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## Translational Research Design: Collaborating with Stakeholders for Program Evaluation

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## Translational Research Design: Collaborating with Stakeholders for Program Evaluation

### Abstract

In this article, the authors examine researcher collaboration with stakeholders in the context of a translational research approach used to evaluate an elementary school program. The authors share their experiences as evaluators of this particular program to demonstrate how collaboration with stakeholders evolved when a translational research approach was applied to program evaluation. Beginning with a review of literature regarding stakeholder participation in evaluation and other qualitative research, the article reflects on a method for conceptualizing participant involvement and collaboration within the translational framework. The relationship between researchers and stakeholders is articulated according to this method. We interpose these descriptions with their alignment to Petronio's (2002, 2007) five types of practical validity for translational research. The paper ends with a consideration of what was learned throughout the evaluation process, including both successes and challenges, by means of the translational model.

### Keywords

Translational Research, Translational Validity, Participation in Program Evaluation, Collaborative Research

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## **Translational Research Design: Collaborating with Stakeholders for Program Evaluation**

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*In this article, the authors examine researcher collaboration with stakeholders in the context of a translational research approach used to evaluate an elementary school program. The authors share their experiences as evaluators of this particular program to demonstrate how collaboration with stakeholders evolved when a translational research approach was applied to program evaluation. Beginning with a review of literature regarding stakeholder participation in evaluation and other qualitative research, the article reflects on a method for conceptualizing participant involvement and collaboration within the translational framework. The relationship between researchers and stakeholders is articulated according to this method. We interpose these descriptions with their alignment to Petronio's (2002, 2007) five types of practical validity for translational research. The paper ends with a consideration of what was learned throughout the evaluation process, including both successes and challenges, by means of the translational model. Keywords: Translational Research, Translational Validity, Participation in Program Evaluation, Collaborative Research*

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The translational research design represents a researcher's commitment to collaboration with participants, and addresses issues of ethics and advocacy that have been recognized in established descriptions of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Garner, Raschka, & Sercombe, 2006; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Korth, 2002; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). Specifically, translational research represents an effort to translate findings into functional solutions for research partners and community members (Petronio, 2002). Yet the literature finds that translational efforts are neither easy nor occurring with great frequency (Maienschein, Sunderland, Ankeny, & Robert, 2008; Petronio, 1999). In recent accounts, scholars have located translational research within the fields of communications and medicine in which discoveries are driven (translated) toward practical applications (Hamos, 2006; Petronio, 2007). In our use of the term, both the process (method) and product (outcome) characterize important aspects of translational research, particularly among the individuals with whom the researchers collaborate: the local partners or stakeholders. The evaluation project described in this article is used to demonstrate how translational research and collaboration with stakeholders developed in the context of the evaluation of an educational program. It is our goal to represent the translational research processes by sharing actual experiences in collaborating with a specific evaluation partner. However, we do not present results from actual data concerning this evaluation.

This article recounts the relationship we developed while working at a university-based education research center with the Catholic diocese of a large Midwestern city. The project involved the evaluation of an after-school program established to meet the educational needs of children attending low-performing and high-poverty Catholic schools. Though the initial partnership developed out of the diocese's need for program evaluation, we identified this need

as an opportunity to forge a relationship with a community partner and to contribute to the existing body of research on after-school programs. The overall mission of the university research center was to use translational methods in all projects. In practice, the approach was two-fold. One facet consisted of the collaboration with community partners for their immediate research needs. The second included translation of research results back to the field and to the public. While traditional notions of research often focus on a linear process in which faculty researchers generate questions, conduct a study, and publish results, the translational process begins and ends with researcher and partner together at the table co-leading the inquiry process (Ortloff & Bradley-Levine, 2008; Petronio, 2002; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). In the current case, the demand for university level research intersected with a community partner's need for accountability and translated to products beneficial for the partner, its program, participants, the university, and academic community in general.

The translational methods described here are much like a moving target. Indeed, forming a true partnership is not considered an end in itself, but rather an ongoing practice. Partners aimed to learn from the other throughout the research process and to better meet the needs of the community as a result. Our case is no exception. As such, we find it necessary to describe some history of the field of translational research. Next, we identify common understandings of stakeholder involvement within evaluation and qualitative research literature, but note that we prefer the term "partner" to "stakeholder" in order to draw attention to the intended horizontal relationship we are cultivating with the community. However, we will use the terms "partner" and "stakeholder" interchangeably given that the latter is more commonly used in the selected literature. Lastly, we outline the specific methods we utilized in the translational research process, drawing on research methodology across disciplines. These methods are by no means a "how to" list for translational research among community partners, but rather describe what evolved "at the table" when we came together with our research partner.

Finally, while it is important to note that program evaluation is a large piece in the relationship between the research center we represented and the diocese, it is just one part of the translational relationship, and the emphasis of this article. The goal of forging opportunities for translational research is, indeed, to improve practice for community partners—through the work they need, but also through university research made public—and to overtly engage local stakeholders who are experts of their contexts in order to make university resources relevant and applicable to real community needs (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009).

Our case is but one example, and in writing this article, the reflection process prompted us to further define what we mean by "translation." Thus, the methods in translation described here served a dual goal: to aid community partners in meeting their need for evaluation/research, and to extend current notions of qualitative research for the purpose of bringing the needs of the community to the fore of scholarship (Petronio, 2002).

### **Literature: Approaches to Translation**

#### **Translational Research in Communications and Medicine**

Both communications and medical research scholars have a recent record of using translational research in their respective fields. Petronio (2007) and Maienschein et al. (2008) acknowledge the more recent and popular focus bestowed upon translational work through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and their "Roadmap for Medical Research" issued in 2003, in which the U.S. federal government called for scientists to intensify their efforts to apply medical results more rapidly than in the past. However, as early as the mid-1990s, Petronio (2007) described a commitment to "translating research into practice" (p. 215). In other words,

she advocated a way for communications scholars to establish methods of implementation that would be “geared toward developing functional practices to improve lives” (p. 215). There is a subtle difference between the two fields’ treatment of the word *translation*, though both involve the increase of efforts toward bringing scholarship and research to the clinical or community places where the application of new knowledge is most pressing.

Woolf (2008) refers to these two types of translational work in the medical field as T1 and T2. T1 is identified as the “new methods for diagnosis, therapy, and prevention and their first testing in humans” as have been acquired from recent laboratory work (p. 211). T2, on the other hand, focuses on the intersection of the results from T1 with the “community and ambulatory care settings” which involves a whole host of unpredictable variables and disciplines that characterize work with “human behavior and organizational inertia” (pp. 211-212). Simply put, T1 appears to be the actual drugs and treatments that emerge from the lab, while T2 refers to the ways in which the drugs and treatments are accessed by the patients and communities who need them. From a research perspective, T1 requires more quantitative approaches such as experimental design whereas T2 benefits from qualitative approaches because the goal of T2 is to answer questions of why and how communities and individuals use the innovations developed through T1 research. Moreover, what Petronio and communication scholars have been calling “translating scholarship/research into practice” for over a decade closely resembles Woolf’s T2.

Petronio (2007) identified several types of translational validity which address the uncertainty of applying findings to practice and help further define their contribution to the field. These are “experience,” “responsive,” “relevance,” “cultural,” and “tolerance” validities (Petronio, 2007, p. 216). Each describes aspects and enactments of communication to which translational scholars must be attentive in achieving the goals of translation. More specifically, they explain the precise means for the researcher and the stakeholder’s partnership in the inquiry, and how these should proceed. The five types of validity not only offer “criteria for the admissibility of evidence” and ways to “align scholarship to the translational process” (Petronio, 2002, p. 511), but in our understanding they propose how stakeholders and researchers collaborate in research.

*Experience validity* recognizes the lived experience of the research partners and subjects. *Responsive validity* obliges researchers to remain attentive to society’s changing needs. *Relevance validity* ensures that value is placed “on the issues important to target populations,” making certain that community needs come first when researchers are deciding which questions to explore in their work (Petronio, 2002, p. 510). *Cultural validity* respects both the ethnicities and customs of various cultural groups and ensures that these serve as a context for research translation. Lastly, *tolerance validity* upholds the iterative research process by recognizing “taken-for-granted phenomena that occur in everyday life and passing that understanding on to others” (p. 511).

In essence, we observe a strong correlation between translational validity and qualitative research (Petronio, 2002). The five types of validity offer a way for qualitative researchers to define their ontological and epistemological views by means of the translational approach. Many qualitative approaches acknowledge the social negotiation of both the researcher’s and participants’ views of reality (Creswell, 2007). In this view, there is not one reality, but a mutual perspective in which researcher and participant (among others) collaborate to build and share their respective understandings of their lived experiences. Knowledge is likewise generated through iterative and negotiated processes within the shared research. Petronio’s five types of validity assist the researcher in calling attention to the many contexts and reasons for keeping collaboration and negotiation at the forefront of the research process. Within Petronio’s five types of validity, researchers selecting qualitative approaches can recognize ways to describe, evaluate, and substantiate their collaboration with stakeholders and

the community. They also aid the researcher in being attentive to ways in which collaboration *ought* to take place.

Likewise, the five types of validity (in varying ways) highlight what we, through our partnership with the diocese, have sought out in meeting their needs based on their particular circumstances, practices, cultures, and overall lives that existed prior to our involvement, and persisted after we left the field. Experience, cultural, and tolerance validities are the most applicable to our case of program evaluation. Each represents the ways in which we continually negotiated the terrain of translational work in the evaluation of the after-school program through a deep contextual understanding of our partner's lived experience and culture. Because the relationship with community members is so integral to translational work, we now turn to the literature's treatment of stakeholder participation in evaluation and research to help address the issue of researcher and community relationships.

### **Stakeholder Participation and Communication**

More common notions of partner involvement in the literature refer to degrees of stakeholder participation within evaluation and academic research. Taut (2008) reviewed several researchers' conceptions of stakeholder involvement within evaluation research, in particular, and found that there was no conclusion regarding how many and to what degree stakeholders should be involved in research. Nonetheless she noted that all researchers believe they should be engaged to some extent. In a widely-cited article concerning types of collaborative evaluation, Cousins and Whitmore (1998) distinguished between two types of participatory research, which they term "Practical-Participatory Evaluation" (P-PE) and "Transformative-Participatory Evaluation" (T-PE). In P-PE, the evaluator leads most aspects of the evaluation along with the participants, while T-PE characterizes full stakeholder involvement (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2010).

O'Sullivan and D'Agostino (2002) applied Cousins and Whitmore's framework and further explained that utilization of findings is an important consideration when debating the role of participants in evaluation. They find that although some participants believe that the evaluator should be the one who moves forward with the findings, most believe it is the involvement of stakeholders that will increase utilization of an evaluation (O'Sullivan & D'Agostino, 2002). They also found that participation can be loosely defined and must be treated with caution. Simply providing program data can be termed "participation," but true collaboration moves beyond data provision to imply the "desired level of involvement" (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2010; O'Sullivan & D'Agostino, 2002, p. 373).

Similarly, stakeholder involvement is often dependent on the desired outcomes of the study (Taut, 2008). If there is a social justice goal regarding the empowerment of participants, then it is often the case that every stakeholder is involved and the use of an evaluation's results becomes diminished. However, if the utilization of findings is most pressing, the involvement of fewer participants is often perceived as more beneficial to the evaluation process (Taut, 2008). In either case, a belief in stakeholder contributions places varying conceptions of participation and the use of research outcomes at the center of defining what collaboration in evaluation means. We recognize the contribution of translational research for its consideration of participant/stakeholder contexts and study outcomes (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009)

Some literature considers the many ways in which participants ought to be involved in research, both practically and ethically. These include roles in participatory types of inquiry, in challenging notions of hierarchy and power, and for the contributions they make to the research process (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Garner, Raschka, & Sercombe, 2006). What translational research brings to bear on these levels of understanding for participant involvement is the idea of challenging current university practice (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009).

What is confronted is the very formation of inquiry in the first place. Translational researchers use methods that seek to set community partners' questions as *the* guiding force for new research, and emphasize the practice of collaboration and reciprocity to simultaneously meet the immediate needs of the community and university (Petronio, 2002).

Taken together, the literature summarizes varying conceptions but lacks in making actual methods of stakeholder collaboration explicit (O'Sullivan & D'Agostino, 2002; Taut, 2008). The translational partnership described below sheds light on ways stakeholders and evaluators can work together in one type of qualitative research, both to increase participation on all sides and to illuminate a new method for carrying out university research and evaluation. Cunningham (2008) asserts that collaboration must foster participation in ways that "remove barriers between those who produce knowledge (researchers) and those who use it (practitioners)" (p. 375). Thus, we articulate understandings of participatory research and evaluation in the following table.

**Table 1.** *Summary of Collaborative Research/Evaluation Strategies and Elements of Inquiry*

	<b>Principal Investigator (PI)/Evaluator Role</b>	<b>Stakeholder Involvement</b>	<b>Goal of Inquiry</b>
Practical Participatory Evaluation	Balanced leadership of inquiry with stakeholders, but ultimate decision-making with PI.	Balanced involvement in the inquiry process, but ultimate decision-making with PI.	PI and stakeholders together determine utilization of findings locally.
Empowerment Evaluation	PI is facilitator of the inquiry.	Full involvement in the inquiry and decision-making process.	Stakeholders determine utilization of findings with goal of empowerment.
Translational Research/Evaluation	Co-leads inquiry with local stakeholders; Brings university resources to inform/support inquiry. Expert of evaluation/research process.	Co-leads inquiry with PI; Expert of the local context.	PI and stakeholders determine utilization, application, and publication of findings; Ensures that research outcomes directly improve stakeholders' roles in the community and lives of the target population in addition to contributing to wider body of knowledge.

*Adapted in part from Cousins and Whitmore (1998) and Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011).*

Common to all types of research and evaluation are the three elements: principal investigator (PI)/evaluator control, stakeholder involvement, and the goal of the inquiry. Each of the three types of research/evaluation summarized in the table highlights different views of the three elements. The principal investigator/evaluator controls all aspects of research, shares research decisions locally with stakeholders, or is a balance between both. Research involves all stakeholders in all aspects of research (e.g., transformative evaluation), or only a select few stakeholders in a small number of research decisions (e.g., some types of participatory evaluation). Lastly, the goal of the inquiry could be to forge a partnership with stakeholders within an organization (e.g., transformative evaluation), or for results to be fed back into the

local organization when the research is complete (e.g., participatory evaluation). Most important to our current work, however, are characteristics of the third type: translational research. Translational research maintains many of the aspects of the types above, but also acknowledges that both the evaluator and stakeholder are experts of their own contexts. It works toward bringing together the best of research and practice in order to further the goals of the community within the framework of university research such as in our case.<sup>1</sup> In sum, stakeholders and the researcher both participate and contribute to the inquiry, and the results of research are to be applicable to the community organization and published in a manner that makes the findings practical and available to the wider academic and public community.

## **Translational Methods**

### **Enacting Translational Research through Partnership**

The partnership between the research center and the diocese began in the spring of 2007 when the after-school program director approached the director of our center to discuss the diocese's need for a more meaningful evaluation of their program. The center's translational research model required that researchers "be invited into a position where [they] are able to describe (or retell) events, as well as the rationale for decisions from the organization's point of view" (see Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). The diocese's need and our expertise opened the door for a collaborative partnership. The diocese was then applying for grant renewal to fund their program and sought opportunities for on-going formative feedback that would impact program implementation and quality, and the potential for the program director to contribute to the evaluation design and process. Our first task was to create the evaluation plan for the diocese's grant narrative. Pivotal to this task was the development of research questions which were crafted from the after-school program's goals. Secondly, we sought approval to work with human subjects from our university's institutional review board (IRB), which ensured our research provided the necessary documentation, safeguards, and transparency to assist in ensuring participants' privacy and protection.

Once the diocese reviewed and provided feedback to our evaluation plan and the IRB approved our protocol, the research team began the process of understanding the after-school program and how it fit into the program's goals and mission (Fitzpatrick, Worthen, & Sanders, 2011), reflective of Petronio's (2002, 2007) experience validity and cultural validity. As part of this team, the authors explored the diocesan website, reviewed curricular materials from the program and schools, and attended staff trainings as participant observers. These activities allowed us to "take into account the lived through experience of those we [were] trying to understand" (Petronio, 2002, p. 509). After the initial work in seeking to better understand the origin and mission of our community partner, the research team, led by one of the authors, entered the field and began in-depth observations of the program's summer camp. During this time, it was essential that team members engaged with the staff to establish a "supportive, non-authoritarian relationship" in order to increase trust and get to know more about the program without being intrusive (Carspecken, 1996, p. 90). To accomplish this, the team often ate lunch with the staff during site visits to the camp, and we also made ourselves visible to the staff each day. This prolonged engagement, represented through the length of time we were in contact with the staff and students, as well as the number of hours we observed the program served to "heighten the researcher's capacity to assume the insider's perspective" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 141). It also represented validation to the program director that we were committed to the

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<sup>1</sup> University-based research may not always be the locus for the primary investigator, but it is noted that this was the original intent when Petronio (1999) wrote of translating "scholarship" into practice. University research is what we mean when we discuss our roles as researchers and evaluators within the university research center.

project and willing to invest significant amounts of time and energy in order to “build trust, learn the culture, and check for misinformation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). The trust built during the initial months of the partnership led to what Smith and Helfenbein (2009) refer to as “shared decision-making /generating inquiry questions, which involve[d] a pushback against pure objectivity or self-proclaimed independence” (p. 93). In short, the collaborative process began as a result of early trust building and prolonged engagement, representing aspects of experience and cultural validity and the larger frame surrounding the participants’ experiences (Carspecken, 1996; Petronio, 2002).

### **Collaborative Evaluation Design**

Because the research center was hired to evaluate the after-school program, questions regarding what the program wanted to know were decided upon in agreement with the program director and the research lead, a position in which both authors served. This aspect of the translational process most aptly reflects relevance validity as we desired to place value on the program’s needs and to use their knowledge and descriptions of the issues that were important to them (Petronio, 2002). The researchers saw the staff and partners located within the schools and the community as the authorities of their environments; as a result, we had the opportunity to collaboratively develop appropriate methods in order to answer the most vital questions driven by program needs.

Working in concert, the research lead and the program director adopted a modified version of the Extended-Term Mixed-Method Evaluation (ETMM) design (Chatterji, 2005, including the following components: a long-term time-line; an evaluation guided by the program’s purposes; a deliberate incorporation of formative, summative, and follow-up data collection and analysis; and rigorous quantitative and qualitative evidence. This method of analysis was preferred by the directors and researchers at our university research center for its deliberately flexible, yet specific, methodology that permitted transformation over time, in response to program changes and growth. The ETMM design also enabled the team to effectively combine formative and summative data points within the appropriate timelines. For example, formative data reporting was more useful to program staff mid-way through the academic year and in our informal monthly meetings, whereas summative information concerning student data (i.e., program attendance and analysis of standardized test scores) was valuable at the year’s end for both state and local reporting. The key data points included observations, interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, and student-level data including test scores, grades, and attendance records. Although the research lead usually directed the initial development of protocols and surveys, these instruments were shared at various points of development with the program director, which afforded opportunities for her to include questions she needed or wanted to ask. Additionally, because we could not “presume we [knew] what [was] best for [our community partners] or how to best address their... needs,” program effectiveness and implementation questions changed with each year of the grant, and we met regularly with the program director to ensure that the research and evaluation were meeting the concerns of each grant year (Petronio, 2002, p. 510). The selection of the ETMM design for program evaluation likewise supported this type of flexibility (Chatterji, 2005).

### **Participatory Observations**

Petronio (2002) found that qualitative methods are often more conducive to the aims of the five types of translational validity. The use of qualitative participant observations in our research privileged both the experiences and culture of the participants and the surrounding organizations within the diocese’s after-school program. After the summer camp came to an

end, researchers made plans to begin evaluating the after-school programs held in seven sites serving over 700 students for the academic year. Because the evaluation of the after-school program was a much larger undertaking than what was offered during the summer, the research team began site visits by watching from a distance, careful to observe each program component, and student and staff interaction in their natural settings. However, after a short time, we returned to the participant observer paradigm in order to help build trust with participants, as well as to yield a participant's perspective of the program (Creswell, 2008; Petronio 2002, 2007). We began offering our assistance to students during the time allocated for homework help, which built rapport with the students while offering an extra set of hands to reduce the staff's workload. Working with the students on homework also gave us opportunities to talk to participants in order to discover important insights regarding their experiences. As participant observers we were able to build credibility with the program staff, who noticed that members of the research team were fellow educators and/or parents. As a result, they welcomed us more readily into their buildings, which helped the research proceed more efficiently. We visited each of the schools where the after-school program took place between four and eight times each semester during each school year.

The research team also utilized interviews and focus group discussions, which probed the "layered subjectivity" of participants, allowing them to discover and revise their initial thoughts and emotions through each stage of the research (Carspecken, 1996, p. 75). Our familiarity with the program and the trust we built with participants including staff, students, and parents, during extensive observations permitted them to give, what we believed to be, candid responses to interview and focus group prompts. For example, given the option to turn off the recorder so that a critical remark would be "off the record," many participants chose to leave the recorder on, showing that they trusted we would not only maintain their confidentiality, but that we understood the context of their comments. We found that staff members were more likely to share complaints with us when they knew that the information would be passed to the program director anonymously. This represents an important ethical consideration central to translational methodology in which we attempted to "place greater value on the issues that [were] important for [the] target population" (Petronio, 2002, p. 510). These honest exchanges enabled the diocese's program director to offer assistance and problem-solve with the after-school staff throughout the year.

The trust in our research team that program staff developed during the evaluation supported our efforts to conduct balanced focus group discussions with parents as well. Although staff members were responsible for recruiting parents to participate in the discussions and we might have expected that they would invite only those parents who were pleased with the program, we rarely held a discussion with a group of parents who made only positive contributions. Rather, staff wanted to hear the constructive feedback from parents they knew were not perfectly satisfied, and they believed that we would utilize this data to help them improve the program.

In addition to the qualitative data collection discussed above, the research team and program director co-designed staff, student, and parent surveys to assure that as many stakeholders as possible were given the opportunity to share their perceptions of the program, highlighting our commitment to the ideal that the research serve a relevant purpose for all populations involved (Petronio, 2002). Surveys were administered during the fall and spring of each academic year. Before each administration period, members of the research team and the program director collaborated in a review of the surveys to determine whether revisions to questions needed to be made or new topics of interest should be probed. Program staff usually administered surveys, which were available online and on paper. Parent surveys were also translated into Spanish by a staff member.

## Ongoing Formative Feedback

Because data collection occurred almost continually throughout the length of the multi-year grant period, formative feedback was both expected and needed by the program director and staff. The research team utilized the constant comparative analysis model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed us to engage in continual analysis whereby themes emerged, developed, and changed. Several months of data collection, usually over a naturally occurring time frame such as a semester or summer vacation were followed by short, but intensive analysis. Emerging themes were reported to the program director and staff via formative feedback reports. These served as member checks because the director and staff were invited, and even expected, to offer their perspectives on the findings. Reports typically went through at least two rounds of revisions as a result of these member checks.

The diversity of the research team facilitated the constant comparative analysis process and helped address issues of cultural validity through our appreciation of the local ethnicities, customs, and routines of the after-school program, staff, and students (Petronio, 2002). As mentioned previously, a number of team members were former teachers with experience and therefore, expertise working with students in the grade levels that the program served. However, the diverse backgrounds of other team members also contributed to the overall team perspective. For example, a social work major was also a graduate of one of the schools within the program; she was able to provide a community perspective to our analysis. Another team member was an international student who offered a more global analytic perspective. Also, because of her outgoing and kind personality she was admired by the children in the program. Other team members included psychology majors, higher education graduate students, and sociology majors. The diversity present in the research team facilitated internal debate and perspective taking that we believe would not have occurred within a homogeneous team, and which facilitated the translational research process from partner development and evaluation design through data collection, analysis, and cultural awareness.

From the start of this project, we explicitly strove to keep lines of communication open and transparent. To this end, we made our analysis process as understandable as possible by including the program director in various analysis sessions, which provided another opportunity for member checking and for disclosing both ours and our partners' biases and values (Petronio, 2002). This sharing allowed us to be clear about the ways the evaluation unfolded and to make the research process accessible to members of the after-school program staff. However, this open communication was complicated at times. For example, at various points during our partnership we were asked to share confidential information such as identifying a staff member who we observed doing something that the program director found unproductive. At these moments, we had to find ways to balance our commitment to preserve confidentiality with the program director's need for impartial information. But it was at these instances of tension that we believe the trust we had built through our partnership allowed us to engage in conversations where we shared, and learned from, our different perspectives.

Another form of member checking occurred as a result of our regular communication with staff at each site. Our bi-monthly visits allowed us to serve as a vehicle for facilitating interaction among the sites as well as checking our findings. We often shared successes that we observed with sites that were struggling or looking for new ideas, while staff provided us with information about the students, schools, and communities they served. In these ways, our exchange resulted in greater understanding of the context for the research team and increased knowledge sharing (Petronio, 2002) among the sites through our informal reports and continual communication.

## **Learning from Translation**

Our experience with translational research has positioned us toward demonstrating that “shared ownership of the research process present[ed] conditions for empowerment and create[d] a dynamic exchange of ideas about how to best implement and study an intervention/program” (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). We say “positioned” because translational research represented an ideal in some respects. Yet it is a type of research within which we find worth and value. Still a moving target, our understanding of translational evaluation and research resonated with Petronio’s (2007) notion of naming this kind of research a “challenge” (p. 216). Her five types of practical validity for translational work provided us with an explicit framework for facilitating stakeholder participation in our research. Because we sought to understand our partner’s lived experience throughout the evaluation process, we achieved some aspects of shared knowledge, and also came up against some difficulties. While in the field as participant observers, for example, we made efforts to build positive relationships with our participants, which helped us transcend certain difficulties.

Highlighting Petronio’s (2002, 2007) experience validity, our data collection was fostered within the context of the program’s current practice. And although our proximity to the site staff “as they enacted [their work]” permitted us access to the lived experience of the after-school program, we might have been lacking in other types of Petronio’s translational validity because we did face some challenges in “transform[ing] findings into meaningful outcomes” (p. 216). However, because of our attention to the experience and practice of our partners, we felt that our shared trust facilitated tackling issues that were difficult or uncomfortable for either the program staff or the research team members. An illustration of this challenge is depicted below.

At one site, it seemed as though the more research team members shared data with staff members, the more strained our relationship became. The site director and program staff began to view us more as “external evaluators” than as partners and were less likely to respond positively to our presence at their sites. In addition, shortly after our mid-year reports were disseminated, we had a sense that the site director or program staff members were scrambling to show us “what the evaluators want to see” rather than a typical program day. The site director and staff were also sometimes concerned because we came on the “wrong day” and were not going to see their program at its “best.” To alleviate these tensions, we continually reassured staff that we were seeing many positive things happening at their site. We would often name specific strengths of their program or remind them that during previous visits we had seen many positive elements. When faced with areas in need improvement, we shared ideas that we had seen implemented at other sites that might help them improve. In addition, we started to ask upon arrival whether there were particular activities that the site director wanted us to see that day. This allowed the site director and staff to show us their best and helped put them at ease concerning whether we would see what they had hoped. For her part, the site director became much more direct about telling us what we missed last week or yesterday, and began to share stories about program elements of which she felt proud. Other site directors also shared their concerns with the program director, who was able to communicate some of these to us on their behalf. The nature of our ongoing communication with the program director and site directors gave us many opportunities to directly address the tensions, and work toward finding realistic and empowering solutions as quickly as possible. It also enabled us to become more responsive in the way we communicated with the after-school program staff as a whole “to be receptive to human conditions” and sensitive to the manner in which our communication affected staff behavior (Petronio, 2002, p. 510).

The above tensions reflect one challenge in attempting to involve all staff members relative to the utilization of research and evaluation findings. Cousins and Whitmore’s (1998)

delineation between practical-participatory and transformative-participatory evaluation applies to our difficulties in that not all program staff were entirely enmeshed in the present evaluation. The diocese's program director and each of the seven site directors for the after-school programs were our main contacts for collaboration. Site staff members were involved on a more cursory basis, and usually in response to the program director's request for assistance in the evaluation. In accord with O'Sullivan and D'Agostino's (2002) description, site staff members were "participants," but recall this term is often used loosely. Merely permitting us access to the program at their respective sites, site staff were participating.

In seeking to understand why some of our findings were received with tension by site staff, we considered again the five types of translational validity as described by Petronio (2002, 2007). In addition to the need to address the limited participation of site staff, Petronio's tolerance validity points out our probable deficiency in "honoring existing patterns when [we] bring research into practice" (p. 216). With our main communication residing with the overall program director, our findings were not well received on occasion because they passed through the program director first before proceeding to the site directors. Had we better addressed tolerance validity, we would have been more cautious and cognizant of the intersection between the evaluation results and the sites where the research took place. This junction of communication must be a place where we, as translators of research, position ourselves and the research to be more collaboratively interpreted and presented. In hindsight, we should have offered a work session where site directors and staff were invited to view the research and discuss findings and implications with the research team before creating a collaborative report.

Another significant characteristic of the research to which we had been attentive concerned the hierarchical relationships between the program director, site directors, and staff. Though we, as the research team, fit somewhere between the program director and site directors, we constantly found ourselves searching for ways to "work the hyphen" in our researcher-participant relationships (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 108). We cast the positivist notion of "objective expert" aside in favor of adopting an approach of solidarity in which we hoped to have "[undergone] an important shift, from that of an outside appraiser to that of a collaborator" (Cunningham, 2008, p. 375). In sum, we hoped to truly collaborate with our partner. Yet, as explored in this article, this is an aspect of our translational process that experienced both success and tension. Our frequent site visits and the participant observation paradigm we followed facilitated our mutual respect in the field. However, because the diocese's program director led the collaboration efforts with the research team leaders, the researchers' relationship with site staff appeared unbalanced at times (though most site visits proceeded smoothly). Additionally, both authors are former educators in schools similar to the ones served by the after-school program, and our own backgrounds likely influenced our interactions with the sites and their staff, such as in recommending program changes based on our prior experiences. However, our goal as translators of research into practice compels us to discover more appropriate methods for collaborating with all staff. As we move forth, we must echo Petronio's (2002) call for increased communication in order to apply "new ways of conceptualizing a problem [and] make our work more accessible to the people who are not in academia" (p. 511). In this way, we will be able to truly understand the context in which staff members interact not only with our findings, but also with us as partners in the research process.

### **Limitations**

There were some notable limitations to the translational research approach in our evaluation study. Aside from the challenges noted above in "learning from translation," several limitations existed due to the fact that as researchers for a university center, we had been hired to complete a specific program evaluation for the seven school-based, after-school programs.

Because our employment at the research center depended on the funding generated from the program evaluation, we were limited in some respects by the evaluation requirements. Additionally, some after-school site staff members hesitated to participate in the evaluation beyond the provision of data; most after-school staff members worked other jobs and were paid little (Halpern, 2003). Thus, we understood their trepidation when they declined to invest more time in a collaborative research project beyond their current capacities as after-school staff members. Most of our collaboration took place with the after-school program director who was our point person for the evaluation contract. In retrospect, we would have valued building autonomy and leadership from the ground level up with each after-school site staff member, but this would include altering (somewhat radically) the job descriptions of these individuals.

A final limitation concerns our desire to work more intentionally in the results and implementation phase of our research, something which our evaluation proposal did not fully encompass at the academic year's end. In order to truly work toward the translational research ideal, our results must press toward practicality, functionality, and program quality improvement (Petronio, 2002). This may include redefining some traditional evaluator functions in the future (i.e., extensive data analyses and summative reporting) in favor of participating in collaborative quality improvement teams that work more closely with community partners within formative data collection and application paradigms (M.H. King, personal communication, May 28, 2013).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The collaborative research processes that we utilized through the enactment of translational research are relevant and important for all qualitative researchers. In writing this article, we set about demonstrating how collaboration with stakeholders during the research process can contribute to authentically translational outcomes. In our case, the program director, site directors, staff members, students, and parents participated at various levels in the design, data collection, and analysis processes. As a result, we saw findings and recommendations acted upon despite various imperfections in the process. Our close communication with the program director and site directors assisted in ensuring that the context for collaboration and translation was in position. Throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting procedures, we approximated the true partnership both we and the diocese desired. The second piece of our translational research endeavor consisted of the practical application and dissemination of findings. In addition to informal meetings and formative feedback throughout the academic year, this article itself is another instance of our commitment to advancing research methodology within the wider community.

Petronio's five types of validity address how we consider translational researchers should engage with partners and work to translate findings into practice. They draw attention to the experiences, history, customs, values, and existing patterns of participants within both translational processes and products. Also important was studying the relationships within the process of implementing the translational product. How we presented our evaluation report to after-school staff members, for example, was no less important than the evaluation work itself. Care for the people and places with whom we work, and care for those who will use our findings is necessary for translation to occur. Table 1 fails to provide a description of the products of various research models, or to demonstrate whether an outcome or product is important at all. This area requires further research. Translational research highlights the process of the partnership, but also points toward a product and the means for putting that product into practice. The other cells in the table do not make products of the research explicit, and if they do, such as when Taut (2008) described the usefulness of evaluation, the

partnerships among researchers and stakeholders were given *less* importance in an effort to come up with a practical product.

Figure 1 below highlights what we have discovered to be integral components to our translational research work. The first concerns the relocation of university research into community spaces, and the concern for the eventual translation of findings into practical solutions for community partners. The application of findings concerns both the local context and also the larger academic community. The second important feature involves the continuous reflection of translational methods in terms of Petronio's five types of translational validity. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, is the notion of community partnership, and approaching this partnership in a collaborative manner. Through the ongoing collaborative partnership, the researcher(s) and community members take advantage of each other's knowledge and resources in the co-construction of research questions and within the research process itself.

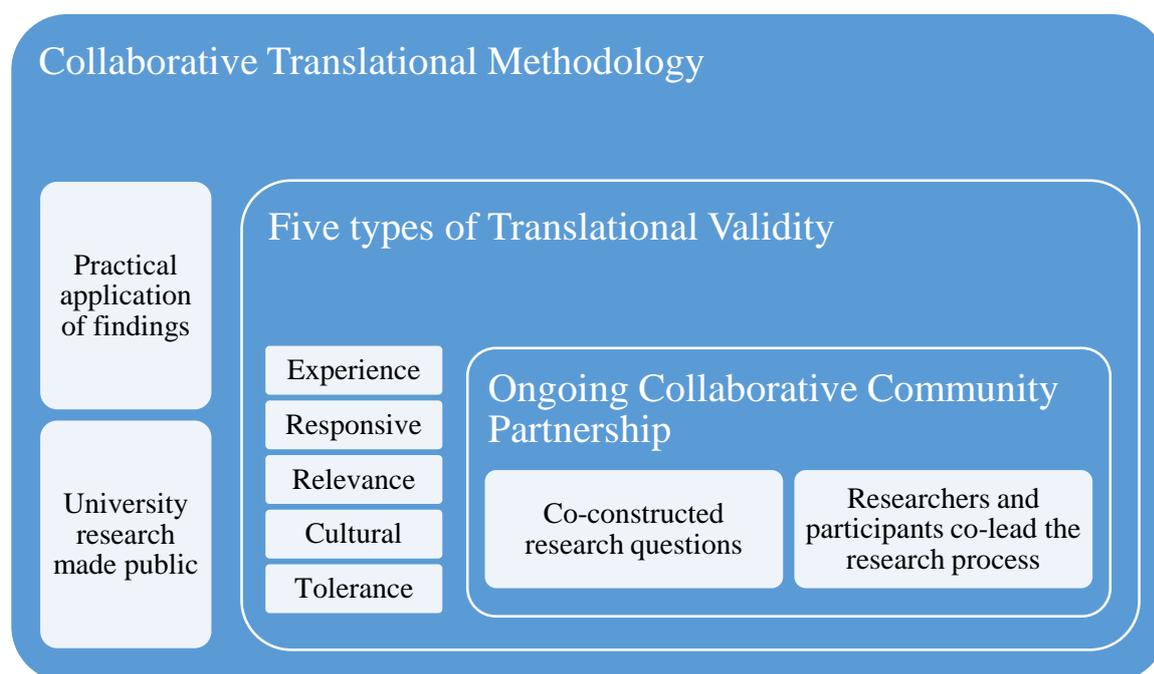


Figure 1. *Features of a Translational Research Model*

Finally, Petronio's (2002) discussion of objectivity within translational research illustrates that our work is not value-free; however, we must be willing to examine how our own values and subjectivities overlap with those of our research partners. Here, "if we want to work toward scholarship translation, we have to be clear on the way the values of those being researched and the researcher's values intersect" (Petronio, p. 511). This moves us beyond just "not interfering" (Petronio, p. 511) with the customs of our stakeholders. In this way, we find translational research challenging at best; yet our struggles do not preclude or outweigh that we also find it to be the most ethical and rewarding manner to approach our work. We are working with relationships that are tenable and evolving, and despite our best efforts to be full collaborators, tensions and imbalances are an inevitable aspect of the process that we must acknowledge and value. Furthermore, what we do have is the understanding that the relationship in which we participate is ongoing, is not an end in itself, and through the trust and communication we have built, we have hope that the process will continue into the future for the good of the partnership, the education programs served, and the community.

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