

***Australasian Evaluation Society International Conference
Evidence and Evaluation
31 August – 4 September 2009
National Convention Centre, Canberra, Australia***

**Issues in the Evaluation of Programs for Indigenous Communities in
Australia**

**Anne Markiewicz
Anne Markiewicz & Associates Pty Ltd**

1. Introduction

Evaluations of programs for Indigenous Australians should reflect the same degree of good practice as all evaluations strive to achieve. These evaluations, however, have additional complexity resulting from the context of Indigenous people's history and culture and current levels of disadvantage within Australian society. Indigenous Australians comprise 517,000 or 2.5% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006)¹ but generally experience poorer health, lower life expectancy, higher rates of death and disability, and compromised quality of life and well being when compared to the total Australian population. In addition, Indigenous Australians are over represented in incarceration and child protection systems².

To address the level of disadvantage, and to 'close the gap'³ for Indigenous Australians, it is important that programs or initiatives designed for Indigenous Australians are fully evaluated to determine 'what works for whom, in what contexts, and how' (Pawson & Tilley 1997). Effective and credible evaluations of programs designed for Indigenous Australians should be informed by an understanding of Indigenous history and culture, culturally sensitive, appreciate Indigenous worldviews and differences, operate ethically and reflect good practice in evaluation, and be capable of producing evaluation findings that can inform future program design and social policy.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au>

² Indigenous children are six times as likely to be abused than non-Indigenous children ('The Age' report, 2nd July 2009)

³ The Close the Gap campaign commenced on 4th April 2007 and called on Australian governments to commit to closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation. 'The Age' reported on 2nd July 2009 that the 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage' report compiled every 2 years by the productivity commission measuring 50 indicators of disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, showed no improvement in 80% of the economic and social indicators.

This paper aims to outline some of the key issues in undertaking evaluations of programs concerning Indigenous peoples and communities in Australia⁴. It is written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous evaluator. The current prevailing pattern in Australia is that most evaluations of programs for Indigenous peoples and communities will be 'undertaken or led by non-Indigenous peoples' (Wehipeihana, N., 2009). This pattern underlines the need for greater capacity development and mentoring over a longer time frame to enable Indigenous community members to become evaluators. In New Zealand, by contrast, there have a greater number of Maori people with expertise in evaluation and guidelines and practices have been developed in relation to the conduct of evaluation with Maori communities. Until greater capacity is developed within Australian Indigenous communities for the management and conduct of evaluation activities, the presence and involvement of non-Indigenous evaluators is likely to remain. In this context, it is important that the issues and challenges involved in undertaking evaluations of programs for Indigenous communities are identified, recognised and addressed.

This article is not able to encompass all the issues that can potentially arise from the process of undertaking evaluations in an Indigenous context. It highlights selected issues including understanding the impact of the historical and systemic context of Indigenous Australians, working to principles of good practice and operating ethically, and ensuring evaluations can inform social policy and inform good practice in the delivery of Indigenous programs and services. Each of these areas are considered individually.

2. Historical and Systemic Context

One of the first challenges in undertaking evaluations of programs designed for Indigenous Australians is recognition that Indigenous peoples and communities have experienced unique historical, social, economic and psychological conditions. These need to be considered in the design and conduct of evaluations. Contextual factors impacting upon Indigenous Australians have been identified by Scougall (2008: 73) and are summarised below.

Historical Factors: Experiences of colonisation, racism and discrimination have resulted in the breakdown of social cohesion and negative life experiences for many Indigenous Australians.

Social Factors: Experiences of separation, loss and institutionalisation have resulted in sub-optimal parenting practices, negative peer influences and normalisation of violence and substance abuse for many Indigenous Australians.

Economic Factors: Many Indigenous Australians have experienced inter-generational unemployment, poverty and limited educational advancement.

⁴ The term Indigenous is used in this paper to encompass Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is acknowledged that specific cultural identities (such as Koori in Victoria) have not been reflected in the use of this term.

Psychological Factors: Intergenerational trauma, stress and negative childhood experiences have resulted in social disconnection and isolation, disempowerment, lack of coping strategies and social skills, mental health and substance abuse issues for many Indigenous Australians.

One of the implications of the above historical and systemic factors for evaluation is that causality is seldom simple or linear and cause and effect can be difficult to disentangle (Scougall 2008: 73). An example from practice is the evaluation of a suite of family violence prevention programs in Australia (conducted by the Office of Evaluation and Audit, Indigenous Programs, 2007 with Anne Markiewicz as an evaluator). In attempting to identify the emergent outcomes and impacts in the reduction of the incidence and prevalence of family violence amongst Indigenous communities, the evaluator also had to consider the characteristics of communities in terms of level of social disadvantage, degree of remoteness, levels of substance abuse and alcohol consumption, and implications of the aggregation of different families and language groupings.

It is thus difficult to evaluate program interventions for Indigenous Australian peoples and communities in silos of education, employment, health, mental health, income support, child protection, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, family violence or other areas of social provision. These areas of social provision tend to intersect and evaluations need to be able to identify the complex inter-relationships that reflect the lives of Indigenous Australians.

Another significant implication for evaluation of the context impacting upon Indigenous peoples and communities is recognition that the Indigenous community is diverse and variations in appropriate programmatic responses will inevitably arise. Evaluation of one program as successful may not be transferable to another state/territory or another community. The following quote illustrates this point:

Adding to the difficulty of doing something constructive about Indigenous family and community issues is the fact that one-size-fits-all prescriptions seldom work well in a policy environment that is characterised by cultural and contextual diversity. Rather programs and services have to be tailored to meet local needs and circumstances (Scougall 2008: 74 quoting Libesman 2004).

3. Good Practice and Ethics

Another challenge for the evaluator is the ethics and good practice associated with implementing evaluations. There has been a degree of lack of trust of researchers by Indigenous community members, who often believe that researchers take information for their own purposes while nothing changes on the ground for Indigenous people as a result of the research process. Research and evaluation, of course, differ as disciplines. While research can be undertaken in order to contribute to knowledge generation and advancement, for purposes of obtaining higher qualifications or academic publications, evaluations are generally commissioned by government departments or non-government organisations wanting to establish if their program interventions have been effective and achieved results. By its very nature, evaluation should have a greater level of use and application for Indigenous peoples and communities. However, there is a lot to be

learned for the discipline of evaluation from research, as its application has had a longer history in an Indigenous context.

Over the years there has been a lot of research undertaken in our communities into aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well being. Sometimes the outcomes from this research have not always benefited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (NHMRC, 2003 (b): Introduction).

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have developed guidelines for ethical conduct in Indigenous research. The Guidelines were preceded by a literature review that identified concerns that research was often characterised by poor consultation and communication and cross cultural insensitivity (NHMRC, 2003 (a): p4). The Guidelines are of interest to evaluators as a reference point for ethical conduct, particularly given the absence of specific guidelines developed for Indigenous evaluation in the Australian context. Evaluation should follow similar principles to social research in its application of ethical principles. The principles identified in the Australian context were supported by the work of the Institute for Aboriginal Health at the University of British Columbia (UBC), that developed a framework for its research activity emphasising the “4 Rs” of research with aboriginal communities: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Evans et.al, 2009:895). This framework is now presented below:

RESPECT

- Respect for, and support of, the richness and integrity of the common cultural inheritance of Indigenous communities and their cultural, spiritual and social cohesion, whilst also recognising the diversity among communities.
- Respect for the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples in relation to knowledge, ideas, cultural expressions and materials.
- Respect for social cohesion and commitment to cultural distinctiveness amongst Indigenous Australian communities.

RELEVANCE

- Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding developed with those affected by the research.

RECIPROCITY

- Equitable benefits for participating Indigenous communities such as enhanced capacities and opportunities.
- Use of, and access to, research results and outcomes that are able to advance people’s identified interests and are of benefit to them.

RESPONSIBILITY

- Negotiation around the research process, obtaining informed consents and ensuring transparency of research methods and use of findings.

- Acknowledging and valuing Indigenous experiences, with equal levels of involvement and distribution of benefits.
- Commitment to doing no harm, accountability and transparency.

Whilst most evaluators would agree with the above principles and values, they can be more challenging to apply in practice than they are accepted in theory. Some examples of their application to evaluation in the Indigenous context are described below.

Respect for Culture:

Most evaluators undertaking evaluations of programs developed for Indigenous peoples and communities would ideally hold a commitment to and value the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous Australian communities. This respect, however, needs to be translated to all processes of the evaluation, including the design of the evaluation and its choice of methods, the process of interviewing Indigenous peoples and community members and the way the data that has been gathered is interpreted, analysed and reported..

It can be argued that culturally responsive evaluations should make strong use of qualitative techniques (Frierson, Hood & Hughes, 2002; Berends & Roberts, 2003). The interviewing and interpretive skills of the evaluator are critical to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Important to the process of engagement between the evaluator and interviewee are sensitive interviewing techniques that can identify non verbal as well as verbal cues and the capacity of the evaluator to create a context that is non-judgemental and empathic. The ability of the evaluator to interpret data in a way that is true to the situation, avoiding personal bias, is also important.

Deriving meaning from data in program evaluations that are culturally responsive requires people who understand the context in which the data were gathered (Frierson, Hood & Hughes, 2002: 71).

Respect for Diversity in Indigenous Communities:

Larger scale and national evaluations do not always allow for in-depth, locally customised investigations. A broader brush approach is often adopted to try to encompass the most common, or general features of program results. Even in one community, there may be a number of different family and language groupings that require customised responses. For the evaluator, the challenge is responding to the diversity of Indigenous peoples and communities within the scope of the evaluation time frame, budget and design.

The use of community leaders who support the evaluation and can assist the evaluators to navigate the process of entry to communities can be a positive approach to undertaking evaluations of Indigenous focussed programs (Berends & Roberts, 2003). The corollary of this situation is that there can be limitations encountered in speaking to one person or family group within a community because they are in professional roles or spokespeople and thus easier to access. These contacts may not always represent the full membership of the community, and this has implications for the principle of equity in undertaking evaluations. There is a challenge for the evaluator in ensuring they have an

introduction to, and achieve a good understanding of, issues facing the range of community members and also appreciate and negotiate the differences that may exist within a community.

Reciprocity:

For the purpose of this article, reciprocity is defined in two ways: appreciation for the contribution to the evaluation made by Indigenous peoples and dissemination of the results of the evaluation to Indigenous communities who participated in the process.

The use of appreciation fees or gifts are common in undertaking evaluations. In working with Indigenous communities the issue of appreciation fees and gifts requires forethought. Some evaluators will provide direct cash benefits to individuals who participate, others prefer gifts and others will make a contribution to the local school or a community facility or organisation. Whatever the form of appreciation, the implications require careful consideration.

The issue of dissemination can be problematic for evaluators. It is often the client or commissioner of the evaluation, not the evaluator, who has control over the dissemination process. The NHMRC (2003(b)) guidelines indicate that findings from research should be presented back to the community prior to being made more publically available. This is approach is not always achievable and can create tensions for evaluators.

Encouraging commissioners of evaluations to produce an easy to read version of the more technical final evaluation report is one possible strategy for dissemination of results. Presentation of the evaluation findings to a reference group with representatives from Indigenous communities who have participated in the evaluation is another strategy.

Responsibility:

Most evaluators would hold a commitment to doing no harm through the conduct of the evaluation. Harm can still be done where there is lack of sensitivity, cultural knowledge or lack of forethought. Potential areas for possible harm need to be identified during the evaluation planning process. For example, asking an Indigenous woman about her experiences of family violence may result in a backlash from her partner when he hears about her disclosure to an outsider. Asking a young person from an Indigenous community about his offending or substance misuse may result in disclosures for which the young person has not been charged that may require further police action. Concerns that evaluations are not always undertaken in the most ethical manner are reflected in the following statement:

In practice proper ethical principles for research involving Indigenous peoples are too frequently being either ignored and/or deliberately circumvented and devalued (Taylor, 2003: 46).

Use of informed consent processes can ameliorate some, but not all, of the potential harms involved in interviewing Indigenous people about sensitive issues. While research

may have been approved by an Ethics Committee, evaluations may not have been through such scrutiny about the nature of the questions to be asked. In these situations, careful considerations of the questions to be asked and the implications need to take place.

Relevance: Ensuring Evaluations Inform Social Policy and Guide Good Practice.

For evaluations to have benefits to the Indigenous peoples and communities who have participated in the process, they need to be used to guide the development of good practice in programmatic and service delivery responses and inform social policy development. The role the evaluator can be one of an agent of change (Taylor, 2003: 46). Areas of possible influence from evaluations include:

- Developing an enhanced *understanding* of the issues impacting upon Indigenous Australian peoples and communities;
- Representing *Indigenous voices* and concerns and reflecting these in reporting;
- Facilitating *discussion and debate* of current programmatic approaches and policies;
- *Developing, informing or reviewing* government funded programs, their designs and implementation; and
- *Influencing, developing or changing* government policies and measuring their impacts.

An example of influence at the social policy level was the *Little Children are Sacred* report⁵ which highlighted evidence of child abuse taking place in the Northern Territory's Indigenous communities. This report led to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) initiated in June 2007 - 'a set of measures designed to protect children, make communities safe and build a better future for people living in Indigenous communities and town camps in the Northern Territory' (FaHCSIA, 2009)⁶. One could argue that the response to the *Little Children are Scared Report* was ill considered given the complexity of the issues and the need for sensitive and well considered responses. This example is included as an illustration of potential influence.

In order to have influence, evaluations should provide credible information to enable the incorporation of lessons learned into decision making process (Kusek and Rist, 2004). Ideally, evaluations undertaken should be linked to organisational processes for project design and annual planning. Some of the factors that impact on the influence of evaluations include the organisational learning culture, the value and credibility of the data and findings generated by evaluation processes, and the timing of the generation and communication of findings in concert with decision making processes.

The following strategies may assist with increasing the utility of evaluation findings for Indigenous peoples and communities. The first strategy involves fostering an

⁵ Anderson, P. and Wild, R., Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred' Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, Darwin 2007.

⁶ FaHCSIA website, 2009

organisational environment that is conducive to and supportive of evaluation functions, embracing the concept of becoming a learning organisation that adopts evidence based decision making processes. The development and design of programs to address disadvantage among Indigenous Australians should be based on evidence and data regarding likely effectiveness rather than developed for political expediency. The second strategy involves ensuring that evaluations of programs designed for Indigenous people are credible, using appropriate data collection methods and inclusive of strategies for effective communication and marketing of the results. The third strategy involves timing the release of evaluation results at times of critical decision making within, such as at budget allocation time (McKay, 2007).

Evaluation processes for Indigenous programs thus need to be aware of and address the salient policy issues and concerns, be undertaken in a timely way in relation to policy making time frames, develop good relationships in order to effectively communicate the findings, and finally, foster a policy environment that is favourable to the use of evaluation findings as part of the decision making process.

4. Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of some of the challenges likely to be experienced by evaluators in undertaking evaluations of programs established for Indigenous Australians. Based on the principles and discussion above, evaluators concerned with programs established for Indigenous peoples and communities should aim to:

Respect: Understand Context

- Develop their understanding of Indigenous history, culture and social context and reflect this understanding in the design of the evaluation and the interpretation of its results.
- Appreciate Indigenous perspectives and worldviews whilst also allowing for and accommodating differences from people to people and community to community.

Relevance: Negotiate Methodologies and Approaches with Commissioners of the Evaluation

- Advocate for the design and use of evaluation methodologies that collect data in culturally appropriate ways.
- Apply realistic methodologies and time frames for conduct of the evaluation.
- Build a partnership with commissioners of evaluation to produce credible and useful evaluations.

Responsibility: Develop Interpersonal and Communication Skills

- Ensure that they act with cultural sensitivity and in a culturally appropriate manner at all junctures of the evaluation process.
- Develop high level interviewing skills that can respond to non verbal cues and interpersonal sensitivities.

- Negotiate with participants about the evaluation to ensure an understanding of its purpose and use.

Reciprocity: Consider Benefits

- Ensure that consequences of questions asked are fully considered in order to 'do no harm'.
- Operate in an ethically appropriate manner using informed consent processes.
- Consider appropriate benefits for participants in direct reciprocity and/or dissemination of evaluation findings.
- Ensure the evaluation is capable of producing findings that can inform future program design and social policy wherever this is possible and achievable.

References

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2002), *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*, Canberra.

Berends, L. and Roberts, B. (2003), 'Evaluation Standards and Their Application to Indigenous Programs in Victoria, Australia', in *Evaluation Australasia*, Vol. 3, No.2, pp 54-59.

Department of Finance and Deregulation, Office of Evaluation and Audit (Indigenous Programs) (2007), *Evaluation of the FaCSIA Family Violence Programs: FVRAP-FVPP*.

Evans, M.;Hole, R; Berg,L; Hutchinson, P and Sookraj, D. (2009), ' Common Insights, Differing Methodologies- Toward a Fusion of Indigenous Methodologies, Participatory Action Research, and White Studies, in an Urban Aboriginal Research Agenda', in *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No.5, pp 893- 910.

Frierson, H.; Hood, S.; and Hughes, G.B., (2002), 'Strategies that Address Culturally Responsive Evaluations' in Frechtling, J., *The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation*, National Science Foundation.

Kusek, J.Z., Rist, R.C., (2004), *Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System*, The World Bank, Washington D.C.

McKay, K. (2007), *How to Build M&E Systems to Support Better Government*, Washington, World Bank.

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2003a), *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*.

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2003b), *Keeping Research on Track: A Guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about Heath Research Ethics*.

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*, Sage UK

Scougall, J. (2008), 'Lessons Learned about Strengthening Indigenous Families and Communities' - *Occasional Paper No 19, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004*.

Scougall, J. (2006), 'Reconciling Tensions between Principles and Practice in Indigenous Evaluation', *Evaluation Australasia*, Vol. 6, No.2, pp 49-55

Taylor, R. (2003), 'An Indigenous Perspective on Evaluations in the Inter-Cultural Context: How Far Can one Throw a Moree Boomerang?' in *Evaluation Australasia*, Vol. 3, No.2, pp 44-52

'The Age' (2/7/2009), 'Indigenous gap 'widening, not closing'
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/02/2614635.htm>

Wehipeihana, N. (2009), 'Indigenous Evaluation: A Strategic Objective of the Australasian Evaluation Society'. *Evaluation Australasia*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp 40-44