The Same Only Different: Approaches to Ethics in Professional Practice in Australasia and North America

David Turner

Kathleen Toms

Amanda Wolf

Overview

- Purposes of the study:
  - Get a snapshot view of practitioner approaches to ethics in different evaluation societies
  - See how approaches are similar or different across societies
  - Provide a basis for reflection among society members

Q Methodology

- Provides for a systematic investigation into a subjective point of view by asking participants to order ("sort") a set of statements on a topic

- Correlations among sorts are factor analysed to show clusters (sorts with a "family resemblance")

- Unlike surveys, methodology captures views as a whole and compares each "whole" with all others

Summary of Research Steps

- AES, AEA, and CES members invited to make comments on role of ethics in their professional practice

- 91 responses received from AES and AEA members

- Over 400 comments distilled down to 56 representative statements

- Participants invited to sort statements according to how strongly they agree or disagree with them

Interpretation

- Use "factor array", which is a weighted average sort based on individual sorts that "loaded" (were statistically significant) on a factor, to find strong views, and see contrasts with other views

- Other statistical diagnostic tools also used to look at distinguishing statements and differences

Issues in Interpretation

- High degree of commonality across different sorts
  - A strong emphasis on professionalism and good research ethics was widely evident
  - Half the AES sorts were highly correlated with 2 or even 3 factors (over a third of AEA sorts)
- Nevertheless, distinct patterns of response emerge from the data

AES Analysis

- Three factors analyzed, accounting for 61% of variation in responses
  - Factor 1: Technical specialist, centered on professional competence
  - Factor 2: Focused on empowerment of program participants, not on client directly
  - Factor 3: Client-focused

AES Factor 1

- Strongly agrees with need to be seen as having integrity in and using appropriate methods
- Also strong on making rights known to participants, protecting their welfare
- Disagrees with idea of evaluator as change agent, putting client in best light

AES Factor 2

- Strong support for the idea of empowering people through participation in evaluation, agrees that there is no objectivity

- Emphasis on cultural competence, recognising social context, considering rights

- Disagrees that evaluation should be value-free

AES Factor 3

- Emphasis on working with and training clients, getting them to ask the right questions, seeing clients as partners

- Evaluator seen as change agent

- Disagreement with notion of value-free evaluation, keeping clients at arms-length

AEA Analysis

- Four factors account for 62% of variation in responses
  - Factor 1: Client-centered professionalism
  - Factor 2: Also client-focused, but giving more power & accountability to client
  - Factor 3: Evaluation practitioner-focused
  - Factor 4: Technical professionals, but within the constraints set by the wider social context

AEA Factor 1

- Evaluators are not agents of change

- Practice is community embedded

- Client involvement in evaluation is possible

- Appropriate methods, unbiased reports and high quality are essential

- Primary job is to guide clients to the right questions

- Applying standards evaluator's responsibility

AEA Factor 2

- Evaluation is not value-neutral

- Evaluator is a change agent

- Clients should be trained to participate in evaluation

- Practice is community embedded

- Evaluation uncovers benefits and costs in human terms

- Evaluation findings inform the 'big picture'

AEA Factor 3

- Evaluators base their practice on personal values
- Use experience and 'gut' to judge own practice
- Evaluation's effect on the lives of people means it cannot be value neutral
- Believe evaluators have to have integrity in their methods and relationships
- However, they do not accept objectivity
- Do not have client participation in evaluation

AEA Factor 4

- Codes of ethics act as a compass to method integrity

- Evaluation takes place in context of social culture, which must be respected and responded to

- Not concerned with use, change agency or the 'big picture'

- Practice is not informed by personal values/beliefs

- Believes participation in evaluation can empower certain participants.

Combined Analysis

- Factor 1: Professional technical specialists

- Factor 2: Participant- or community-centered; focusing on empowerment, cultural competence

- Factor 3: Technical specialist, but not as client-focused as Factor 1; own perspectives play role

- Factor 4: Intuitive, personal values-driven, change agents

- Factor 5: Client-centered

The Same

- Evaluation entails using appropriate data collection and analysis plus maintaining quality throughout.

- Ethics include that the evaluation do no harm; guarantee rights to privacy, self determination and information ownership.

- Community respect and cultural competence are essential.

Only Different

- 2 of the American factors and 1 AES felt that evaluators are change agents, all the rest did not.

- AEA feels more strongly that conducting evaluation according to standards rests with the evaluator.

Issues for Discussion

- Why does society need a group of people offering a service called evaluation?
- Is evaluation a profession or a skilled occupation?
    - If a profession, what is the nature of our social contract?
- Managing tensions between maintenance of professional standards and client needs
- Incorporating community voice and views – client and public involvement