

Evaluation Ethics and Quality
Results of a Survey of Australasian Evaluation Society Members

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Introduction

In recent years, the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) has issued two publications related to ethics in evaluation: Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations, and the Code of Ethics. The Guidelines are intended to promote better practice in evaluations, and seek to inform both those who commission evaluation research and those who carry it out. The Code is directed at evaluation practitioners, and focuses more on conduct by individuals.

Both the Guidelines and the Code were developed by the Society's ethics committee. That committee is now considering further activities to support and promote ethical practice among the Society's members and more broadly. One area being considered would involve developing or adapting standards on evaluation quality such as those in place in the US or Germany [insert references]. The committee is also considering what other activities it may carry out.

To inform the committee's future work, an online survey was carried out between August and November 2003. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent via email to all AES members, totalling approximately 650. As of the beginning of November, 132 responses had been completed. Discussions at the annual conference indicated that some part of this low response rate was caused by difficulties in accessing the survey from certain locations, perhaps because firewalls blocked access. Survey results should therefore not be taken as representative of all Society members. They do, however, reflect the concerns and suggestions of those who were interested enough in the issues to respond.

Survey respondents hold a range of positions and different experiences. They included academics, internal evaluators, evaluation contractors, auditors, and managers. Nearly half worked in the public sector, with others working in universities, the private sector, or the voluntary or community sector. They ranged in experience from new members of the profession to people with over 20 years of experience in evaluation.

Experience of Ethical Challenges

Although some respondents said they had never experienced ethical challenges or dilemmas in their work (38), most said they had. One person described ethical dilemmas as "pretty much part of the territory in evaluation." When asked to describe these challenges, people mentioned situations like these:

- Issues related to those who commission and/or use evaluations
 - Managers or funders trying to influence or control evaluation findings, sometimes including pressure on evaluators for positive results (cited repeatedly), sometimes including pressure to provide "dirt" on a program

- Conflicts between the organisation's needs and those of the client (when working as an internal evaluator)
- Political interference
- Dissemination or suppression of reports
- Requests to use information gathered for one purpose (e.g. program improvement) for a different purpose (e.g. accountability)
- Unilateral changes to terms of reference midstream or at time of reporting an evaluation and dealing with the implications for quality and relevance of data collected
- Issues related to dealing with different types of evaluation subjects or participants
 - Working with indigenous people
 - Research with children
 - Sensitive topics such as sexual victimisation
 - Feeding back results to participants
 - Informed consent
 - Privacy and confidentiality
 - Interview subjects disclosing confidential or inappropriate information in interviews
- Other
 - Surfacing issues of incompetence or poor performance among program staff
 - Whether or not to use ethics committees

When asked how they dealt with ethical challenges or dilemmas, the most common response was to talk things through with colleagues and/or with clients. A small number said they ignored the issue, however. Other responses included the following:

- Used a 3rd party accepted by participants
- Consulted an outside body such as the Market Research Society
- Consulted with local groups, such as a council of elders
- Developed own protocols
- Worked through ethics committee
- Structured research process to involve participants
- Brought issues to the attention of other parties
- Drew on university guidelines that are more stringent than AES guidelines

Awareness and Use of AES Ethics Publications

Among the group that responded to the survey, awareness of the Guidelines and Code were fairly high (91 and 86 positive responses), but some people said they were aware of neither. Some of those who were aware of the publications said they had not used them in their evaluation work. Many respondents said they had used ethics publications from other sources either in addition to or instead of AES materials. These other sources included:

- Guidelines or codes published by other professional bodies such as the Market Research Society of Australia, Australian Association of Social Workers, NZ Association of Social Science Researchers, NZ Association of Psychologists, Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, and the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers
- University guidelines

- Codes of conduct or other guidance published by government agencies
- Research textbooks on ethics

When asked how they use either the Guidelines or Code, some people said they used them for project planning, and/or cited them in contracts for evaluations. Respondents drew a distinction between general reliance on them for educating themselves or others, and use in resolving specific issues. Answers included “generally preparing myself for my professional role,” and “professional reflection.” One respondent said “I would like to think that, having read them, they are unconsciously operating as part of my experience and knowledge and approach to the work I do without specifically referring to them.” Both the Guidelines and Code were used as general references, or for teaching or training purposes. Some respondents said they used one or both publications when planning new projects, talking with stakeholders, or dealing with difficult situations when they arise.

Topics Not Covered in AES Ethics Publications

Some respondents said nothing further was needed from the Society. One person said that: “I think it would be a mistake to try to cover all possibilities, e.g., different guidelines for how to deal with evaluation issues around indigenous populations, or each of the many different cultural and linguistic segments of our community and/or other population groups. The main thing to recognise is that different sensitivities will apply and it is the responsibility of the evaluator to ensure that s/he is aware of those differences, behaves appropriately, and decides whether the project is within scope of her/his capacity.”

Others cited a range of topics that should, in their opinions, be addressed by the AES through its publications or by other means. These included the following:

- Examples of good ethical conduct
- A statement of the benefits of good ethical practice
- Some specific ideas for changes in existing publications. Example: in the area of reporting the results should note value of clients providing feedback on the work and how it will be used
- Issues on children and young people
- Safety protocols for interviewers
- Circumstances in which the principle of confidentiality might be suspended
- Action on unethical conduct where AES members are involved (note that this is provided for in the Code)
- Guidance on storing raw data
- Power issues with regard to clients.
- Issues of power and inequalities in dealing with subjects of research. Examples included men interviewing women or non-indigenous people interviewing indigenous people, and dealing with different subjects in focus groups.
- Dealing with indigenous groups or communities, or other cross-cultural issues and issues of cultural safety
- How to get further guidance (“a sort of help desk - someone to talk to about things as they come up”)
- Conflicts of interest
- How to deal with potential conflicts with other requirements like the Privacy Act

- Guidelines for people undertaking participatory evaluations (i.e., conducted by project participants or stakeholders themselves with guidance from a professional evaluator)

What Else AES Should Provide in Regard to Ethics

When asked what other guidance the AES should provide in regard to ethics, responses included the following:

- Case studies
- Practical guidelines on how to deal with tricky situations and/or advisers/mentors that one could turn to in such cases for guidance
- Best practice standards
- General research ethics, beyond specific statements of ethics for evaluation, covering subjects such as the treatment of research subjects or program participants, privacy issues (data management etc.), or consent
- Access to an evaluation mentor
- Opportunities to hear and discuss ethical issues in a safe context, like at conferences
- Training
- Issues related to internal evaluations, such as managing relationships with key stakeholders, and positioning evaluation within an agency to make it effective
- Guidance on when and where Ethics Committee approval should be sought.

Standards of Quality

As noted earlier, the AES has neither developed its own set of quality standards nor endorsed standards developed elsewhere. The survey included questions about whether there was a perceived need for the Society to adopt its own standards. Questions were asked about experience with quality issues (similar to the question about experience of ethical challenges or dilemmas) and about what the AES should provide.

Respondents were asked if they had faced issues of evaluation quality in their work related to evaluation design, stakeholder management, project management, reporting, utilisation, or some other type of issue. Somewhere around half of respondents indicated that they had dealt with each of these issues at some point. When asked how they dealt with these issues, the most common responses indicated that they had worked things through with clients and colleagues. This was similar to the reaction noted earlier about ethical challenges, in which respondents commonly said they had simply talked things through. Some noted that they had brought in expert assistance, or drew on published sources of guidance. Some noted that quality issues cannot always be resolved.

Survey respondents were asked whether the Society should do any of the following:

- Endorse the US program evaluation standards,
- Develop guidelines to implement the program evaluation standards within the Australasian context,
- Develop its own quality standards,
- Develop its own quality guidelines, or
- Help organisations develop their own internal guidelines or standards.

Some positive responses were given to each of the options. One person said “All of the above - but what a lot of work!!!” Several respondents suggested drawing on standards work done overseas instead of “reinventing the wheel.” Some respondents suggested endorsing overseas standards, while others argued for adapting them to the Australasian context, perhaps with additional materials on indigenous issues.

Forty three respondents did not agree with any of the options offered about standards. One person said he or she was “standarded out.” Another said there is no need for new standards, as there are adequate guidelines available.

Summary and Implications for Future Ethics Work by AES

It should be stressed that these survey results represent the views of a minority of the Society’s members, presumably including people who have an interest in the subject of evaluation ethics. Several interesting points emerge, however. The survey shows that respondents, for the most part, have dealt with a range ethical concerns and quality issues. They have dealt with those issues in a variety of ways, drawing on different sources of guidance, often outside AES, and on other people’s experience.

The survey shows little evidence of perceived need for the AES to develop new publications related to evaluation ethics. It does confirm the importance of keeping evaluation ethics on the Society’s agenda. Given the expressed desire for guidance and dialogue, it underscores the need to address ethics at the regional or local level as well as at the level of the Society as a whole. Annual conferences and regional meetings provide opportunities for members to discuss ethics in relation to their own practices. The Society should continue to make such opportunities available to members.

The survey underscores the role of the AES in informing its members and the wider public about evaluation issues. One respondent called for the AES to “provide widespread information and promotion of these standards and guidelines outside the AES, to ensure that the users of evaluation are aware of evaluation requirements.” Several respondents were unaware of, and/or had not used, the AES’ publications on ethics. Others were aware of them but were looking for more specific guidance. Case studies and examples of good ethical practice were suggested. Another issue raised concerned opportunities for networking, support, and guidance. It was suggested that the AES could identify people to contact for advice. One response might be to promote the publication of articles in the Society’s journal that deal with ethics, as well as encouraging members to address ethics in their presentations at the annual conference. Another response might be to give greater visibility to the AES’ role in ethics, and to encourage people to contact Society members at either the regional or central levels when they need to discuss difficult issues.

The survey does not show any consensus for developing evaluation standards. Responses were divided between those who felt the Society should develop new standards, those who wanted it to adapt standards developed elsewhere, and those who supported neither option. Given the interest expressed in guidance on evaluation in Maori or other indigenous communities, however, there may be a need to adapt evaluation standards to consider differences in the population and culture of Australia and New Zealand.