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Culturally competent evaluation in Indian Country requires an understanding of the rich diversity of tribal peoples and the importance of self-determination and sovereignty. If an evaluation can be embedded within an indigenous framework, it is more responsive to tribal ethics and values. An indigenous orientation to evaluation suggests methodological approaches, a partnership between the evaluator and the program, and reciprocity.

Culturally Competent Evaluation in Indian Country

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Given the rich tapestry of tribal cultures in the United States, it is presumptuous to assume that any evaluator, whether an Alaskan Native or a member of an American Indian tribe (or a non-Indian), can understand the culture of every group. Rather than trying to master multiple cultural specificities, the goal of a competent evaluator, especially in Indian Country, should be to actively seek cultural grounding through the ongoing processes of appreciating the role of tribal sovereignty, seeking knowledge of the particular community, building relationships, and reflecting on methodological practices. This article is an opportunity for discourse and reflection on these many levels. It discusses the importance of understanding the implications of sovereignty when working in Indian Country, the significance of an emerging indigenous framework for evaluation, Indian self-determination in setting the research and evaluation agenda, and finally particular methodological approaches I find useful in my evaluation practice.

For this discussion, I use the term *Indian Country* to describe the collection of tribal nations and Alaskan native communities that occupy a shared homeland and live in culturally bounded communities. The term *indigenous* refers to the first native residents of lands that have been taken over by outsider populations—specifically, Indian tribes and Alaskan Natives in North and South America, and the Pacific.

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Understanding Sovereignty

Few Americans fully appreciate the political status of American Indians and Alaskan Natives. In Indian Country, sovereignty expresses recognition of and respect for tribal governance and nationhood. Treaties between tribes and the United States established a unique federal-tribal relationship. This relationship is also recognized in numerous executive orders and acts of Congress. Programs operating on Indian reservations operate within a civil structure unfamiliar to most Americans. Tribes are governmental units separate from state and local governments. In many tribes, the governing bodies include a general council, composed of all tribal citizens age eighteen and above, and an elected business council, which is usually called the tribal council. Other tribes have more traditional forms of governments based on historical leadership patterns. Recent federal laws have encouraged tribal self-determination and self-governance. As a result, many tribes now operate their own educational, health, and welfare programs through funding relationships with the federal government.

More than thirty years ago, a well-known husband-and-wife anthropologist team noted that their profession had studied American Indians more than any other group in the world (Swisher, 1993). This intensive scrutiny from the outside has been problematic to many American Indian people, whose tribes and families have suffered from a long history of intrusive studies that have built the reputations of anthropologists and other researchers but brought little more than loss of cultural ownership and exploitation to Indian people. The research studies often depicted Indians in a naïve or negative light. Trimble's review (1977) of articles on Indian educational research found that most of the literature concentrated on problems centered around the investigator's interest, and not those of the tribal people from whom the data were obtained. Because evaluation draws on methods of anthropology, among other social sciences, evaluation in Indian Country may suffer from a similar legacy.

With the growing emphasis on self-determination, it is not surprising that some tribal governments are establishing formal processes to protect themselves from the abuses of research. Although program evaluation is somewhat different in that it seeks to understand and contribute to programs within the context of the community, the collective tribal history with research has contributed to a general distrust of outsiders who come to study, ask questions, and publish their findings (Crazy Bull, 1997). Evaluators need to learn whether official approval is needed to conduct the evaluation, and evaluators must be sensitive to particular tribal processes involved in working with research committees. Tribal sovereignty also fuels concern about access to data and uses of evaluation information. Since tribes are continuously engaged in struggles to protect their rights, they are hesitant to have evaluation findings reflect negatively on the social, economic, or political goals of the community.

Because tribal governments are much smaller than local and state governments, programs operating under tribal authority are much more closely connected to local political structures than are most other publicly funded programs. As a result, programs operating under tribal governing structures tend to be more susceptible to social and political forces at work in a community. As such, they have a greater obligation to be responsive to community priorities and concerns. Evaluation can make an important contribution to developing responsive and effective programs in tribal communities. The challenges for culturally competent evaluators in Indian Country are to move past ingrained reticence toward research and instead actively engage the key stakeholders in creating the knowledge needed to deliver effective services.

Evaluation can become even more responsive to tribal programs if it is couched within indigenous “ways of knowing” and knowledge creation. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has funded a project of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) to develop an “indigenous framework” for evaluation. The framework will guide a training curriculum for educators in Indian Country. AIHEC is undertaking this work because more Indian communities are developing and implementing new strategies for improving the educational attainment of their youth that draw from traditional values and culture. In so doing, it is urgent to establish new evaluation processes that are broad enough to accommodate and value different ways of knowing, build ownership and a sense of community within groups of Indian educators, and efficiently contribute to development of high-quality and sustainable Indian and Alaskan native education programs. Building an indigenous evaluation framework will contribute to the national evaluation discourse through inclusion of indigenous epistemologies—ways of knowing—that are not typically included in standard Western evaluation models. By supporting incorporation of indigenous epistemologies into Western evaluation practice, the field will be more responsive to the educational interventions that are using traditional and cultural approaches.

The Case for an Indigenous Evaluation Framework

In her discussion of decolonizing research in indigenous communities, Smith (1999) advocates the importance of creating designs that ensure validity and reliability by being based on community values and indigenous ways of knowing. Deloria (1999) argues that there is a need to make a concerted effort to gather traditional tribal wisdom into a coherent body of knowledge: “I believe firmly that tribal ways represent a complete and logical alternative to Western science. If tribal wisdom is to be seen as a valid intellectual discipline, it will be because it can be articulated in a wide variety of expository forms and not simply in the language and concepts that tribal elders have always used” (p. 66). Garrouette (2003) argues that indigenous ways of knowing can find a place in the academy only if

those with access to the academy make it a safe place for indigenous knowledge. Evaluation is a good candidate for building this bridge. Though based on Western research models, evaluation, as Weiss (1998) notes, is a practical craft; evaluators engage in the craft to contribute to program quality. With their nod toward practicality, evaluators can take liberties to explore cultural epistemologies that differ from those taught in the academy if such exploration contributes to the validity and usefulness of evaluation in the context of program operations. Those evaluators who belong to the academy should also be able to bring the fruits of their explorations into the academic discourse. Consequently, evaluators who learn how to practice in a culturally competent framework have the potential for changing not only the field of evaluation but also conversations on knowledge creation, its components, and its ramifications. For this reason, I would like to share some of our emerging thoughts about an indigenous framework for evaluation.

Elements in an Indigenous Framework

There is a growing discussion among indigenous scientists and evaluation experts about native or indigenous approaches to knowledge generation that are in contrast to Western ways of knowing. At a recent AEA conference, Hayley Govina (2002) described how her Maori values required that in her culture “evidence” must be “trust-based” and grow out of mutual understanding and relationship. She contrasted this Maori “valued knowledge” approach with a Western research model that is “evidence based” and capable of selecting out factors and looking at them in isolation. At the same AEA conference, Andrea Johnston (2002) described how Western evaluation logic models are linear and interested in isolated domains such as indicators or factors. In her Ojibwe world, knowledge is holistic, and the focus is on how the spheres (of factors) overlap to produce growth. In his book on native science, Greg Cajete (2000) contrasts the opposing cosmologies of Western culture, where a God is apart from the earth and man is given dominion over the material world, and the indigenous belief that man comes from the earth and all elements of the world are equal. In his work, Cajete defines models, causality, interpretation, and explanation in ways that go beyond objective measurement but honor the importance of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationship, holism, and value.

Indigenous knowledge values holistic thinking (Cajete, 2000; Christensen, 2002), which contrasts with the linear and hierarchical thinking that characterizes much of Western evaluation practice. Cajete also describes the profound “sense of place” woven throughout native thought. This strong connection to place, location, and community is in sharp contrast to modern American values of mobility and individualization—values that often define “success” in contemporary America.

Cajete further describes how Indian people experience nature as part of themselves and themselves as part of nature, adding that “this is the ultimate form of being ‘indigenous’ and forms the basis for a fully internalized bonding with that place” (p. 187). Although history of contact with Europeans has altered indigenous connections to their original lands, the sense of place is still a deeply held value. Despite their outward appearance of poverty and limited development, reservations are cherished homelands. Tribes invest energy and resources to regain lost land and develop opportunities on the reservations. For many programs operating on reservations, an important criterion of success is their contribution to the larger tribal goals of restoration and preservation.

Indian tribes also possess a strong sense of community. This is found in many tribal languages, in which the name for the tribe translates into English as “the people,” as is the case for the *Dené* (Navajo), or the *Anishinabe* (Chippewa or Ojibwe) “spontaneously created people. Original tribal names distinguished the uniqueness of the group in relation to the rest of the world” (Deloria, 1994). Maintenance of the tribal community is an important criterion of successful programs and services in Indian Country.

Christensen (2002) describes the values of an elder epistemology, noting that “with its emphasis on oral skills it is an important intellectual construct, yet it is neither practiced nor even deemed relevant in the academic community” (p. 5). Drawing from the example of elder teaching, Christensen describes the role of respect, reciprocity, and relationship. In practice these three R’s suggest an approach to evaluation that understands the tribal context, contributes knowledge and builds capacity in the community, and is practiced by evaluators who value building strong relationships with those involved in the evaluation. Elder teaching is based on a democratic value of give and take, equality, and participation. Smith (1999) reinforces this ethic of respect: “From the indigenous perspectives ethical codes of conduct serve partly the same purpose as the protocols which govern our relationships with each other and with the environment. The term ‘respect’ is consistently used by indigenous peoples to underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity. Through respect the place of everyone and everything in the universe is kept in balance and harmony” (p. 120).

Smith also describes an indigenous research agenda in which the very naming of the research agenda denotes self-determination. She writes, “What researchers may call methodology, for example, Maori researchers in New Zealand call *Kaupapa Maori* research or Maori-centered research. Such naming accords indigenous values, attitudes and practices a privileged, central position rather than obscuring them under Westernized labels such as ‘collaborative research’” (p. 125). This suggests that as indigenous people move into evaluating their programs, they take charge of their own agenda; name their own evaluation processes; and use the methodologies that fit within their framing of place, community, values, and culture.

Reflections on Evaluation Methodology

In a country that values mobility, competitiveness, and progress, the Indian values for preservation, continuity, and community seem somewhat out of place. Yet it is these more conservative values that underlie many of the programs and projects that are subject to outside evaluations. Failure to understand such values, or imposing more mainstream assumptions upon the definitions of successful outcomes, results in evaluations that fail to contribute to tribal goals and program expectations. Understanding the importance of the values and the elements emerging in the indigenous framing of evaluation, as well as my experience doing evaluation in Indian Country, suggests a number of methodological considerations: the importance of formative evaluation, the value of building conceptual models, the importance of participatory processes and building evaluation capacity, issues in using qualitative and quantitative methods, and challenges in doing comparative research.

Importance of Formative Evaluation. The more conservative values of preservation and restoration operating on Indian reservations suggest that tribal programs need to be evaluated within their own context. The major evaluation questions become formative and tribe-specific (“How can we improve our service delivery?” or “What have we learned from this program or project?”). The view is inward; questions that imply comparison with populations outside the tribal community are less relevant to a community that is focused on its own growth and development. I found this to be true when researching evaluation issues in tribal schools in the 1980s. Reacting to a national evaluation driven by political forces in Congress against the tribal movement to control their own schools, the Senate commissioned a study of tribally controlled schools. The study specifically requested that these schools be matched with public schools serving students on the same reservation that also had a tribal school. The schools were compared on achievement, attendance, and per-pupil costs. Although the study failed to yield much of value for the political forces driving it, it definitely was not useful for administrators and staff in tribal schools. My research (LaFrance, 1990) found that the evaluation interests of tribal school personnel centered on “within school” concerns. They were interested in students doing well over their time in the school and whether they were developing a good sense of self-esteem. They wanted to know if the curriculum was meeting its objectives. They did value learning how their school compared to others; however, this question was of secondary importance and one that would not drive policy decisions.

To ensure sharing formative knowledge, I have arranged to regularly debrief program directors regarding initial evaluation findings. Since tribal institutions are small, the director or principal investigator is often the single person coping with delivery of social services or educational programs. Unlike administrators who work in larger institutions, she does not have

colleagues with whom to share concerns or learn about resources. Regular evaluation debriefings bring to her another person to whom she can talk about the issues encountered in operating the project. The evaluator becomes a resource for testing ideas or seeking advice. Although this might step outside the boundaries of evaluation, it is an important value-added contribution in resource-strapped communities (LaFrance, 2002b).

Building the Conceptual Picture. Given the inward orientation and the importance of understanding the assumptions and values driving programs operating on Indian reservations, I find it useful to work with stakeholders to articulate a theory of change (Weiss, 1998) prior to developing the evaluation plan. This is done in a facilitated workshop. The first objective of the workshop is to explicate the underlying assumptions guiding the program. All of the workshop participants have an opportunity to discuss what they do. Since everyone has tasks and activities, all are equally included in the discussion. Once activities are mapped out, the workshop participants are asked what will change as a result of the activities, or what their assumptions for change are. This is a much deeper question and leads to a healthy discussion among program staff about their beliefs, values, and hopes for the program.

The second objective for the workshop participants is to identify the major information they need to collect to find out whether their assumptions are correct. The information from the workshop is used to design an evaluation plan that is responsive to the program's values and assumptions. This approach results in a conceptual model for the program that may or may not look like the traditional logic model. In fact, I never use the term *logic model* since it connotes an intellectualism that can come across as elitist, mysterious, and Western. This is not to argue that conceptualizing the program is not important. In fact, it is essential to good evaluation design. However, the model should fit the program and the stakeholders' way of seeing the program. Traditional logic modeling formats might be too sequential and narrative-driven and not appropriate ways to capture the connections between program activities and underlying assumptions in Indian Country.

Participatory Practice and Capacity Building. A third objective of the workshop is to establish a participatory ethic for the evaluation. Staff and other stakeholders should participate in developing their evaluation. In a setting that values community, participatory processes are recommended. Also, as a result of building a theory of change together, I become a partner in an evaluation process that is owned by the program staff and stakeholders. The partnership builds relationships between program operations and the evaluation—between the program staff and the evaluator. This approach fits in the emerging indigenous framework because it demonstrates that the evaluation is *respectful* of the vision of the program held by its primary stakeholders and establishes *relationship* in executing the evaluation—two of Christensen's three R's (2002).

Given the high value tribal communities place on sovereignty and self-determination, it is recommended that evaluators look for opportunities to build evaluation capacity whenever possible. Using a participatory workshop to build the program's conceptual model and evaluation plan demystifies the process of evaluation and builds ownership in the evaluation. Other opportunities for building capacity should be explored. Many tribes sponsor their own community colleges, and this may be a way to build evaluation training capacity for budding evaluators from Indian Country. In one of my projects, which involved a large community survey, I was able to work with college students who were interning with the tribal office during the summer. They assisted in recruiting focus group participants, developing questions for the survey, and administering the survey at community events and meetings. Although these opportunities might be rare, a responsive evaluator should be aware that they are possible and try to incorporate as much training as possible in the evaluation plan.

Issues in Using Qualitative and Quantitative Methods. Given the highly contextual nature of tribal programs (operating in their sense of place and community), qualitative methods are central to the work. This is not to say that quantitative inquiry is not valued; rather, tribal communities have simply not found it a useful way to assess merit. Tribal populations in the programs being evaluated are often not large enough to put faith in statistical models; as a result statistical analysis is usually limited to descriptive summaries. Experimental design is generally discouraged, for ethical and practical reasons. It is difficult to assign adults or children into different "treatment groups" in small communities. Even if this could be done, the social and political reaction to a perception of unequal treatment could be quite disruptive in a small and fragile community.

Confidentiality is an important concern in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. When working in small communities, evaluators have to continually sort out information that does not protect the confidentiality of the respondent. When we asked a group of evaluators with experience in Indian Country to identify challenges in doing evaluation in tribal communities, one evaluator noted that her dilemma concerned how disposition of data influences accessibility to participants. She found that fear of repercussions if identity were figured out from responses to ethnographic inquiry or survey answers can discourage participation or response rate (Greenman, e-mail communication, 2003).

Furthermore, instrumentation can be problematic, especially when the funders require standardized measures. Another evaluator responded to our request for challenges by noting that she was being required to use a one-hundred-page intake form that was proving impossible to administer. When she undertook a cultural core measures search, she found few culturally validated measures for American Indians (Kumpfer, e-mail communication, 2003) and none that she could use. Most previously developed instruments need to be reviewed and often revised to fit the context of an

Indian reservation or community. Survey questionnaires have to be developed to fit the general education level in the community, which is often lower than in mainstream communities. It is important to test items on a cross-section of the community, because advisory committees often have a higher level of education or literacy than the general population.

Trimble (1977) describes an effort to measure self-esteem of Indian adults. The Association of American Indian Social Workers, sponsors of the survey, formed an advisory board to guide development of the instrument. Their goal was to develop a standardized instrument that could be used by Indians who were members of various tribes. He noted that there were culturally based objections to creating one instrument that would work across the diversity of tribal nations. However, a core of the advisory committee did not want to abandon the idea of using one instrument. The compromise was an instrument that included open-ended and sentence-completion items to capture personal expression.

The ethics of evaluation require informed consent of those being interviewed. However, special care should be taken when interviewing across cultures. In my summary of conversation among Indian evaluators attending a conference sponsored by NSF, I share Christensen's concern that elders often think that everything they say will be reported, and they do not understand that in a final document only certain quotes often represent their interview. Christensen argues that informed consent is "making sure that the evaluators comprehend what you are saying, and that you understand and consent to how what you are saying will be used" (LaFrance, 2002a, p. 67).

Challenges in Doing Comparative Research. Varying tribal histories, locations, resources, and size make it difficult to draw conclusions across tribal communities. Case studies and qualitative approaches that embed the program within the context of the community are generally more effective than quantitative studies that seek comparison across communities or groups of tribal people. However, summative evaluation is often informed through comparison. So how do you find comparison groups? Obviously it depends on the service or program under consideration, but here are a few suggestions:

Using retrospective measures. This method allows participants to assess their own changes on the basis of personal perspectives. This approach is good when a premeasure instrument might be intrusive or intimidating to program participants.

Comparing tribal statistics with national data. Many national surveys contain data disaggregated by ethnicity. In some programs, the data on Indians contained in these data banks might be usefully compared to tribal data on the same measures.

Finding a comparison reservation community that is willing to act as a "control group." However, if this method is used, it is important to negotiate

an understanding with the partner reservation so they are comfortable with the use of the evaluation findings.

General Advice to Evaluators. One of the guiding questions for this volume is, “How does better understanding of the role of culture improve evaluation practice?” Understanding the influence of tribal culture and context is critical when conducting evaluations in Indian communities. The goals of social services and educational programs are often twofold: help the individual student or client, and attempt to strengthen the community’s health and well-being. Given this dual set of goals, indicators of success might not correspond to the dominant society’s focus on individual achievement. These same values influence how tribal people view the role of researchers. Crazy Bull (1997) described these values in her advice to researchers who come into Indian Country: “We, as tribal people, want research and scholarship that preserves, maintains, and restores our traditions and cultural practices. We want to restore our homelands; revitalize our traditional religious practices; regain our health; and cultivate our economic, social, and governing systems. Our research can help us maintain our sovereignty and preserve our nationhood” (p. 17).

To ground the evaluation in the tribal community, a culturally responsive evaluator should learn as much as possible about its history, resources, governance, and composition. If possible, he or she should engage in community activities such as graduation ceremonies and dinners for the elders in the tribe, or funerals for honored tribal members. Engagement can also involve attending special events such as a Treaty Day celebration, powwow or tribal dance, rodeo or canoe journey. This participation can help the evaluator understand the context in which he or she is working. It also allows Indians in the community to build relationships with evaluators that are based on friendliness and respectful interest, rather than defined by strict roles and outsider “expertise.” In fact, expertise in the form of education, degrees of higher learning, or professional reputation is of little value in Indian Country if the community does not see the evaluator as respectful and capable of understanding an indigenous perspective.

Building a strong partnership between the stakeholders and the evaluator and being willing to relinquish some of the power embedded in being “the evaluator” challenges long-held assumptions that an evaluator is to be impartial and distant from the program’s operations. These assumptions are based on the need for objectivity in research and evaluation. However, partnership with the program being evaluated or with the community who are recipients of the program services does not imply that an evaluator loses the ability to remain objective. There is always some level of subjectivity influencing an evaluator’s approach to her trade. This subjectivity is conditioned by the training and orientation (quantitative, qualitative, feminist, empiricist, critical, and so on) of the evaluator.

Evaluation methods that are responsive to community values and contexts are still objective in application if the evaluator and the program's stakeholders value learning from the evaluation. Situating evaluation methodology within an indigenous framework should result in creating this sense of ownership. Once ownership is created, the stakeholders value the knowledge they can gain from the evaluation—and evaluation is all about creating knowledge. When the stakeholders own knowledge creation, the evaluator can discuss negative findings (failure to accomplish goals, assumptions that appear to be incorrect) as well as positive findings. The knowledge becomes empowering, and evaluation is not viewed as merely a judgmental activity imposed by funding agencies or other outsiders.

By making the process of knowledge creation transparent and participatory, the evaluator builds evaluation capacity in tribal communities. It has been gratifying to be asked to review rough drafts of proposals in communities where I have conducted evaluations and see that they have included sophisticated evaluation designs using such terms as *theory of change*, *matrices of evaluation questions*, and *data collection plans*. It is also satisfying for an evaluator to become accepted and welcomed, not just for her trade but also as a friend and colleague in working toward the aspirations and sovereignty of the tribe. If the tools of the evaluator are used to fulfill the goals and aspirations of tribal peoples, then the evaluator has given back to the community, and not just come in to assess, monitor, and judge. She and the community have a sense of reciprocity—the final *R* in Christensen's model of elder epistemology.

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