Two-way accountability: Improving Ethical Evaluation Practice in Indigenous Contexts

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The issue

- Plethora of ethical guidelines – some for evaluation, some for research with Indigenous peoples

**BUT**

- No guidelines specifically for evaluation in Indigenous contexts

**AND**

- Critical difference between reading guidelines or articles on ethical practice, and application in practice
Accountability

- Often conceptualised as programs justifying their funding by meeting set targets, achieving desired outcomes, and therefore accountability to funder (proxy for taxpayer/voter)

- 2 way accountability – e.g. accountability to community for decisions, quality of programs and services

- Often multi-party accountability (e.g. AusAID)

- To whom is the evaluator accountable? Where does the evaluator’s accountability end?
Ethical guidelines

- NHMRC guidelines for human research with Indigenous sub-sections (2009)
- AIATSIS ‘Guidelines for ethical research in Indigenous studies’ (2011)
- Many others, including American Evaluation Association guidelines
Issues in the literature

- Silo effect, focus so restricted that critically impacting issues cannot be raised (e.g. Chesterton 2003)

- Insufficient time to build relationships, especially for external, non-Indigenous evaluators (e.g. Scougall 2006)

- Insufficient time to do the work, even for Indigenous evaluators (e.g. Roorda and Peace 2009)

- Pressure to change or suppress findings (Markiewicz 2008, 2010)
Why evaluate?

- To understand the process of development
- To improve practice
- To inform policy, test theory, e.g. for potential replication, scaling up
- As part of accountability requirements
  - To be seen to have completed an evaluation
  - As support for a pre-determined course of action (cease, increase, maintain a program or policy)
  - To justify spending or to justify spending cuts
- Implications for ethics in some of these approaches, including research participant benefit/risk
In an era where the economy is looking to return to surplus and government is mandated to “do more with less”, the need to develop KPIs that reflect overall strategy and outcomes is crucial... in particular ‘effectiveness’ KPIs that are appropriately specific, measureable, achievable, relevant and timed...

New cross-government evaluation strategy being driven by Finance
NT Context

- Major investment going in to addressing ‘closing the gap’ and other priorities, such as child protection
- Large number of new initiatives, often commenced in a rush, and during period of great social and political change
- Lack of good historical, baseline data
- Great deal of evaluation ‘noise’. To whom should change be attributed to? NTER, Growth Towns, Shires, specific interventions?
NT remote context

- NT population approx. 30% Indigenous
- ‘... most over-researched/evaluated group in the world’
- Considerable trauma, ‘churn’, few local qualified evaluators
- Many evaluands remote culturally as well as geographically
- Markers of cultural distance: (NB NOT Indigeneity)
  - First and home language(s)
  - Avoidance relationships
  - Ceremonial/cultural obligations
Case 1 - confidentiality

- University contracted to evaluate a culturally-based crime prevention program
- Community-initiated and managed;
- Harnessed traditional Aboriginal mechanisms to address violence, social order issues
- Aboriginal processes to meet funder-negotiated KPIs
- Generally positive findings from evaluation
- Program de-funded days later and evaluators advised not to share findings with program (confidentiality issue)
How to resolve

- AES, unlike AEA, has no guidelines on client/user behaviour
- NHMRC guidelines don’t cover contractors or users
- NHMRC ‘feed back’ guidelines assisted to some degree but still called for ‘brave’ decision
- Final outcome: draft report sent to program for checking; program able to use it to secure other funding
- Ongoing: seeking improved AES, NHMRC guidelines and engagement
Case 2 – intellectual property

- University staff contracted to evaluate traditional healing program
- Traditional knowledge a barrier – concern about sharing ‘secret’ information
- Even more concern that the knowledge would then be ‘owned’ by somebody else
- Three parties: Traditional knowledge owners, government, academic institution
How to resolve

• Intellectual property discussed in literature but few guidelines on what should be owned by funder; managing agency desire to publish; what remains with those whose traditional knowledge it is.

• Scoping and costing, timing flexibility to enable back and forth negotiations

• Outcome: good one; C’wealth agency granted the extra two months required to negotiate satisfactory arrangement, but longer term guidelines required
Case 3 – Top-down, bottom-up

- Can’t measure what you can’t see
- Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Program
- Role to liaise between child protection system and community members; 3 types of activities
- Evaluation began before program well underway – program logic workshop based on hypotheses
- Mixed methods evaluation on a shoestring ($12-15,000 plus in-kind support, cost included site visits to 4 communities)
Management view

- Community education programs
- Working with NTFC officers
- Meeting needs identified by community members
Worker view

- Community education programs, kids safety plan
- Working with NTFC officers
- Meeting needs identified by community members
But...

- Observations of RAFCW work showed that even the worker was under-estimating what they did.

- Managing family disputes on behalf of police seen as part of ‘cultural citizenship’ and therefore counted by worker as time away from work; after documenting with manager, this was considered part of job, but role boundaries remained an issue.

- ‘Top down’ KPI for community education similarly missed most (culturally embedded) ongoing activities, SO...
Used culturally embedded tool being piloted to identify and quantify protective and risk factors for child and community safety in remote communities

‘Fire tool’ enabled communities to comment on program(s) being evaluated, but within own context

Each community identified local ceremonies and cultural transmission as most important protective/risk factor

The priority for program was better local collaboration and integration
How to resolve

- Cultural insider/outside team

- ‘Painting the elephant’ exercise, articulating assumptions in cultural context, basis for new ‘theory of change’ model

- Community education in understanding their role and potential power in evaluation

- Outcome: Good immediate response but continuing staff churn. Next phase of evaluation tendered with decent resources but impossible timeline; university declined

- Ongoing work—see next slide
Summary: Ongoing activities

• Working to improve evaluation ethical guidelines, particularly in Indigenous contexts and who they apply to

• Working on mechanisms for improved awareness and engagement with evaluation funders/contracting agencies, users, as well as evaluators

• Examining potential of Evaluation Committees taking place of bio-medical model Human Research Ethics Committees

• Looking to support more local evaluators, pilot more holistic and Indigenous-centred evaluations – what would they look like?
Conclusion and over to you

- Many ethical frameworks around, but...

- How confident are you in recognising the ethical implications of your work? Where do you see your role ending? Submitting the final report? Or do you feel some accountability for what happens next?

- How confident are you that you understand the special challenges posed by evaluation in Indigenous contexts?

- What options are available to you in dealing with ethical issues, other than just saying ‘no’? (and what happens if all of the ethical research agencies say no?)