Indigenous evaluation: an editorial review

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For the first issue of 2012 we bring you a special edition of *EJA* that deals with evaluation in indigenous settings. But before we present some new articles in this field, we felt that it would be interesting to review what has been published and discussed on the topic to date (especially in *EJA*) and to see how the area of indigenous evaluation has evolved in Australasia. This task has involved a search along our shelves, as well as a more formal library search that has resulted in material that goes back more than 30 years.

The first references to evaluations amongst indigenous groups appear to have come under the umbrella of the need for *cross-cultural awareness* (Brislin & Segall 1975; Kumar 1979; Paton 1985).

In Australasia, one of the first references we could find concerning working with indigenous groups and of being culturally aware appeared in *EJA* in 1993. At this time, Westwood and Brous wrote a reflective piece based on the experience of conducting field work that required working with a ‘non-mainstream cultural group’. The article used the authors’ evaluation experiences to provide some lessons for evaluation practice. They determined that such evaluations need to consider: cultural taboos; sensitive issues; language; functional differences and lifestyle; but noted particularly that ‘whilst this seems logical, in practice it can be difficult to apply’ (Westwood & Brous 1993, p. 43).

In a similar vein, and still about cross-cultural awareness, Patricia Rogers (1995) writes about Ernie House’s (1992) article, published in the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* where, in a discussion about stakeholder approaches to evaluation, he suggested that evaluators need to consider minority groups carefully. Ernie pointed out the difficulty of integrating the divergent (and often conflicting views) of different subgroups within minorities and that by outsiders treating all those within a minority group as ‘the same’ can lead to domination of decision-making by the most powerful subgroups—and therefore to a dissolution of any democratic process.

Such writing of the time gives the impression, though, that many (Western) evaluators remained somewhat aloof from the indigenous people receiving programs (e.g. Adhikari & Yik 1999). Indeed, Neale and Tavila (2007) continue to be concerned about this and so raise the issue of who carries out, or benefits from, an evaluation because ‘indigenous communities have a long history of being seen as the “other” where they are researched “on” and their experience interpreted by outsiders through a different lens’ (Smith 1999).

This was certainly the case for three of the articles written as a section of *EJA* in 1997 (‘Indigenous perspectives’, *EJA*, vol. 9, nos. 1&2, pp. 24–61). For instance, projects undertaken in Australasia at that time did not mention the possibility of recipients becoming full-blown evaluators. This was even the case when evaluations were undertaken by (the then) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). As a manager in the Office of Evaluation and Audit in ATSIC described:

program recipients often are the least able to become fully involved in the evaluation process. This is because they are scattered in space, a national diaspora of individuals and competing service delivery groups, and limited in their familiarity with bureaucratic processes. (Batho 1993, p. 35)

The only involvement in an evaluation, therefore, that a recipient was likely to be allowed was to become an elected community representative sitting on a Steering Committee. Rather patronisingly, it was added that: ‘Although the Commission’s clients are not formally involved in evaluations, their views are actively sought by evaluation teams’ (Batho, p. 35).

This ‘external’ perspective has not only been the case for Australasian indigenous groups because *EJA* has published work from other areas of the world such as pieces concerning the First Nations of Canada (Barrados 1999—an adaptation of her keynote address delivered at the 1999 AES International Conference, Perth). There again, what was written/spoken about was from the perspective of the external, non-indigenous evaluator’s point of view (this was also the case for Wheeler 2007).

However, Barrados raises the need for *cultural relevance* and identifies useful lessons for an external, non-indigenous evaluator such as:

- recognising and understanding the cultural dynamics of the situation
- determining the commitment of the indigenous community and its leaders to evaluation
- ensuring that there is a common understanding of the different requirements from within the indigenous community from those imposed externally (Barrados 1999, p. 36).

Moving from these ideas of making evaluations culturally relevant then changed into calls for evaluators to become ‘culturally competent’. Certainly cultural competence became important enough for the American Evaluation Association to dedicate a whole issue of *New Directions for Evaluation* to it entitled ‘In Search of Cultural Competence in Evaluation’ by the middle of the 2000s (Thompson-Robinson, Hopson & SenGupta 2004), but it was still directed mainly at non-indigenous evaluators.
Even with attempts at cultural competence, there were still concerns about how to reconcile tensions between trying to be aware and knowledgeable about indigenous culture and principles while trying to follow them in evaluation practice. Scougall (2006) described this dilemma succinctly:

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 change. The hard reality is that evaluators are most often outsiders with limited resources and precious little time to spend in the field. By ‘outside’ 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 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 principles and practice. (Scougall 2006, Abstract)

There has also been a call for ‘cultural appropriateness’. However, Thomas (2002) points out that 10 years ago such action was often ignored (the only exceptions in Australasia seeming to be Faisandier & Bunn, 1997—where two parallel programs, one for Māori and another for non-Māori were set up to reduce alcohol addiction—Gray et al., 1995, and Mooney, Jan & Wiseman, 2002). Referring to New Zealand specifically:

the assessment of the cultural appropriateness of the service being evaluated is rarely mentioned … [Yet] evaluators have been increasingly required to demonstrate that their research approach is consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi and responsive to the needs of Indigenous Māori people and other non-dominant ethnic groups such as those of Pacific descent. This requires attention to at least two aspects of an evaluation: (1) the appropriate design of research methods and conduct of the evaluation team; and (2) assessment of the extent to which programs and services operate in culturally appropriate ways. There has been relatively little discussion of how these aspects might be incorporated into the design of evaluations. (Thomas 2002, Abstract)

To address the second point, Thomas (2002, p. 53) suggests that to be culturally apposite requires: appropriate practice management; staff training; use of cultural advisers; the creation of networks with local indigenous groups; and liaison with specialist service providers. In conclusion, Thomas presented a framework for assessing cultural appropriateness including key components and potential indicators.

One solution to such issues has been a ‘side-by-side’ arrangement that involves partnering a local indigenous worker with local cultural knowledge alongside a non-indigenous non-evaluator with relevant qualifications. This was supposed to produce a ‘balanced’ evaluation team. But the problem remained that work was still being carried out ‘on’ ‘indigenous groups’ and the challenge remained to enable indigenous groups to drive their own destinies. Consequently, indigenous authors have long advocated a realignment of power relations between researchers and evaluators (Taylor 2003, p. 48).

This translated into the beginnings of positive action. One of the major authors suggesting a change within Australia was Scougall 1997, p. 53) who stressed that:

Evaluation only becomes relevant to Aboriginal people when it is conceived of as a process that enables communities to understand their situation better, give voice to their own issues and concerns and determine a direction forward.

and therefore, decisions should not be taken by the ‘dominant culture’ (Scougall 1997, p. 59).

Scougall (2008) also reported that FaCSIA (the then Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) had convened an Indigenous Community Capacity Building Roundtable in 2000 that produced eight principles to guide evaluations with Indigenous families and communities. These comprised:

- encouraging partnerships between government and Indigenous people in program design and implementation
- identifying positive role models and successful approaches
- empowering Indigenous people through developing leadership and managerial competence
- targeting youth and children in regard to leadership development, esteem building, etc.
- building on the strengths, assets and capacities of Indigenous families and communities
- empowering Indigenous people to develop their own issues
- giving priority to initiative that encourage self-reliance and sustainability
- fostering projects that consider Indigenous culture and spirituality (Scougall 2008, p. 4).

Similarly, Sanga and Pasikale (2002) articulated principles for any evaluation activity with Pacific islanders including:

- maintenance of dignity
- creation of enduring relationships rather than sporadic encounters
- good communication
- reciprocity where possible
- empowerment.

In the light of such sentiments there was then a push for more participatory and collaborative evaluations and EJA began to report projects that attempted to incorporate such approaches (e.g. Neale & Tavila
2007), even in challenging circumstances (such as Spooner, Flaxman & Murray’s, 2008, involvement in an Aboriginal boys’ crime prevention program).

But at the turn of the new millennium, the desire for indigenous groups to take ownership of their own destinies grew; sometimes with the help of others. For example, McIntyre (2002) acted as a facilitator and empowerment coach of Indigenous facilitators who were developing a Community of Practice for a process evaluation involving governance of an Aboriginal public housing association.

However, the winds of change began to blow in more strongly, with indigenous groups taking charge of their own evaluations and so becoming more influential in their own right. The watershed and great stride forward occurred in the evaluation world about a decade ago, in 2003, when the AES Board of the day identified indigenous evaluation as a strategic objective. (In a later article, Nan Wehipeihana, 2008, described the factors leading up to this decision, as well as future strategies required).

In the same year (2003), Russell Taylor was asked to give a Keynote Address at the AES International Conference in Auckland. Called ‘An Indigenous Perspective on the Inter-Cultural Context’, the content concentrated on the idea of renewing ethical evaluation practices when working within inter-cultural contexts (Taylor 2003). This was a real milestone in that it was the first time an Indigenous person literally took centre stage to speak about indigenous evaluation.

As part of the same event, a two-day indigenous ‘Wānanga’ (forum) was held. The purpose was to discuss developments, issues and other themes relevant to evaluations involving Indigenous people. Wolfgangramm, Oliver & Akroyd (2003) reported that topics covered included building community capacity in evaluation and issues in the development of a Kaupapa Māori evaluation framework, that is, to undertake evaluation from an indigenous viewpoint.

This work has begun to bear fruit, especially in regard to indigenous evaluation frameworks. For example, Boulton & Kingi (2011) reflected on the use of a Māori conceptual framework from which to evaluate a complex health policy regarding obesity. This approach considers: Māori: Development; Autonomy; Delivery; Leadership; Integration; Responsiveness; and Environmental perspectives. The authors discuss the usefulness of employing such a framework and conclude that:

not only provided a practical analytical tool for Indigenous evaluators, but also the means by which the wider team could ensure rigorous and robust data analysis, thereby guaranteeing the production of relevant findings for the commissioners. (Boulton & Kingi 2011, p. 1)

And so we come to the current issue. In the first article, the necessity for culturally competent evaluation is called for once again but continues to emphasise how it must come from the indigenous viewpoint. In her article, Sandy Kerr extends the work of Boulton and Kingi to show how historically held values, rules and customs reflected in Kaupapa Māori (i.e. ‘carrying out things properly from a Māori standpoint’) have underpinned the development of Kaupapa Māori theory. This ‘theory’ has then provided a platform for the emergence of a framework for the practice of evaluation in the context of the evaluation of Māori programs in Aotearoa New Zealand. Six principles evident in this practice are discussed (i.e. the principles of control, challenge, culture, connection, change and credibility). The relationship of these principles with Māori culture, the work of Kaupapa Māori theorists, and their congruence with broader contemporary evaluation theory is explored.

Next, Anne Markiewicz uses her experience to reflect on issues to be considered when evaluating programs for Indigenous Australians. From the perspective of a non-Indigenous evaluator, the four principles of respect, relevance, responsibility and reciprocity (based on the research framework of Evans et al., 2009, developed in British Columbia) are examined against the background of the unique historical, social, economic and psychological conditions that have shaped the experience of Indigenous Australians. While the principles outlined may be seen as core to effective evaluation generally, this issue of building trust between the evaluator and Indigenous community members is seen as a necessity. Each of the principles is then elaborated upon to reflect an Australian perspective and to provide evaluators with strategies to implement these.

The two following articles (by Maya Haviland with James Pillsbury, and Megan Price et al.) provide case studies of particular, individual evaluations and explore the issues, challenges and learnings from these projects. Both evaluations were undertaken in Western Australia and mutually reinforce the need for continuous learning of all stakeholders in order to build an understanding of effective indigenous evaluation practice.

In their evaluation of the Jalaris Kids Future Club, Haviland and Pillsbury highlight some of the issues encountered in: identifying appropriate and non-discriminatory benchmarks for measuring outcomes for Indigenous children; collecting evidence through culturally appropriate methods; and being sensitive to local kinship networks and the relationships between these. In particular, their article indicates the need for flexibility and responsiveness in supporting the evaluation process. They also outline the challenges that distance and resourcing can pose when attempting to develop evaluation partnerships and build evaluation capacity as part of a participatory approach.

Last, Price, McCoy and Maï focus on the need for Aboriginal community ownership and empowerment to be integral to the evaluation process. As non-Aboriginal evaluators working with remote communities, this article identifies a number of messages. Of these, the need to build (and often rebuild) trust is paramount. This requires time and, in this case, the use of an intermediary or ‘sponsor’ to support communication and build perceptions of legitimacy with stakeholders was found to be a valuable strategy.

Appropriate methodology was also perceived to be key—with the use of an iterative approach seen to assist the building of contextual understanding and constructive engagement with community members.
Varied approaches to the collection of data, including the use of art-based methods, proved successful in providing communities with the means to tell their stories in culturally appropriate ways. More importantly, the authors indicate the importance of engaging continually in reflexive practice to allow for adaptability in the evaluation process so that it remains effective and meets the needs of all stakeholders.

Well, that brings you all up to the minute with current topics and exemplars associated with indigenous issues. By the time this issue reaches you all, the AES Perth International Conference about Māori frameworks of evaluation (Cram 2008)...

1 Price et al. note that the word ‘Aboriginal’ rather than ‘Indigenous’ is used in their article as this is the preference of the Aboriginal communities they have worked with.

Notes

References


*All material published in AES journals has been highlighted in bold.*