

Reconciling tensions between principle and practice in Indigenous evaluation
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Abstract

The expectations placed on an evaluator working in an Indigenous context are often great. The ideal is someone in close relationship with the community, employing culturally sensitive methods, fostering broad community involvement, transferring evaluation skills and contributing to a process of empowerment and positive social change. The hard reality is that evaluators are most often outsiders with limited resources and precious little time to spend in the field. By 'outsider' I mean someone not of the people, culture and place. They are typically short on contextual understandings and need to work across many project sites. This precludes the possibility of any real bonding with the participants. Furthermore outsiders often struggle to 'hear' correctly and to elicit meaningful information from Indigenous people due to cultural barriers and poor rapport. Perhaps only a handful of locals will choose to become more than peripherally involved in an evaluation. These are major impediments that give rise to very real tensions between evaluation principle and practice. This paper reflects on these tensions in the context of the national evaluation of the Australian Governments' Stronger Families and Communities Strategy ('the Strategy').

Introduction

This paper is a piece of personal reflection that looks at certain tensions in Indigenous evaluation in one particular study. The views expressed are mine alone and not necessarily shared by others involved with the Strategy. These tensions include the need to balance both contextual depth and representative breadth; expectations of dual accountability to both the agency commissioning the work and to the Indigenous projects and participants; and pressures to get evaluation reports completed whilst simultaneously leaving something that is of practical benefit to the Indigenous people who are its subjects.

Over the period 2002 – 2006 I worked as part of a team evaluating the Strategy. My focus was primarily on the Indigenous projects. As a non-Indigenous person I was a cultural outsider. My concern was that my contribution might add to the legendary list of 'hit and run' researchers who visit Indigenous communities for a couple of days and then leave to write their 'definitive' reports. The Indigenous critiques were ringing loudly in my ears.

Indigenous people throughout Australia are saying loudly and clearly that enough is enough in respect of inappropriate and offensive research methods and practices that are largely associated with non-Indigenous researchers... It needs to be emphasized that Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander knowledge has been extracted. Knowledge has been taken like the mining industry has taken minerals from our lands and transformed into academic text to benefit individuals and institutions... Just as the mining industry has benefited from mineral extraction from Indigenous land, the academic industry in its exploitation of Indigenous knowledge, has also benefited from a similar process of extraction. (Williams & Stewart, 1992: 90)

Typically it has been 'best practice' for researchers in Indigenous contexts to slowly build some social connection before commencing data collection. Only after a prolonged period in the field is it likely that we will get meaningful information. The dilemma in this case was that such an initial investment in relationship building was not possible because we were trying to work across many projects in a relatively tight time frame.

Background

The Strategy is a major Australian Government policy initiative administered by the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). It seeks to strengthen, empower and support families and communities so that they can more effectively help themselves. The Strategy does not claim to be a panacea that will fix the complex myriad of social issues that confront families and communities such as poverty, substance abuse, self-harm and family violence. Rather it is about equipping them with the capacity to address these issues themselves and better cope with the pressures that lead to family and community breakdown.

In 2002 FaCSIA commissioned a consortium led by the Collaborative Institute for Research Consulting and Learning in Evaluation at RMIT University (CIRCLE) to evaluate the first phase of the Strategy which ran from 2000-2004. Over six hundred community-based projects across Australia were funded during this period. Activities encompassed playgroups, awareness raising, relationship building, men's groups, women's groups, youth initiatives and leadership development projects. The findings of the evaluation are generally consistent with the literature that testifies to the effectiveness of social investment in capacity building, early intervention and prevention (C.I.R.C.L.E, 2006; Rogers & Funnell, 2006).

The Strategy was also found to have made a valuable contribution to Indigenous family and community strength (Scougall, 2006). About a quarter of the projects were Indigenous, directly accounting for some \$21m expenditure. For example, some projects were found to have achieved a high level of community participation. This is a substantial achievement given that many exist in environments where multiple factors mitigate against widespread involvement, including lack of transport and substance abuse.

The current second phase of the Strategy, which lies outside the scope of our evaluation, will run until 2009. It retains a central role for community organisations in addressing

local needs and the focus on building capacity, early intervention and prevention. The main difference is a greater emphasis on early childhood initiatives. Some implementation processes have also been refined. Details are available at www.facsia.gov.au/sfcs

Balancing Depth and Breadth

There is often a tension between expectations that an evaluation will deliver both a greater understanding of the implementation context (depth), as well as broadly representing the experience of all of the Indigenous projects. In this case the necessary breadth was achieved by accessing questionnaire data sent to all funded projects; an initial questionnaire asking about project development and a final one concerned with outcomes. These questionnaires were not administered by myself but by another partner in the evaluation consortium. This data provided an overview of the experiences of each project. This was supplemented by a discrete study undertaken by myself which included numerous face-to-face follow up visits to particular projects identified as having the potential to teach us about what was working well and why (see Scougall, 2006).

The challenge was how to capture the desired depth. We needed to get close to Indigenous peoples lived experience of the Strategy if we were to provide anything more than a superficial treatment. It was decided to conduct several case studies of particular Indigenous projects (see for example Scougall, 2005). This created opportunities for ‘professional loitering’ in the field where we could observe project activities and talk with participants and service providers first hand. In selecting case study sites we sought out projects with dissimilar objectives and which operated in different settings (e.g. urban and remote) and which had broader relevance to Indigenous Australia.

The Indigenous case studies served both an *instrumental* and an *intrinsic* purpose (Stake,1995). They were *instrumental* in that particular projects were examined to develop a general understanding of similar projects elsewhere and their implementation processes and outcomes. But they were also *intrinsic* because they were about understanding specific cases as ends in themselves. This was important because it enabled us to display some reciprocity by ‘gifting’ something practical and useful back to the projects that had voluntarily agreed to participate in the case studies. This took several forms: raising community awareness and understanding of their own situation; sharing relevant knowledge and insights gleaned from other Indigenous projects; identifying useful new organisational links and networks; and sowing the seeds of change by highlighting options and choices.

The use of the case study method, at the very least, enabled us to examine a few projects in-depth in circumstances where there were many more sites than we could ever hope to examine first hand. Further we tried to go beyond the usual process of information extraction. In effect each case study was conceived of as a kind of ‘mirror’ that might enable the Indigenous projects to see more clearly what they had already achieved and the opportunities and challenges that still lay ahead (Scougall, 1997).

Balancing Professional and Local Knowledge

Evaluation conducted in an Indigenous context demands a range of knowledge and skills. Certainly it requires expertise in evaluation and, in this instance, knowledge of Indigenous social policy. But it also requires trusting relationships with the participants and an understanding of their place, their project and the cultural setting within which it exists. It is unlikely that all of these necessary attributes can ever be embodied in any one person. Typically we require a team that draws both insider (i.e. local Indigenous) and outsider perspectives together in a process of creative synthesis that respects the different knowledge, skills and understandings that everyone brings to the table.

The evaluation research community and the Indigenous community must acknowledge the respective skills brought together in any evaluation project... it needs to be recognised that Indigenous peoples do not come to the evaluation experience either empty-handed or empty-headed. Indigenous cultural knowledge and experience needs to be recognised, respected and given the same currency as other non-Indigenous knowledge. (Taylor, 2003: 49 - 50)

Pooling the input of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous personnel can bring multiple strengths to bear on an evaluation. To achieve this local Indigenous people were recruited to assist with the case studies. All were well positioned to ascertain the views of local Indigenous people. As cultural insiders they brought with them their understandings of the context, their pre-existing relationships with the people and their experience of the project.

In Central Australia a 'side-by-side' arrangement known as *malparrara* has long been in operation. It involves partnering a local Indigenous worker with local cultural knowledge, alongside a non-Indigenous person possessing professional qualifications. This served as a model that informed the formation of evaluation teams used on the case studies.

- In a case study of a large family strengthening project in Central Australia our team comprised four people: an Indigenous women from the region who spoke the language and had extensive experience with the project; another Indigenous women from outside the region with a strong background in social inquiry to consult with various stakeholders; a non-Indigenous women with a work background in the family and children's issues that were the subject of study; and my own experience of undertaking evaluation work in Indigenous contexts.
- In a case study of a leadership development project in south-east Queensland the team comprised three local Indigenous people (two men and a woman) and myself. The role of the local people was to work in pairs to conduct interviews with community members so we could hear their views about the project and what now needed to happen. I provided some interview training and attended a three day Indigenous Leadership Summit project activity as an observer.

My role in all of the case studies involved putting the evaluation team together, designing the methodology, reviewing documentary sources, recording observations, discussing the project with various stakeholders and writing the reports based on all of the information collected.

The Indigenous members of the evaluation team were recruited in collaboration and agreement with the Indigenous case study projects in order to be the primary link to project participants. In Central Australia a mature woman with status and authority was chosen. The feeling was that a younger person would not command the necessary cultural respect. In south-east Queensland our original intention was to employ just one local Indigenous person on the team. However the local advice was that the interviews needed to be undertaken by a team comprising a man, a women and a youth with the capacity to engage young people. A recurring theme throughout the whole evaluation was the distinction between 'women's business' and 'men's business'. This did not necessarily mean that only a male could work with the men and a female with the women. Rather it was about understanding when it is appropriate for a male or female to engage in certain activities or to speak on particular topics.

The employment of local people on the case studies was found to have several advantages. Firstly it got project participants feeling comfortable and talking freely, thereby engendering trust in the process. Trust – the firm belief that another person or institution can be relied upon - is a major issue in Indigenous evaluation. We can only hope to hear what local people think about their projects where they feel sufficiently safe to express themselves. Without a foundation of trust there will be no engagement or cooperation. Information collection with Indigenous people is always a delicate matter. Outsiders who come and ask questions are understandably treated with suspicion because we are unwelcome reminders of past intrusion in Indigenous peoples' lives.

The past resonates in the present. Fear and lack of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have become embedded over the generations and today whatever faith we as Indigenous people have in others is fragile and easily disturbed or destroyed. (Burchell, 2004: 6)

This historic pattern of mistrust is difficult to turn around in the short term. It is likely that it will immediately be assumed that any outsider is from 'the government'. We can expect to be 'found guilty' before we 'prove ourselves innocent'. Further there are a host of cultural factors that need to be respected when collecting information: local protocols regarding appropriate styles of questioning; concepts of time; and the need to avoid clashes with events such as funerals, ceremonies and sporting events. Local Indigenous people with 'street' credibility and pre-existing relationships of empathy, trust and rapport are likely to be best placed to negotiate this terrain.

Secondly the use of local people as co-evaluators minimises the risk of inadvertent misinterpretation of participants' comments that is always present when a non-Indigenous researcher is involved. At the cultural interface there is always a danger that we might attach meaning to what's said which doesn't accurately reflect the experience and views of project participants. It is very easy to unintentionally slant what we hear and see. The process of interviewing local participants by local people allowed Indigenous knowledge of a project expressed in the participants' own language and concepts to be captured. Qualitative research methodologist Norman Denzin (1989: 26) argues that "*meaningful interpretations of human experience can only come from those persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves in the phenomenon they wish to interpret and*

understand.” After all it is the participants themselves that have the lived experience of the project. Coming to see the world from a project perspective can have a profound influence on an evaluation (just as learning to see the world from an evaluator’s perspective might have a lasting impact on those at project level).

Those who have come through the old positivist school of research training might wonder if the use of generally inexperienced people in evaluation leads to some loss of academic rigour and validity, and perhaps the introduction of an element of bias because they lack the professional detachment of the trained evaluator. But the objectivity of an outsider cannot be taken for granted either, for it is never entirely possible to be free of our cultural baggage.

Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:24.)

A balanced evaluation team comprised of people with different cultural backgrounds arguably provides our best safeguard, for it ensures that a range of values and interests are brought to bear on an evaluation. Further I would suggest that any possible loss of rigour and validity is more than compensated for by what we gain in relationship. One might possess all of the evaluation skills and techniques in the world, but in the absence of any social connection it is unlikely that much meaningful information will be collected due to poor rapport and non-response. However it should not automatically be assumed from the above discussion that it is always advantageous to employ local Indigenous people on an evaluation. In some situations ‘outsiders’ without prior involvement in local community politics might actually be more acceptable and effective, especially where social cohesion is an issue and sensitive issues like native title are at stake. The question of ‘who?’ always needs to be negotiated.

In the case of this evaluation the inclusion of Indigenous people on the evaluation team provided the necessary cultural competence necessary to meet ethical evaluation standards.

The evaluator or evaluation team should possess the knowledge, abilities, skills and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation. Evaluators should fairly represent their competence, and should not practise beyond it. (Australasian Evaluation Society, 1997)

Professional and contextual understandings both matter greatly in Indigenous evaluation.

Balancing Dual Accountabilities

An evaluator working in an Indigenous setting may find themselves exposed to expectations of dual accountability; on the one hand to the agency commissioning the study and on the other to the Indigenous projects and their participants. The latter reflects legitimate Indigenous aspirations to be involved in decision-making and determine their own directions.

As a basic tenet, approaches to evaluative research involving Indigenous people must be based on respect for Indigenous people's inherent right to self-determination, and our right to control and maintain our culture and heritage (Taylor, 2003: 47).

Evaluation is a tool of governance which we can use to manage change and inform our resource allocation decisions. The key question in Indigenous contexts is 'In whose hands does it rest?' For historically Indigenous people have been on the receiving end of evaluation. Generally it has been something done 'to', 'on' and 'about' Indigenous people; rather than 'with', 'for' and 'by' them (Scougall, 1997: 53). The challenge is to make evaluation a tool of self-governance that enables Indigenous peoples to drive their own futures. Indigenous writers have long advocated a fundamental realignment of power relations between the research and evaluation community and Indigenous peoples (Taylor, 2003: 48).

[M]ost research has been undertaken by non-Indigenous people for reasons external to Indigenous needs or interests, and has in most circumstances been done on Indigenous people. This power imbalance has led to an inability to have input into, control over, or ownership of the results of research and has more often than not further dis-empowered Indigenous people. The power imbalance permitted 'outsiders' to define the 'problem' and pose the 'solution' with little challenge to methodological and ethical issues. (Arbon, 1992:1)

The evaluation of the Strategy did allow the projects involved in the case studies to exercise some degree of ownership and control over aspects of what was evaluated, how it was evaluated and the ultimate dissemination of reports. The prior approval of RMIT University's Human Research Ethics Committee was obtained for each case study. People were not interviewed without their informed consent. The methodology was negotiated with communities in advance to ensure that our work was carried out in accordance with their expressed wishes. Everyone interviewed was provided with a 'Plain English Statement' explaining what the evaluation was about and informing them about their rights as participants, that their involvement was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time if they so wished. Indigenous members of the evaluation team played a valuable role in informing case study participants and ensuring that they were in a position to give informed consent to be interviewed. Some projects were in communities where English was not the first language, so everything needed to be explained in the local language. Projects were only visited and reports were only published with the agreement of the local Indigenous organization responsible for the project. Draft reports were sent back to projects for local comment ahead of publication. This was a long and occasionally frustrating process. Understandably some communities had more pressing issues to deal with than our evaluation. People also needed time to digest information and hold meetings to discuss reports and findings.

At the national level it was more difficult to give effect to Indigenous control. Sometimes processes are established whereby evaluators report to an Indigenous Reference Group which serves as a source of guidance. But the Strategy was a mainstream initiative and there was no such group. There were, however, other ways in which we could

demonstrate responsiveness to Indigenous priorities. Back in 2000 FaCSIA had convened an Indigenous Community Capacity Building Roundtable ('the Roundtable') that laid down eight principles to guide the work of the Department in its interactions with Indigenous families and communities. In summary these were:

- encouraging partnership between government and Indigenous peoples in program design and implementation;
- the identification of positive role models and successful approaches;
- empowering Indigenous peoples through the development of leadership and managerial competence;
- targeting the needs of youth and children in areas including leadership development, esteem building, cultural awareness and anti-violence training;
- empowering Indigenous peoples to develop their own solutions to their own issues and to take responsibility within their own families and communities;
- give priority to initiatives that encourage self-reliance and sustainable development;
- fostering projects that are inclusive of Indigenous culture and spirituality;
- building on the strengths, assets and capacities of Indigenous families and communities.

While there was no mechanism in place whereby this evaluation could be directly accountable to Indigenous people at a national level, the evaluation reports nevertheless did strive to remain true to the principles laid down by the Roundtable. This is reflected in the issues that were given priority attention: the identification of Indigenous 'best practice'; the examination of initiatives that address the needs of young people; the nature of partnership arrangements set in place; the focus on leadership; and the adoption of a strength based methodology.

Balancing Evaluation Reporting and Capacity Building

Evaluation can be an empowering experience for Indigenous peoples when the negative reports about failed policies and projects give way to positive stories of hope that celebrate Indigenous achievements and provide useful insights into the factors that contribute to success. One of the tensions in this study was that of ensuring that the evaluation was somehow an empowering experience for the Indigenous people involved, while simultaneously being able to convey the message that most Indigenous communities are still far from strong. The very real danger is that we might continue the historic process of constructing Indigenous peoples as always 'lacking'. Evaluators have an ethical responsibility to 'do no harm'. A 'deficit' approach can cause harm to the extent that it undermines those crucial capacities of confidence, self-belief and hope that are so necessary if evaluation is to be a force for positive social change in Indigenous Australia.

The adoption of a strength-based approach meant that our starting point was always the identification of those capacities that were already possessed – resources, skills, knowledge, understandings, interests – rather any perceived shortcomings. First and foremost the evaluation highlighted those aspects of projects that were working well. This

was considered important both because of the impact on project morale and also because of the potential demonstration effect on other projects elsewhere. Each case study identified a range of positive outcomes and future opportunities, before going on to consider areas where there may be scope for improvement. One project in Central Australia, for example, was found to have achieved a growing sense of community ownership over activities, established playgroups in remote communities, progressively enhanced participation, attracted increasingly diverse sources of funding and support, produced an extensive photo archive of project activities and built quality relationships between community members and project staff. Arguably there's more of value to learn when we focus on what's working well rather than what's not.

In those instances where projects fell short of achieving desired outcomes it was important to make it clear that evaluation was not an exercise in blaming Indigenous people and organizations for things beyond their control. We all need to appreciate that Indigenous family and community issues are 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) that are often not open to easy amelioration. They are associated with multiple and iterative underlying factors involving complex intersections of causes and effects. This evaluation was at pains to highlight the many contextual factors that typically inhibit Indigenous projects. These include: logistical difficulties associated with isolation, distance and remoteness; the absence of many mainstream family and community services (especially in remote regions); overloaded services trapped in a crisis response mode; a youthful demographic profile that places heavy demands on maternal, child health and other family and community services; cross cultural communication difficulties in regions where English is not the first language; inadequate basic infrastructure such as staff housing, vehicles and project space; difficulties in consistently recruiting and retaining competent staff and a high incidence of staff 'burn out'; frequent over-reliance on the capacity of a few key individuals; and the impact that high mortality and morbidity have on the capacity for active social and economic participation (Scougall, 2006).

The evaluation highlighted the extent to which such prevailing social and economic conditions can erode project achievements. In one instance the murder of a project worker set one initiative back several months as people dealt with their grief and trauma (Scougall 2006). Recognising all of this serves to temper expectations as to what might realistically be attained. There are often good reasons why an Indigenous project may not be able to match the achievements of a similar scale mainstream initiative. The evaluation found that some Indigenous projects had unrealistically bold expectations. In some places just getting local people meaningfully engaged is a major step forward in itself.

The literature of 'empowerment evaluation' advocates the transfer of evaluation logic, skills and knowledge to local people (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman et al, 1996). However, there can be a tension between completing an evaluation in a timely manner and the task of building local evaluation capacity. I would suggest that the provision of evaluation training to local people, who may have little formal education, is resource-intensive and time-consuming work that can be difficult to accomplish within the limited time span of an evaluation. Arguably the development of a capacity for self-evaluation is a long-term

developmental process extending well beyond the duration of one evaluation. It is noted that FaCSIA has funded action-learning activities in association with some Strategy projects (Scougall, 2006). When it comes to building a self-critical evaluative organisational ethos, these initiatives would seem more likely to be effective than anything I might have been able to achieve on the run. Certainly the inspiring vision of a departing team of evaluators leaving a self-evaluating community in its wake is way beyond anything that was accomplished in my work. While I think this evaluation did contribute to Indigenous empowerment in some important ways, skilling was not one of them.

Conclusion

This paper is a contribution to a broader discussion about appropriate evaluation practice in Indigenous contexts. It should not be read as implying that there is a 'one right way' of dealing with the inevitable tensions that arise. It is just one way. But at a general level the experience of this evaluation most certainly does reinforce the central place that respect for 'right' relationships plays in facilitating the conduct of evaluation and social research in Indigenous contexts. In particular we do well to remind ourselves that behaviour is best understood with the benefit of an insiders' perspective. *"People deserve to be properly understood and this will often demand the kind of intimate knowledge which comes from close relationships"* (Kushner (2002: 21).

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