, and design bias narrow our methodological toolkits; we know that solely utilizing metric-driven indicators insufficiently gauges program effectiveness. Therefore, we call on researchers to acknowledge Einstein’s wisdom to use a different kind of thinking, a different kind of doing, and transcend habit and complement their empirical practice with an emic, i.e., exploratory, inductive orientation. Complementing engagement with participatory methodologies, we believe, can facilitate the discovery of both cultural beacons (culturally embedded, user-defined data) and overlooked indicators. Thus, in the sections that follow, we review literature on participatory methodologies and explain the differences we see between cultural beacons and overlooked indicators.

3.1. Participatory, non-textocentric methodologies

We are not alone in our call; many scholars and practitioners have urged multiple and alternative ways of defining and generating knowledge (see also Dutta & Pal, 2010; Holland, 2013; Chambers, 2007; Shiva, 2005; Smith, 1999). In terms of knowledge process, they encourage techniques that attempt to involve all stakeholders in a process (Grabill, 2001, 2007; Simmons, 2007; Spinuzzi, 2005), with the range of stakeholder

participation depending on such variables as context, scope, and goals of a project. Simply, these are participatory methodologies.

In addition to enabling (even necessitating) diverse participation within research activities, participatory methodologies (PMs) do not privilege textual methods – they are “non-textocentric,” or the antithesis of Conquergood’s (2002) notion of “textocentric.” This quality allows for the voices of non-native speakers to be heard, for difficult-to-articulate ideas and feelings to be expressed, and for communities’ unpublished knowledge to be circulated. According to Chambers (2010), 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). Simply, PMs reveal 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 indicators we measure.

What are some examples of PMs? Various forms of performance (e.g., artistic, musical, oral, visual) provide a context for local stakeholders to lend their voices, both literally and figuratively, to interpretations of community issues, and thus have attracted considerable attention in recent decades as a sound method for data collection and evaluation (Boal, 1979; Carr, 2001; Davies & Dart, 2005; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Parks, Gray-Felder, Hunt, & Byrne, 2005; Singhal & Devi, 2003; 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).

In a similar vein, the participatory Most Significant Change (MSC) technique solicits participants’ change narratives (Davies & Dart, 2005). Participants describe their experiences of program-produced change, articulating “the significance of the story from their point of view” (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. MSC also provides a space for stakeholders at different levels to articulate unexpected outcomes. For example, in its application in an agricultural extension program in Australia (Dart & Davies, 2003), stories were elicited under the auspices of “any other change” and “lessons learned.” When these stories were articulated at a round-table meeting with funders, funders noted that such stories captured complex, diverse outcomes and provided valuable insights outside of formal evaluation data (Dart & Davies, 2003). Essentially, MSC collects data on unexpected outcomes, demands diverse participation, and facilitates organizational learning.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a design process that not only leverages PMs, but includes local stakeholders in the entire project from conceptualization to final conclusions. PAR can add value by serving as “an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives by nurturing community strengths and problem-solving abilities” (Minkler, 2000, p. 193). PAR also can “sensitize both the community and the providers about the feelings and constraints of the other side,” ensuring that the dialog does not become adversarial (Singh & Shah, 2007, p. 6).

Numerous case studies illustrate the usefulness of PMs. For example, [Ebrahim \(2003b\)](#) cited two projects from Howard-Grabman (2000) that leveraged 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; see also [Holland, 2013](#), on the power of participatory statistics). [Chambers \(2010\)](#) also described a "win-win in Bangladesh" (Jupp and Ali, 2010) in which "... a team led by a consultant used an array of PRA (participatory rural appraisal) tools, a listening study, and drama to generate value statements from members of the movement. The over 8000 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).

These examples illustrate that while learned outsiders can offer valuable perspectives, community members' grassroots epistemologies also can explain, contextualize, and add useful nuance to program evaluations. Specifically, we suggest that culturally embedded, user-defined data resulting from the incorporation of an inductive lens can illuminate heretofore "invisible" or tacit knowledge. Recognizing and respecting such knowledge, which in concrete instances we call cultural beacons, enables program evaluators to improve the quality of their data, build both relationships with and capacity among participants, and vary research practice from habitual ways of knowing and doing, i.e., trained incapacities.

3.2. Cultural beacons

Our present investigation examines cultural beacons ([Dura et al., 2013](#); [Felt et al., 2012](#); [Singhal & Durá, 2010](#)). As we note previously, CBs are (1) culturally embedded – that is, so specific to a culture that they often seem "invisible" to outsiders; and (2) user-defined – that is, stakeholders recognize the value of these data themselves. CBs are embodied within objects (like paper towels) or practices (like hand-washing) that appear to outsiders as commonplace, indistinguishable from other aspects of a foreign culture. This is how they are "invisible." They are CBs because stakeholders' engagement with this object and/or practice means more than face value would suggest – it contains multiple layers of meaning, often pointing to tacit knowledge.

For example, suppose evaluators of a hand-washing campaign asked participants to sketch signs of community change, and one participant drew her son's report card marked with straight A's. At face value, or at its first layer of meaning, what does a stellar report card suggest? Perhaps it indicates that a student is hard-working and gifted. The relationship between this report card and hand-washing is murky at best; unaided, researchers would not ask intervention participants about their children's report cards (while they might ask about the frequency with which they have bought soap, the last time they visited a doctor, etc.).

Now suppose that the participant introduced a second layer of meaning, noting that previously her son fell ill frequently, which forced him to miss school. When he took to regular hand-washing, his health, school attendance, and grades steadily improved. In this sense, the report card is a CB – it is a culturally embedded, user-defined aid for understanding program-related change.

3.3. Overlooked indicators

Although overlooked indicators also reflect change, they are not CBs. Overlooked indicators have (a) been omitted from analysis and (b) lack a second layer of meaning; in other words, they are straight-forward signs of change that have, for one reason or another, escaped evaluators. In the aforementioned scenario of a community-wide hand-washing campaign, an overlooked indicator could be a public restroom wastepaper basket. Pre- and post-intervention tallies of the number of times wastepaper baskets in public restrooms were emptied would provide information (beyond self-report) about the extent to which the community has embraced sanitary hand-washing. Investigating the frequencies with which the restrooms are used and the baskets are emptied could enrich or confirm findings on per capita hand-washing. If ignored, the wastepaper basket would be an overlooked indicator. It would not be a CB because, in order to be seen and understood, one needs only awareness of pre-intervention conditions (as opposed to nuanced cultural knowledge). Both insiders and outsiders are equally well-equipped to monitor such indicators – their inclusion is just a matter of foresight or insight.

4. Methodology

With this analysis across our four projects, we seek to learn:

RQ1: In which specific forms do cultural beacons appear? In which sites or contexts do CBs tend to be located?

RQ 2: How do CBs deepen our insights about what counts and for whom in programmatic interventions?

RQ3: How can researchers and practitioners honor CBs in their program monitoring and evaluations?

To answer our research questions, we draw upon data we collected in four unrelated field research projects in Uganda, India, Perú, and Sénégal spanning a time frame of eight years collectively. Our methods for structured evaluation of these projects included various participatory, non-textocentric data collection strategies and a grounded theory approach to analysis ([Glasser & Strauss, 1967](#)). Peripherally to formal data collection activities, we also recorded observations in our field journals and/or photographically. In the following section we describe each study site and methods used – more detailed information about each project is included in the analysis and endnotes. Here, we analyzed the data gathered in these projects according to the two-fold criteria for CBs: (1) culturally embedded and (2) user-defined. Within our data sets, we looked for spaces where this data was triangulated or corroborated beyond self-report, and we evaluated the CBs for impact (individual or organizational learning) (See [Dura et al., 2013](#); [Felt et al., 2013](#) for a CB Evaluation Checklist).

4.1. Study sites and data collection

Research Project #1 – Uganda. This research project evaluated a child protection intervention in Uganda implemented by Save the Children using the positive deviance approach from 2005 to 2007.³

³ Data presented from Uganda was collected in 2008 during an assessment of two child-protection projects for Save the Children, one in Uganda and one in Indonesia. *Life after the LRA: Piloting Positive Deviance with Child Mothers and Vulnerable Girl Survivors in Northern Uganda* was funded by the Oak Foundation, and *Positive Deviance to Reduce the Trafficking of Young girls in East Java Indonesia* was funded by the Oak Foundation during a pilot phase and later by the United States Department of Labor. Positive deviance is premised on the notion that in every community there are individuals and groups who are able to find solutions to seemingly intractable problems without access to special resources. The research conducted at these two sites resulted in a detailed report submitted to the Oak Foundation, which was published in 2009 as a monograph: *Protecting Children from Exploitation and Trafficking: Using the Positive Deviance Approach in Uganda and Indonesia*.

We conducted participatory sketching activities in Pader District of northern Uganda with 71 respondents, including returned abductees and young vulnerable mothers, their mentors, parents, and local community leaders (Papa & Singhal, 2009; Singhal & Durá, 2009). We asked participants: *How have your lives changed as a result of participating in this program, and what are some visible signs of change in yourselves and in the community?* We collected a total of 145 sketches and accompanying narrations. We also obtained insight into local culture and history through off-the-cuff conversations with local stakeholders who worked for Save the Children.

Research Project #2 – India. This research project evaluated the impact of an entertainment-education radio soap opera called *Taru* in rural areas of Bihar, India. *Taru* was broadcast during 2002–2003 and promoted gender equality, reproductive health, and inter-caste harmony (Duff, Witte, & Singhal, 2005).⁴ We handed out disposable cameras to a dozen avid youth listeners of *Taru* and encouraged them to take photos of *Taru's* influence on them or their community. The invitation yielded some 150 photographs and narrations.

Research Project #3 – Perú. This research project evaluated the impact of an on-air radio program coupled with an on-the-ground income-generating and capacity-building initiative in the Peruvian Amazon in 2003.⁵ The initiative, implemented by Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization in the Peruvian Amazon, included the broadcast of a popular radio program, *Bienvenida Salud* (Welcome Health), and several community-based empowerment activities for local women through trained *promotora comunitaria* (community promoters) (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). In order to begin to assess the impact of Minga's on-the-ground programs, we handed blank sheets of paper and colored pencils to eight community children, all sons and daughters of *promotoras*, and asked them to visualize their communities, draw them, and narrate their sketches.

Research Project #4 – Sénégal. This research project centers on a pilot initiative called Sunukaddu 2.0 implemented in 2010 by the African Network for Health Education (RAES), a non-profit located in Dakar, Sénégal.⁶ This intervention was intended to facilitate the development of communication, collaboration, and exploration skills among participating youths (Felt & Rideau, 2012). Evaluators gathered data via pre- and post-testing, focus group interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and analysis of participants' creative works, as well as off-the-cuff conversations and continued email correspondence with some participants and staff.

5. Cultural beacons across four projects

In this section, we answer our first research question: In which specific forms do CBs appear? In which sites or contexts do CBs tend to be located?

⁴ Data presented from India was collected in 2004 during an assessment of a mass-media initiative in Bihar, India. The project was implemented by Ohio University and funded by Population Communications International, and yielded a report: *Effects of Taru, a Radio Soap Opera on Audiences in India: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis*.

⁵ Data presented from Perú was collected in 2003 during an assessment of Minga Perú's capacity-building initiatives targeting issues of domestic and community violence in the Peruvian Amazon. These initiatives were funded by UNIFEM and yielded a report for Minga Perú and UNIFEM.

⁶ Data presented from Sénégal was collected in 2010 during implementation of Sunukaddu 2.0, a public health intervention designed to support youths' meaningful communication. This project was funded by le Réseau Africain d'Education pour la Santé (RAES). Some of the program's impacts are detailed in a book chapter, "Our Voice: Public Health and Youths' Communication for Social Change in Sénégal," in *African Childhoods: Survival, Education, and Peace-building in the Youngest Continent* (M. Ensor, Ed., 2012).

5.1. Mats beneath trees, clotheslines, G-nuts, and birds in Northern Uganda

In 2008, we partnered with Save the Children in Northern Uganda to evaluate a project that aimed to reintegrate (into their home communities or into new communities) young women and girls formerly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army during the country's civil war (Singhal & Durá, 2009). Former abductees had been, in most cases, forced to commit atrocities in their home communities and almost universally used as sex slaves. Traumatized home communities tended to reject these "pariah" women, denying them access to friend- or kinship networks, status, and/or a stable income.

To assess the impacts of this project, we conducted participatory sketching activities with a group of returnees (most of them young mothers and several of them former child soldiers). 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." As researchers applying a grounded theory approach, even prior to systematically coding and analyzing data, we noticed a pattern in the recurrence of statements similar to Sylvia's. In the end, we discovered that the mat beneath the tree was ubiquitous across our respondents' change narratives (See Figs. 1 and 2). This prevalence suggested to us that learning more about the tree and the mat was worthwhile.



Fig. 1. The mat beneath the tree.



Fig. 2. Betty's many possessions, including the clothesline.

The face value of this experience, which we call the first layer of meaning, does not suggest much of a “story.” However, participants added a second layer of meaning, elaborating that this was where they talked and rested. Having a place to talk implies that they had people to talk with; having a place to rest implies that they valued self-care and/or could afford leisure time. As evaluators seeking to understand the extent to which participants still endured stigma and/or poverty, these tree-shaded mats suddenly seemed quite significant indeed. They provided a way of monitoring community reintegration.

We wondered if there were any additional layers of meaning. After formal data collection concluded, Paska, the project coordinator for Save the Children, explained that sitting on a mat under a tree has important symbolic meaning in Acholi culture. Among the Acholi, having a tree next to one's homestead means being able to offer a place where elders can sit with authority and a sense of well-being and, with composure, tell stories. It indicates social standing and growth. A mat signifies a place of rest, a place of greeting, a sign of welcome – the ability to host others.

The respondents' narration and Paska's explanation helped us to understand a mat beneath a tree as a cultural beacon – a culturally embedded, user-defined indicator of change. Without their explanations, such artifacts would have appeared unremarkable to our “outsider” eyes. But with local stakeholder insight, we appreciated how these objects transcend the ordinary and serve as indicators that the participants have friends, free time, status, and means – strong evidence indeed that community reintegration has occurred, and produced desirable outcomes.

Our discovery of the clothesline as a cultural beacon occurred in a similar fashion. In Betty's sketch and accompanying narration, we see the tree and the mat, but we also see other possessions, including a clothesline.

Betty described her assets in great detail: a house, a bed, a curtain, a mat under the tree, utensils, and so on. Then she noted: “I have an *agulu* (water pot) to store and cool water and a wire to hang clothing.” Many other girls drew and talked about having a wire to hang clothing. A clothesline's first layer of meaning might be hygiene – participants could wash their clothes and hang them to dry. Respondents themselves offered the second layer of meaning, the clothesline's significance beyond hygiene. 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. Additional narrations explaining the sketches confirmed that the clothesline is a cultural beacon, for it illuminates the presence not only of personal care, hygiene, and grooming, but also of material well-being, social status, and self-respect.

During an off-the-cuff conversation in the field with Jimmy, a member of the local Save the Children staff, we discovered two more cultural beacons. When one of the present authors observed that there were whole g-nuts (peanuts) along the road, Jimmy explained:

G-nuts on the ground are a sign of abundance. Before, people were so hungry that if there ever were 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 did not use to come because there were no leftover food scraps (personal communication, August 2008).

Jimmy's testimony was not part of structured research activities but we recorded it in a field journal and photographed these flora and fauna. For outsiders, peanuts on the ground or birds circling campsites would hardly suggest even a first layer of meaning; most would conclude (if they even stopped to think at all) that these were unexceptional elements. But insiders know better. Jimmy was generous enough to explain that nuts on the ground are extraordinary. They are a cultural beacon because their significance is culturally embedded and contains a second layer of user-defined meaning: food supply is sufficient enough that one would find even a single g-nut on the ground. The same goes for birds at campsites – they are cultural beacons pointing to the availability of food scraps, which in turn indicates an increase in food security.

Whether through structured participatory research activities or during meta-research conversations and storytelling, a mat beneath a tree, a clothesline, and even g-nuts on the ground and birds circling campsites can be rich in contextual, culturally embedded meaning.

5.2. Birthday parties, jeans, boy-friends and bicycles in rural India

In Bihar, India, we used participatory photography to assess impacts of *Taru*, an entertainment-education radio soap opera that championed equal treatment of girls and boys. After listening to the radio program for several weeks, participants photographed and narrated visible signs of change in their communities.

Eighteen-year-old Meenakshi explained that, after listening to a *Taru* storyline in which residents of the fictional rural community Suhagpur celebrated a young girl's birthday, a couple in her own village threw a party for their daughter. Not long after this first party, a string of birthday celebrations were held for village girls. This practice slowly spread to surrounding villages, where *Taru* was equally popular.

Without context, outsiders might interpret this event as ordinary; after all, girls all over the world have birthday parties. But such an event is unusual in many rural Indian villages. Most residents 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, the celebration of a girl's birthday has a user-defined second layer of meaning and is therefore a cultural beacon, one that points to shifting gender roles and notions of equity in Bihar.

Vandana, a 17-year-old listener of *Taru* from Village Kamtaul, submitted a photo that contained two cultural beacons indicating gender equality. In this photo, Vandana was clad in jeans and standing beside a young man. While outsiders may glide past such a photo, insiders from the local context can appreciate its transgressive elements: conservative villagers deem jeans inappropriate. Vandana's jeans are a cultural beacon because they indicate more than face-value, more than a preference for denim over linen. They outwardly and consciously reflect her independence – perhaps even her defiance – of traditional norms.



Fig. 3. Vandana posing for a picture next to her male friend.

As 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.” Vandana identified this relationship as *Taru*-related because the character *Taru* enjoyed a platonic relationship with a male classmate. The extent to which this qualifies as change was explicated by community members who said this is perhaps the first time in their village that a young woman has invited a young man to stand beside her and pose for a photograph (See Fig. 3); young women and young men simply do not fraternize, and young women dare not initiate. Thus, the boy-friend relationship is a cultural beacon, indicative of a larger shift in social norms.

Mukesh, a 22-year-old respondent in Abirpur village, also documented gender equality progress by snapping a photo of two girls with a bicycle (See Fig. 4).

The first layer of meaning is seemingly ordinary: one girl is riding a bicycle, another is walking beside it. But knowledge of cultural norms adds the second layer of meaning. In rural India, male members typically appropriate material artifacts such as bicycles, radio sets, and cameras; therefore, a photo of two girls sharing a bicycle is telling. Its contextual significance becomes clearer in our knowledge that *Taru*'s plotlines incessantly promoted equal status for women, equal treatment of the boy child and girl child, and mobility for girls outside of their homes. Mukesh added a third layer of meaning, saying of his photograph,



Fig. 4. Girls using a bicycle to change gender norms.

“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). It is unclear whether Mukesh was articulating the words and ideas of the girls themselves, or if he was constructing his own meaning. If it is the latter, then this CB also indicates Mukesh's own increased awareness of girls' interest in social freedoms.

5.3. Intersecting paths and plant life in the Peruvian Amazon

To better understand changes produced by Minga Perú's livelihood and environmental resource management programs, we invited eight children from various riverine communities to participate in a participatory photography and sketching assessment (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006).

Intersecting paths, which appeared in several of the children's illustrations (see Fig. 5), are a CB. To outsiders, paths might seem like an ordinary way to get from point A to point B. However, from the accompanying narrations, we learned that these intersecting paths hold another layer of meaning as both discrete homesteads and distant communities finally have access to neighbors. These intersecting paths are a CB that represents interdependence and communal living (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006).

The sketch also depicts low-lying shrubs interspersed with trees in a contoured pattern. At face-value, this might be interpreted as page filler or meaningless doodles. But the boy who created this sketch explained that he drew 11 different kinds of trees and shrubs and purposefully dotted them with colorful varieties of fruits and flowers. Therefore, the plant life in his picture is a CB, representing both his esteem for and knowledge of the natural environment. For Minga Perú's agro-forestry efforts, both this boy's attitude and his command of information represent success in terms of consciousness-raising and increased likelihood of sustaining environmentally respectful practice.

The sketch also depicts houses, schools and churches. The first layer of meaning is sufficient for understanding these objects: houses, schools, and churches are important institutions. As such, they do not qualify as a CB but they are potential overlooked indicators. If monitors neglected to note, pre- and post-intervention, the quantity and quality of these structures, then they would certainly be overlooked indicators.

Similarly, several children's sketches featured chicken coops and fish farms (See Fig. 6). This suggests that such sites of livestock production did not exist prior to Minga Perú's intervention; it might mean that building chicken coops and fish farms are artifacts



Fig. 5. This sketch demonstrates local respect for the natural environment and communal living.



Fig. 6. Children's drawings of trees, chicken coops, and fish farms in the Peruvian Amazon.

of the agro-forestry project. However, since accompanying narration failed to provide a second layer of culturally embedded meaning, chicken coops and fish farms are not cultural beacons. That is to say, they do not mean more than they suggest – for example, a mat beneath a tree meant more than a cushion and shade, it meant status. But in this case, chicken coops and fish farms simply mean the intuitive: food and money. Outsiders can understand the significance of chicken coops and fish farms just as easily and accurately as insiders. If Minga Perú researchers failed to count local stakeholders' chicken coops and fish farms before and after the intervention, then they are overlooked indicators, or underappreciated signs of straight-forward community change which still serve the purpose of data triangulation.

5.4. Facebook profile photos and films in Sénégal

During the summer of 2010, non-profit The African Network for Health Education (RAES) piloted Sunukaddu 2.0, a youth-oriented intervention intended to facilitate diverse skills, particularly with regard to communication (Felt & Rideau, 2012). The program's impacts upon participants were triangulated in several ways. But off-the-cuff conversations and continued email correspondence with staff revealed that participants were not the only persons affected – one staff member in particular underwent profound personal change.

Tidiane Thiang, 27, was RAES's junior audio/video specialist and numbered among the four full-time staff that implemented Sunukaddu 2.0. Prior to collaborating on Sunukaddu 2.0, Tidiane would quietly keep to himself at work; he never talked at meetings, preferring instead to listen, take copious notes, and periodically email his perspectives to his boss. But once Sunukaddu 2.0 began, Tidiane vocally brainstormed at meetings. He challenged participating youths with critical thinking questions and took the initiative to translate complex concepts, first introduced in French, into students' native Wolof. Finally, when transportation and scheduling issues unexpectedly left Tidiane as the sole instructor for an entire day, he delivered the curriculum – and loved the experience. Tidiane's colleagues playfully nicknamed him “the kitten who became a lion.” (Fig. 7)

On August 18, 2010, about two months after Sunukaddu 2.0's kickoff, Tidiane posted a new profile picture to Facebook. This act demonstrates his skills with image editing and social networking, noteworthy in and of itself in sub-Saharan Africa. But Tidiane



Fig. 7. Tidiane's Facebook profile picture.

added a second layer of meaning, writing in an email, “You gave me self-confidence thanks to these skills” (personal communication, September 22, 2010). The picture can thus be understood as neither a Photoshop experiment, nor a trivial alteration, nor an inside joke, but as a declaration of Tidiane's own embrace of a more confident persona, symbolized by the lion bursting from inside of him. Tidiane's profile picture is a CB.

A year and a half later, Tidiane wrote, produced, and directed a short film which he submitted to the United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO)'s “Decent Work for Youth” video contest. The film features several young people on a public bus, discussing employment challenges for urban and rural Senegalese (See Fig. 8). On April 20, 2012, the ILO informed Tidiane that, out of the 240 films submitted, his was judged among the top 15. As such, the ILO would embed his film on both its website and Facebook page, as well as screen it at their two-day forum in Geneva.

Tidiane's film is a CB. After Sunukaddu's conclusion in 2010, Tidiane stated, “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). This disclosure suggests that Tidiane's film manifested a long-standing interest in



Fig. 8. Screenshot of Car Rapide, Tidiane's short film (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6EQ50-Qg7w>).

good governance and social justice. A note accompanying his film also indicates that this work attempts to go even one step further – make change. Tidiane wrote in an email dated May 3, 2012, “I think that this film, once it’s shown at the international forum in Geneva, maybe will change something with regards to employment policies for youths in Sénégal and in Africa.”

The film also represents Tidiane’s rich learning from Sunukaddu 2.0. Tidiane explained, “I showcased social awareness in being able to write the script, I used collective intelligence to direct the film, and I’m in the middle of networking so that more people in the world can have access to this film and share it” (personal communication, June 12, 2012). Tidiane’s words, about his values, his hopes for the film, and the skills that relate to its production, provide a second layer of meaning; they prove that there is more to this film than can be seen on the surface. Tidiane’s film is a CB that illuminates civic engagement and applied education.

5.5. Summary of sites and contexts for CBs

In summary, CBs differ from other indicators of change in that their significance is culturally embedded and user-defined. In other words, they require grassroots explication beyond a first (often more universal) layer of meaning. The 12 CBs we gleaned from our evaluation research across four projects appeared in the form of (1) mats beneath trees; (2) clothes on clotheslines; (3) g-nuts on the ground; (4) birds circling campsites; (5) girls’ birthday parties; (6) a young woman wearing jeans; (7) posing for a photo with friends who are boys, (8) girls riding bicycles; (9) intersecting paths in a community; (10) depiction of diverse plant life; (11) Facebook profile pictures; and (12) community-oriented films. We located these 12 CBs within the following four sites:

1. *material possessions* (e.g., mats beneath trees, clotheslines, jeans);
2. *community landscape features* (e.g., g-nuts on the ground, birds circling campsites, intersecting paths, lush plant life);
3. *social behaviors* (e.g., celebrating girls’ birthdays, girls befriending boys, girls riding bicycles); and
4. *community-inspired art* (e.g., Facebook profile pictures, films).

And we located the 12 CBs within the following contexts:

1. *participatory evaluations* (e.g., participatory sketching, photography, and narration);
2. *field-based observations* (e.g., peripheral to formal data collection activities); and
3. *off-the-cuff conversations* (e.g., during informal conversation, correspondence, or in transit from site to site).

These sites and contexts are not exhaustive, but they do reflect experiences across four different sites (internationally) over an eight-year span. The CBs we found across projects alerted us as evaluators to unexpected areas of programmatic impact – what counts at a local level and how such data informs, deepens, complements, or perhaps even challenges the insights gleaned from formal or institutionally driven (quantitative and qualitative) evaluations.

5.6. Discovering (unexpected) areas of programmatic impact: what counts and for whom?

Our second research question asked: *How do CBs deepen our insights about what counts and for whom in programmatic interventions?* Beyond strengthening the resulting evaluation products at an applied level, being attentive to CBs brought us closer to bridging the theory-practice gap (See [Dervin & Huesca,](#)

[1997;](#) [Enghel & Wilkins, 2012;](#) [Huesca, 2002](#)) at various levels as we explain in a recent publication:

Because CBs have the potential to more fully illuminate program impact, organizations can better ascertain the relative efficiencies of their efforts and the ripple effects engendered...[and] 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 the value and sustainability of an intervention ([Felt et al., 2013, p. 347](#)).

CBs uniquely inform funders, implementing organizations, evaluation teams, and participants about real, rich experiences. These unexpected impacts and insights, though modest and often subtle, can be fed back into the organization or project and acted upon almost immediately.

In the cases presented above, CBs helped the evaluation teams to understand tacit knowledge contained in formal articulations of program-related change. For example, in Northern Uganda a few months prior to our involvement in the project evaluation, Save the Children local staff had administered a survey in which over 90% of project participants reported (a) an enhanced self-concept, e.g., felt an increase in their self-esteem, formed relationships with mentors, and participated in games, dance, and drama; (b) improved hygiene, e.g., cleaning floors, regular washing of clothes, and regular bathing; and (c) enhanced social engagement, e.g., involvement in all activities relevant to the project ([Singhal & Durá, 2009](#)). The CBs gathered in participatory data collection activities we conducted triangulated these findings. They also added nuance and depth in terms of what the survey findings meant for participants, i.e., how do participants tacitly practice these new behaviors day-to-day, and what is the *grassroots significance* of these practices.

Similarly in the Peruvian Amazon, *what counted for children* helped the evaluation team to understand not only that Minga’s programmatic interventions had increased options for adult-managed livelihoods, but also that children perceived these changes in a unique way. Minga’s youngest constituents made known through their sketches that they noticed and appreciated increased connections to other human beings (e.g., neighbors, other communities) and to the natural and built environment (e.g., plant life). For them, the significance of programmatic changes transcended mere survival; it was about quality of life. These CBs then were essential in directing researchers to delve further into the grassroots significance of programmatic changes.

The CBs garnered across projects speak to the value of creating the *contextual conditions* for CBs to emerge and be noticed. We were able to learn the local significance of mats under trees, clotheslines, intersecting paths, lush plant life, jeans, birthday celebrations, and boy-friends – all seemingly commonplace objects or occurrences – through formal participatory data collection activities. The sketching, photography, and art created the conditions (albeit intimidating for some at the beginning of the activity) for participants to reflect visually. Introducing a visual lens prior to a verbal lens provided an added opportunity to make tacit knowledge tangible. Thus, participants’ complementary narrations were anchored in concrete representations, enabling the explanation of that second and unexpected layer of meaning that differentiates CBs from other indicators.

Further, we were able to learn about the significance of g-nuts, birds, a Facebook profile photo, and a community-oriented film through informal engagement. Regardless of whether our involvement in these projects was of a shorter or longer duration, we found ways to make relational moments count. Across projects we deliberately suspended disbelief, positioning local stakeholders as

legitimate co-constructors of knowledge rather than as entities to be persuaded into our own interpretations and worldviews (For a review see Dervin & Huesca, 1997; Flower, 2002, 2008; Simmons, 2007).

5.7. Designing and conducting CB-respectful evaluations

With our third research question we sought to learn: *How can researchers and practitioners honor CBs in their program monitoring and evaluations?* We are specifically interested in ways to evade the “occupational psychoses” and “trained incapacities” noted by Burke (1954/1984), and seek to facilitate more situated, multivocal knowledge-making (Papa & Singhal, 2009; Singhal & Durá, 2009). As noted above, CBs enriched our institutionally driven evaluations by helping us to account for multiple, concurrent, and contextualized worldviews, acknowledging the validity of multiple perspectives. In this section, we present concrete suggestions to facilitate the discovery of CBs in program evaluations.

Use participatory methods. Our experiences suggest that participatory, non-textocentric data collection strategies facilitate evaluators' recognition of CBs. For the projects presented here we utilized sketching with spoken narration, photography with spoken narration, and art submissions with written narration. The principle is that participants can share salient changes and explain their significance; how this representation and explanation occurs can and should vary by participant population, according to their comfort and appropriateness of different media. If researchers and practitioners collaborate with stakeholders from the beginning of a project (which is a tenet of PAR), then they inherently create a space for dialog and the emergence of CBs.

Relational practices. Our data also support co-constructing multiple means of informally gathering participants' insights. Relationship-building practices more obviously include unstructured conversation, respect and humility in one's approach, and perceptive listening. In addition to these we have compiled the following list of lessons learned across our research experiences (adapted from Dura et al., 2013; Felt et al., 2013):

- *Look for “unusual suspects.”* By acknowledging those who are present, make it a point to ask about those who are not present, and ask, who else needs to be here? Or, if those who are not present come up in conversations, ask if they should be invited.
- *Visit local stakeholders in their own contexts when possible.* Our experience suggests that holding interviews with key informants in their work or project contexts anchors the dialog in CB sites (e.g., material possessions, community landscape features).
- *Suspend disbelief and practice deep listening.* The suspension of disbelief grants legitimacy to other ways of knowing. In his exploration of dialog between conflicting actors, Gurevitch (1989) urged interlocutors to first deliberately debunk that which “. . . has been appropriated already as ‘understood’ from an egocentric/ethnocentric perspective” (p. 162) – in other words, begin from a place of *not understanding*, devoid of assumptions, in order to finally arrive at full(er) understanding. Finally, across every evaluation, we found that deep listening (internalizing before interpreting) and careful observation were essential for discovering cultural beacons.
- *Be curious, ask questions.* Often a fear of asking too many questions or probing too much precludes our curiosity. However, having a genuine interest in learning increases the odds of recognizing communicative nuances and multiple layers of meaning.
- *Begin early and follow up.* Beginning to build relationships as early as possible can be helpful in terms of laying the groundwork for informal conversations. Maintaining steady contact with key people paves the road for follow-up questions.

Look for CBs in likely sites. Identifying CBs across four unrelated projects in different locations and timeframes has yielded four concrete sites: material possessions, community landscape features, social behaviors, and community-inspired art. These sites give investigators a starting point and should be scrutinized for CBs.

Utilize locally relevant media. To further support community members' disclosure of indicators, we advocate for documenting goals, metrics and findings in locally relevant media, both print-based (e.g., leaflets, newspapers) and non-print-based (e.g., radio, television, performance). Participatory inputs can contribute to finding the best outlets.

Establish validity and reliability. According to program evaluation expert Chen (2010), integrative validity depends upon three factors: viability, effectiveness, and efficacy. Our implementation suggestions illuminate how using CBs within program evaluation is viable, or “practical, affordable, suitable. . . and helpful in the real-world” (Chen, 2010, p. 207). In terms of effectiveness (or external validity), our multiple and diverse case examples establish CBs' capacity to capture program-related change in real-world settings. In terms of achieving efficacy (or internal validity), investigators can pursue triangulation (or use CBs themselves as a triangulation tool) as well as and theoretical sampling. Respondent groups can be chosen for theoretical rather than statistical reasons, and respondents can be added until theoretical saturation occurs (and when incremental learning is minimal) (See Boeije, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989; Glasser & Strauss, 1967).⁷

It is important to note that some qualitative researchers believe that both validity and reliability must be reconceptualized for qualitative contexts (Golafshani, 2003). Davies and Dodd (2002) understand validity as “rigor,” which they define as “exploring subjectivity, reflexivity, and the social interaction of interviewing” (p. 281), while reliability might be understood as “trustworthiness” (Seale, 1999, p. 266) or “dependability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Summarizing these sentiments, Donaldson et al. (2009) proclaimed, “credible evidence is what the relevant communities of discourse and practice accept as valid, reliable, and trustworthy” (p. 15).

6. Conclusion

The present research was motivated by our observations that (1) current methods for gathering data do not wholly capture program-related transformations, and (2) grassroots ways of knowing yield legitimate data and can enrich programmatic efforts and evaluations. We framed our inquiry around several key research questions: *In which specific forms did CBs appear?*

⁷ Once cultural beacons are validated qualitatively, their reliability and validity (both internal and external) can be estimated in certain relatively straightforward ways. For instance, through 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. If the cultural beacons are valid, then they should be substantially and significantly correlated with these concrete, observed changes. In certain circumstances, cultural beacons can be transformed back into quantitative data. In recent years, researchers and practitioners have developed multiple processes for converting participants' storied or lived experiences into quantitative terms (See Davies & Dart, 2005; Holland, 2013). For our purposes, we could tally the frequencies of specific CBs. This might motivate evaluators to pursue a particular CB, perhaps by looking for signs in the environment (e.g., strolling the community and counting how many homesteads offer a mat beneath their tree) and/or surveying the community specifically (e.g., Do you have a mat underneath your tree?). This approach could expose the depth and breadth of a particular effect (in this case, the extent to which community members enjoy friends, free time, status, and means). Locating these CBs within certain regions or demographic communities can help to shed light on rates of participant engagement and/or local program fidelity.

In which sites or contexts do CBs tend to be located?

How do CBs deepen our insights about what counts and for whom in programmatic interventions? And how can researchers and practitioners honor CBs in their program monitoring and evaluations?

Four international evaluation projects revealed 12 rich, culturally embedded, user-defined data, or cultural beacons (CBs). Across projects, CBs tend to be located within four sites: material possessions, community landscape features, social behaviors, and community-inspired art. We found that participatory methodologies and strong researcher-program staff/community stakeholder relationships (e.g., field-based observations, and off-the-cuff conversations) facilitate the discovery of CBs.

CBs enrich the complexity of monitoring and assessment by asking, at the levels of investigators, participants, and funders alike, *What counts, and for whom?* In a context of increasing inequalities and widening theory-practice gap in development work (Engel & Wilkins, 2012), we suggest CBs as a means of uncovering hidden and unexpected layers of meaning, which yield more robust and nuanced insights about participants' lived realities.

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 should be continually 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 program evaluation and more broadly in the social sciences.

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- Lucía Durá** (ldura@utep.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition in the Department of English at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Her work in the design, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of system, culture, organization, and social change interventions focuses on how change happens rhetorically (how health, advocacy, intercultural, and change-related messages are designed, implemented, and evaluated). She has presented and published her work at multiple local, national, and international venues, including peer reviewed journals, book chapters, and international reports. She has been the recipient of numerous honors and awards such as the UT-Arlington Academy of Distinguished Scholars Public Interest Award and the Dodson Dissertation Fellowship.
- Laurel J. Felt** (felt@usc.edu), a doctoral candidate at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, is guided by her desire to support children's healthy development. Accordingly, she has designed research protocols, pedagogical interventions, and professional development to nurture social and emotional competence, new media literacies, and powerful play. She is Instructional Design Specialist/Research Assistant with the USC Dornsife Joint Educational Project and Instructional Design Coordinator with the USC Shoah Foundation. From 2010 to 2012, she was lead Research Assistant for USC Anenberg Innovation Lab's project Participatory Learning And You! (PLAY!). Her other research interests include participatory action research and impact games.
- Arvind Singhal** (asinghal@utep.edu) is the Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Endowed Professor of Communication and Director of the Social Justice Initiative in UTEP's Department of Communication. He is also appointed as the William J. Clinton Distinguished Fellow at the Clinton School of Public Service, Little Rock, Arkansas. He teaches and conducts research in the diffusion of innovations, the positive deviance approach, organizing for social change, and the entertainment-education strategy. His research and outreach spans sectors such as health, education, peace, human rights, poverty alleviation, sustainable development, civic participation, democracy and governance, and corporate citizenship. He is co-author or editor of 12 books including *Inviting Everyone: Healing Healthcare through Positive Deviance* (2010); *Organizing for Social Change* (2006); *Entertainment-Education Worldwide: History, Research, and Practice* (2004); *Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action* (2003); and *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (1999). He has authored 150 peer-reviewed essays in such outlets as the *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Theory*, *Communication Monographs*, *Health Communication*, *Communication Quarterly*, and *Management Communication Quarterly*.