Closing the gap through respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility: issues in the evaluation of programs for Indigenous communities in Australia

This article outlines key considerations and issues inherent in undertaking effective evaluations of programs developed for Indigenous Australians, written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous evaluator.

The considerations identified include a number of professional practice areas, namely the need for evaluators to: operate with an understanding and appreciation of the historical and systemic context experienced by Indigenous Australians; work from the basis of a solid code of ethics and practice standards; and operate with high levels of cultural sensitivity and the ability to appreciate Indigenous world views and differences. Another central consideration identified in the article is that evaluators need to hold a commitment to produce useful and useable evaluation findings that can inform future program design and social policy in relation to improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

The article develops a number of principles for evaluators to follow in evaluating programs developed for Indigenous Australians. These include: having respect for the importance of historical, socioeconomic and psychological context; commitment to ensuring relevance in methodologies and approaches used; reciprocity in considering the benefits for participating Indigenous communities; and responsibility in undertaking effective communication and consultation.

While most evaluators would agree with the above principles and values, the latter can be more challenging to apply in practice and examples of their application to evaluation, and the inherent challenges in the Indigenous context, are described. Such challenges include: operating within the restrictions of government silos with difficulties portraying the complex interrelationships that reflect the lives of Indigenous Australians; reaching consensus on evaluation design and implementation; working within restricted time frames with lack of opportunity to appreciate and reflect the unique differences among Indigenous communities across Australia; limitations inherent in engaging a broad and representative group of Indigenous stakeholders; and lack of control by the evaluator over the dissemination and influence of evaluation findings and results that link with subsequent decision-making processes.

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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. At June 2006, the estimated number of Indigenous Australians was 517,000 or 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population (ABS 2006). Indigenous Australians generally experience poorer health, lower life expectancy, higher rates of death and disability, and compromised quality of life and wellbeing when compared to the total Australian population. In addition, they are over-represented in incarceration and child protection systems.

Consequently, to address the level of disadvantage, and to ‘close the gap’ for Indigenous Australians, it is important that programs or initiatives designed for Indigenous Australians are evaluated fully to determine ‘what works for whom, in what contexts, and how’ (Pawson & Tilley 1997). In consideration of the above, effective and credible evaluations of programs designed for Indigenous Australians should: be informed by an understanding of Indigenous history and culture; be culturally sensitive; appreciate Indigenous world views and differences; operate ethically; and reflect good practice in evaluation. Evaluations undertaken should also be capable of producing findings that can inform future program design and social policy.

This article aims to outline some of the key issues in undertaking evaluations of programs concerning Indigenous peoples and communities in Australia. It has been written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous evaluator as the current prevailing pattern in Australia is that most evaluations of programs for Indigenous peoples and communities are likely to be ‘undertaken or led by non-Indigenous peoples’ (Wehipeihana 2008). This pattern highlights the need for greater capacity development and mentoring over a longer time frame to enable Indigenous community members to become evaluators.

By contrast, New Zealand possesses a considerable number of Māori with expertise in evaluation. It is not surprising then that guidelines and practices have been developed in relation to the conduct of evaluation with Māori 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 continue. 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 ethically good practice and ensuring evaluations can inform social policy as well as good practice in the delivery of Indigenous programs and services. Each aspect is considered in turn below.

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 any evaluations that involve Indigenous people. Contextual factors impacting on Indigenous Australians have been identified by Scougall (2008, p. 73). These include:

- **Historical factors**: Experiences of colonisation, racism and discrimination have resulted in the breakdown of social cohesion leading to 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 as well as the normalisation of violence and substance abuse for many Indigenous people.
- **Economic factors**: Many Indigenous Australians have experienced inter-generational unemployment, poverty and limited educational advancement.
- **Psychological factors**: Intergenerational trauma, stress and negative childhood experiences have often resulted in social disconnection and isolation; disempowerment; lack of coping strategies and social skills and 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, p. 73). An example from practice comes from the evaluation of a suite of family violence prevention programs in Australia (conducted by the Office of Evaluation and Audit, Indigenous Programs, 2007). In attempting to identify the emergent outcomes and impacts in the reduction of the incidence and prevalence of family violence among 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 difficult therefore to evaluate program interventions for Indigenous Australian peoples and communities based on discrete 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 sectors tend to intersect and evaluations need to be able to identify the complex interrelationships that reflect the lives of Indigenous Australians.
Another significant implication for evaluation of the context impacting on Indigenous peoples and communities is the recognition that the Indigenous community is diverse and variations in appropriate programmatic responses will inevitably arise. Thus, evaluation of one program deemed to be successful in one setting may not be transferable to another State/Territory or another community. As Libesman (cited in Scougall 2008, p. 74) explains:

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.

**Good practice and ethics**

Another challenge for the evaluator is the ethics and good practice associated with implementing evaluations. In this regard, 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. Research is undertaken in order to contribute to knowledge generation and advancement, often for the purposes of obtaining higher qualifications or the publication of articles in academic journals. However, evaluations are generally commissioned by government departments or non-government organisations wanting to determine if their program interventions have been effective and have 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 great deal to be learnt for the discipline of evaluation from research, as its application has had a longer history in an Indigenous context. The NHMRC (2003b, Introduction) report that:

> 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.

Nevertheless, guidelines have been developed for ethical conduct in Indigenous research in Australia (AIATSIS 2002; NHMRC 2003). These 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. As a result, evaluation should follow similar principles to social research in its application of ethical principles. The NHMRC Guidelines identified a range of core values and principles to be considered in the research process.

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 ‘Four R’s’ of research with Aboriginal communities: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Evans et al. 2009, p. 895). This framework is outlined in Figure 1.

**Applying the four R’s of research with Aboriginal communities**

While 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. A description of examples of their application to evaluation, and the inherent challenges in the Indigenous specific context, follows.

**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 as well as 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). In consideration of this, the interviewing and interpretive skills of the evaluator are critical to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Also 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. At the same time:

> 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, p. 71).

Even so, reaching agreement between the commissioner of the evaluation and the evaluator regarding the ways in which an evaluation is designed and implemented can be difficult to achieve in practice. While the evaluator might support the use of more participatory and qualitative methods that offer greater levels of cultural sensitivity, the commissioner of the evaluation might be looking for quantitative results that would require a methodology that would be more difficult to implement in practice. One example of this was an evaluation where the evaluation commissioner wanted to track Indigenous community members over...
a three-year period after the program intervention had ceased to establish longer term impacts. The feasibility of this approach was questionable given the level of transience among Indigenous community members in this particular community. Additionally, without an intervention in place there were ethical issues in relation to the benefits for community members of their participation in such a process.

In contrast to the control by commissioners over evaluation designs of Indigenous programs, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)’s Indigenous Evaluation Framing Project aimed to inform and create evaluation designs that ensured evaluation rigour based on Indigenous ways of knowing and the core values of Indian communities (Richard & LaFrance 2006).

A further example of differences in views of appropriate evaluation methodologies for Indigenous programs regards specification of the time frames within which evaluations are expected to take place. While the commissioner of the evaluation might seek results from the evaluation sooner rather than later, the processes of collecting data from Indigenous communities may be more protracted and require a greater length of time and patience. The holding of a funeral in a community when data collection is scheduled, for example, is likely to delay the evaluation process considerably. Consequently, Pyett, Waples-Crowe & van der Sterren (2009, p. 52) stress that:

First we reiterate the importance of understanding and accepting the extra time that will be needed to develop relationships of mutual trust. Not all researchers have the time or the patience needed and few funding bodies or research institutions allow sufficient time and resources for this essential aspect of research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Evaluation methodologies thus need to be both realistic and culturally sensitive in their approach.

**Respect for diversity in Indigenous communities**

Larger scale 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 within a single 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. Again, the time frames set by the commissioner of the evaluation may not be realistic or in alignment with the need for the evaluator to spend more time in a community to appreciate and reflect its diversity. One example was an evaluation of a youth homelessness prevention program in a community that contained a large number of different family and language groupings. It had been the practice in the State in which this program operated to forcibly place Indigenous peoples in government reserves in order to segregate them. The consequence of this historical practice was a community left scarred by intercultural infighting and...
conflict. An evaluation, given the inherent complexities of this community, and an anticipated quick turnaround, was difficult to achieve.

The use of community leaders who support the evaluation and can assist the evaluators to navigate entry to communities can be a positive approach to undertaking evaluations of Indigenous-focused 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 are spokespeople and thus easier to access. These contacts may not always reflect the full membership of the community, and this has implications for the principle of equity when undertaking evaluations. This poses 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. One example of this arose during an evaluation undertaken in one regional town where the Indigenous community was represented by two key families. One family represented child welfare issues and the other family educational issues, but the families were in conflict, so it was difficult to access both perspectives in the one consultancy. Furthermore, the key members from each family acted as ‘gatekeepers’ restricting access to community members beyond their family groupings. Thus there were concerns that the evaluation was not capturing the views of all Indigenous community members.

Relevance: ensuring that evaluations inform social policy and guide good practice

For evaluations to have benefits to the Indigenous peoples and communities that have participated in the process, they need to be used to guide the development of good practice in programmatic and service delivery responses as well as inform social policy development. As a result, the role the evaluator can be one of an agent of change (Taylor 2003, p. 46). Areas of possible influence that evaluators and evaluations can achieve can be through:

- developing an enhanced understanding of the issues impacting on 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
- 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 report, which highlighted evidence of child abuse in the Northern Territory’s Indigenous communities. This report led to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which was introduced in June 2007. NTER is ‘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’ (see FaHCSIA website). One could argue that the response to the Little Children are Sacred 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 learnt into decision-making process (Kusek & 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 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. Thus, 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 politically expediency. The second strategy involves ensuring that evaluations of programs designed for Indigenous people are credible, use appropriate data collection methods and are inclusive of strategies for effective communication and marketing of results. The third strategy involves timing the release of evaluation results with critical decision-making points, such as at budget allocation time (McKay 2007).

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

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 when undertaking evaluations. In working with Indigenous communities the issue of appreciation fees and gifts requires forethought. Some evaluators
will provide direct cash benefits for individuals who participate, others prefer gifts while yet 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. For example, in one evaluation, a focus group was held in a remote community where it was not clear who was actually participating in the focus group and who was standing on the periphery listening in on the discussion. Therefore, the question arose about who should receive the $20 appreciation fee that was being distributed.

The issue of dissemination can also 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 (2003b) guidelines indicate that findings available from any research should be presented back first to the community prior to being made more public. Such an action 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 dissemination strategy. Presentation of the evaluation findings to a reference group with representatives from Indigenous communities who have participated in the evaluation is another possible strategy.

Responsibility
Most evaluators would commit to ‘doing no harm’ through the conduct of the evaluation. Harm can still occur 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 might 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 might result in disclosures of serious offences for which the young person has not been charged and 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, p. 46)

Use of informed consent processes can ameliorate some, but not all, of the potential harm involved when interviewing Indigenous people about sensitive issues. While research may have been approved by an Ethics Committee, evaluations may not have been through such scrutiny; for example, about the nature of the questions to be asked. In these situations, careful consideration of the questions to be asked and resulting implications need to take place.

Conclusion
This article has provided an overview of some of the challenges likely to be experienced by evaluators when 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 Indigenous peoples and communities by understanding the context whereby evaluators need to:
  – develop their understanding of Indigenous history, culture and social context and reflect this understanding in both the designs of evaluations as well as the interpretation of evaluation results
  – appreciate Indigenous perspectives and world views while also allowing for, and accommodating, differences from people to people and community to community

■ ensure relevance by negotiating methodologies and approaches with commissioners of the evaluation whereby evaluators:
  – advocate for the design and use of evaluation methodologies that involve collection of data in culturally appropriate ways
  – apply realistic methodologies and time frames for the conduct of evaluation
  – build partnerships with commissioners of evaluations to produce credible and useful evaluation findings and results

■ act with responsibility by developing interpersonal and communication skills so that evaluators:
  – ensure that they act with cultural sensitivity and in a culturally appropriate manner at all stages of the evaluation process
  – develop high-level interviewing skills that can respond to non-verbal cues and interpersonal sensitivities
  – negotiate with participants in the evaluation process to ensure an understanding of its purpose and use

■ exercise reciprocity by considering benefits whereby evaluators:
  – 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 through direct reciprocity and/or dissemination of evaluation findings
  – ensure that evaluation is capable of producing findings that can inform future program design and social policy wherever this is possible and achievable.
Notes


2 The Close the Gap campaign commenced on 4 April 2007 and called on Australian governments to commit to closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation. In the 2012–13 federal budget, the government increased its investment in Closing the Gap reforms (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (AIHW, AIFS) 2012).

3 The term ‘Indigenous’ is used in this article 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.


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