

# The role of the evaluator in remote contexts

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## Introduction

What constitutes research? What is evaluation? While there are distinctions between the two terms, both appear to be distinct disciplines in the literature. However, both may involve similar methods of inquiry. There may be subtle differences in the purposes of evaluation and research but perhaps the differences are more related to the perceptions than the methods or the purposes. Evaluation is often seen as a process of ‘assessment’—what works and why—while research is perhaps seen more as a process of ‘discovery’. Some may suggest that the task of research is to be able to ‘generalise’ while the task of evaluation is to ‘particularise’. Others may argue that evaluation begins with practice while research begins with theory. There is a sense in which these are ‘chicken and egg’ type arguments because indeed in each case the two notions may go hand in hand. Even within the discipline there are arguments about whether evaluation should be seen as based on constructivist or positivist paradigms (e.g. van der Knaap 2004) in much the same way that qualitative and quantitative—and mixed methods—researchers argue about the respective merits of their own methods (e.g. Burrell and Morgan 1979; Johnson et al. 2007; Morgan 2007).

Based on the foregoing, for most intents and purposes in this presentation I would argue that the term ‘researcher’ and ‘evaluator’ can be used interchangeably. Therefore we may be able to set aside what may be seen to be a semantic distinction and consider more fully the implications of their role—in this case within the context of diverse locations and situations within the Northern Territory. In this presentation I refer to myself as an evaluator because I have been contracted to ‘evaluate’. However, much of my work involves.

In this presentation I want to share some of my learnings—in particular, those things that I see as pitfalls—potential snags—that may or may not be avoided in practice. These learnings come from working as part of a team, and I acknowledge them for their contribution to these learnings. In doing so I will give an overview of the kind of evaluations we have been involved with. I will also outline some distinctions in the field of evaluation research, which I believe are worth noting.

## Purposes of evaluation

At one level evaluations are used for assessing program outcomes, typically using program logic models to determine: success of interventions (Patton 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004); ‘effectiveness and efficiency’ (Stevens 2005); what works and why, to inform the formative development of policy and practice (Dawe 2003). While the evaluators themselves may have a role

in designing the method of an evaluation, to a large degree the purpose of any evaluation is determined more by the commissioning organisation than by any single methodological approach (Chelimsky 2007). In the case of internal evaluations, where the purpose of evaluation may be driven by an organisation's need to improve professional practice or quality a 'community of practice' approach may be warranted (Wenger 1998). In the case of this latter purpose, the 'community' itself determines the purpose.

## Evaluation approaches

At one level evaluation design methods can be viewed dichotomously. That is they are either formative or summative. The summative approach can be viewed as an exercise 'to determine the overall effectiveness or impact of a programme or project' while the formative approach is designed to 'support the processes of improvement' (Clarke 1999). Proponents of 'empowerment evaluations' (e.g. Fetterman and Wandersman 2005; Fetterman and Wandersman 2007) take this a step further, arguing that such evaluations are not just participatory but can be used to 'foster improvement and self-determination' (Fetterman 2005:10). In summative evaluations, the evaluator is considered to be independent and in participatory and empowerment evaluations the evaluator will have an engaged, interactive role. However this dichotomy is not the only way of considering approaches to evaluation. Evaluators can take on the role of 'scientific expert', 'independent auditor' or 'consultative facilitator'. Patton (2000) suggests that this third role can be described in terms of 'utilization-focused evaluation' where the evaluator is the negotiator. He suggests that in this scenario 'all roles are on the table just as methods are options. Markiewicz (2005) suggests that this negotiation role is important for resolving multiple and potentially conflicting stakeholder interests. Role selection follows from and is dependent on intended use by intended users' (p. 430).

Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context, Input, Process and Product) Evaluation Model offers yet another way to consider different types of evaluation. Rather than trying to distinguish between types, Stufflebeam integrates formative and summative evaluation methods with an 'improvement focus', effectively doing away with the apparent dichotomy (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007b). This kind of integration can however also be achieved within a framework of empowerment or participatory evaluation design. Suarez and Harper (2003) for example, show how a focus on outcomes can be merged successfully in a utilitarian approach to provide both objective assessment of a program's effectiveness and subjective and substantive improvement within a program. The evaluators in that example saw themselves as 'partners' with the program staff.

There are very good reasons for integrating methods and approaches in evaluation. Rao and Woolcock (2003) suggest that well-integrated evaluation methods, including qualitative and quantitative tools, enable generalisations to be made from findings, and 'that the strengths of one approach potentially complement the weaknesses of the other' (p. 168). Falk and Guenther (2007) contend that a rigorous qualitative or mixed methodological approach may produce findings that are no less generalisable than those which are based on quantitative methods.

The kind of evaluations I will describe in the following section are typically described as 'program evaluations'. They tend to rely on a kind of 'logic' (hence the term program logic). Program logic may be based on 'theories of change' assumptions—emphasising the theoretical foundations of a program; or an 'outcome approach' which emphasises the causal linkages between outputs and

outcomes; or an 'activities approach' which emphasises intended work plans (Patton 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). One of the perceived benefits of a program logic approach is that it builds an 'evidence base' (Pawson 2002). An important use of a logic model is to assist with the identification of indicators that will measure the intended outcomes. The choice of indicators is critical for determining impact. There is a tendency in some program evaluations to incorrectly ascribe process and output statements to outcomes (Mitchell 2000). There is also a risk that use of program logic may prescribe an outcomes framework that ultimately is not valid. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007a) warn that evaluators using this approach may 'focus attention on theory developed early in the program and later discover that the program has evolved to be a quite different enterprise from what was theorised at the outset'.

## **Examples of program evaluations in the Northern Territory**

The team I have been working with based at Charles Darwin University, have been engaged in a series of evaluations over a number of years. Each evaluation is based on a strategic or policy intervention. They have included:

- Australian Government funded 'Communities for Children' and 'Invest to Grow' programs (SPRC/AIFS 2005);
- A Northern Territory Government evaluation of Whole of Government Family and Domestic Violence Strategies (Learning Research Group and Department of Chief Minister 2007);
- A suite of Australian Government/Northern Territory Government evaluation of Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Program (IFVPP) projects

I will briefly describe these projects. Each project is innovative and in some cases the concepts had not been employed previously in the Northern Territory. The projects are in various stages of completion and a final evaluation report is scheduled for completion in November 2008.

### **Peace at Home**

Peace at Home is an integrated service for the Katherine/ Borroloola region with both police and community services for families dealing with family violence, including child abuse. There is a strong focus on intersectoral co-operation as well as interdepartmental collaboration, with community representatives and Non Government Organisations (NGOs) involved as partners with government.

### **Safe Families**

Based in Alice Springs, the Safe Families project incorporates three components: Family Workers; access to unstaffed accommodation for Indigenous families fleeing violence through the operation of Family Houses; and access to staffed accommodation for Indigenous young people through the operation of a Kids' House.

### **Raypirri Rom**

The Raypirri Rom Project is a family support program based in East Arnhem, with local workers supporting families at risk of violence using traditional mediation methods as well as linking families to services where required.

## **Indigenous Family Violence Offender Program (IFVOP)**

IFVOP uses Indigenous facilitators in remote communities trained to deliver 50 hour programs to Domestic Violence offenders and voluntary participants. The IFVPP Project has now completed but is now proceeding with additional funding under the Northern Territory Government's *Closing the Gap* initiative.

## **Community Patrols**

The Community Patrols project was designed to support the development/revitalisation of night/community patrols in at least eight remote communities over three years. The project has now been completed.

## **Interventions for Children**

The Interventions for Children Project (IFCP) was designed to develop a set of resources for use in women's shelters and other sites where children accompany parents fleeing from violence, focussing particularly on those from remote communities.

## **Safe Houses**

The Safe Houses Project has three components: building a mobile child protection team; recruiting ten Aboriginal Family and Community Workers (AFCWs), with a Top End and a Centre coordinator; and expanding the stock of safe houses available to remote communities.

## **Behaviour Change**

The Behaviour Change Project is a program to train remote community facilitators in giving courses to groups of men and women (separately), supporting them to make positive changes in their relationships with partners, children and other family and community members. The approach is based on IFVOP but is broader-based, both in its clients and in its content.

## **Empowering Communities**

The Empowering Communities project was designed to pilot a method to involve remote community members to identify, monitor and tackle local violence issues.

## **Stop It Before It Starts (SIBIS)**

SIBIS is an anti-violence education program which was to be delivered in Northern Territory Government secondary schools through school counsellors to Indigenous 12-15 year olds.

The evaluation of these ten projects is based on some common threads, which apply to most of the initiatives. They are underpinned by the following operational principles.

1. The intention of each is to contribute to processes and practices that break the cycle of domestic and family violence across the Northern Territory;
2. They are built around strength-based approaches to practice;
3. There are elements of collaboration or 'Joined-up services' in each;
4. The approaches used are underpinned by 'family-focused practices', rather than singling out one group or another as victims and perpetrators;

5. They are designed to increase Indigenous and community ownership of projects
6. The support building of a remote Indigenous workforce;
7. They work towards developing a remote employment model; and they are
8. Place-based approaches—as distinct from generic or ‘blanket’ approaches.

## **A complex mix of projects with multiple roles**

This is indeed a complex mix of projects that goes beyond the breadth of a typical ‘research’ project. It calls for a multi-skilled team to work with multiple methodologies. The evaluations draw on several of the approaches described earlier. Some of the larger projects require several approaches, drawing on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. These multiple roles can be difficult to play while maintaining the integrity of the data.

On the one hand the evaluator is required to act as a kind of impartial, objective observer. This role includes making external assessments using multiple stakeholder data sources (government, non-government, clients). This may seem fairly straight forward but because the role requires identification of strengths and weaknesses there is potential for the *interpretation* of the data to be contested. In many cases the issue is not the data itself but what it actually means and what does it allow you to say.

On the other hand the evaluator is required to be a ‘critical friend’. This role is not objective and nor should it be. The purpose is to offer reflective practice approaches, ensuring that learnings are applied to the context. This can be a particularly useful role for program managers and officers who are wanting to critically reflect on their practice and who want to improve practice and outcomes. This role can include a capacity building function as well offering training and building evaluation tools. For example, one of my roles has been to build a database for a project so the program staff can collect data to contribute to their evidence.

In many situations it is impossible for an external evaluator to come in and gather data. The evaluator can go through the motions of conducting interviews and reviewing statistics but often the data that is gathered is of questionable value. This is particularly true of Indigenous contexts where sometimes people will tell a researcher what they think they want to hear. However, this is not an Indigenous issue as such. Many non-Indigenous people feel somewhat threatened by evaluators coming in and writing what they think will be a kind of ‘report card’ on their performance. In these situations it is important to either draw on local expertise that is trusted and has the confidence of program staff, or to take the time to build relationships with people, offering constructive feedback and ensuring that their integrity as individuals will not be damaged in the evaluation process. To some extent this latter process is important for building local ownership and engagement. In one instance we have employed a consultant to work with us who has had a long history working in a particular community and who already has good relationships with local people. In other instances the team has conducted multiple site visits on a regular bases over several months to show that we are not ‘seagulls’, flying in and flying out after having dumped a proverbial load on them.

## **Some pitfalls for evaluators and researchers alike**

I'll now briefly cover some of the pitfalls as I see them from my perspective, bearing in mind that I am a non-Indigenous male from the south of the continent. This identity is in itself a potential problem but it can be turned around to some advantage. These are my thoughts and I don't pretend to assume that they are the only pitfalls or the only way of looking at some of the issues I will raise.

## **Indigenous engagement has its challenges (even for Indigenous researchers) but is very important**

The idea that any outsider—Indigenous or non-Indigenous—can effectively engage with Indigenous people in a hurry is flawed. I have come to recognise that there are some things I am unable to do well when gathering data and these are best left to people who can. Apart from the fact that many of the issues I am gathering data on are sensitive—and I would be reluctant to talk about to a stranger myself—my identity as a non-Indigenous male makes it all the harder to engage with many people, particularly Indigenous females.

## **Being a critical friend *and* an objective observer can be like walking in a minefield**

Trying to walk the path of a critical friend and an objective observer can be difficult. The risk of course is that in being a friend you lose your objectivity. I have found that in these situations (which have cropped up frequently in these evaluations) having a set of standards and guidelines by which to work can be particularly useful. For example, the Australasian Evaluation Society's *Guidelines of Ethical Conduct* (Australasian Evaluation Society Inc. 2006) provide a useful framework that can help an evaluator maintain his or her integrity. I have also appreciated the benefit of working in a team with a mix of skills and backgrounds that can help balance out any unsuspecting biases that may creep in. It is also important to recognise your own biases when you come to evaluate a project. Research evaluators are kidding themselves if they think they don't have biases.

## **Managing multiple data sources: what happens when they point to different findings (as they may well do)?**

We would expect that multiple data sources would support each other. Often the qualitative data obtained from interviews of perceptions does support quantitative data gleaned from databases. But sometimes the various data sources do not agree with each other. It may on the one hand be an issue of perception versus reality but other times this is not the case. It may be that there is an alternate reality that the quantitative data will not show. This can be very useful in explaining the dynamics of a complex project context—as many of these projects indeed are.

## **Ethical considerations: how do you demonstrate participant benefits?**

I'm sure we all love preparing 'ethics applications'. These projects have highlighted the importance of maintaining ethical standards in research and evaluation. We have found that in many cases it is difficult to demonstrate what the benefit for participants actually is. We have also found that it can be hard to mitigate the risks associated with participating in research evaluations. In some cases we have had to abandon a particular approach or radically reorient it so that the risks are minimised and the benefits are identifiable.

## These are sensitive and political issues. It would be all too easy to shoot yourself in the foot and potentially ruin future chances for work in this field.

We started working on these evaluation projects before the 'Intervention' came into being and about the same time that Roger's *Lateline* appearance (Rogers 2005; ABC 2006) precipitated a renewed political interest that led to the Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse in the Northern Territory and the *Little Children are Sacred* Report (Wild and Anderson 2007). The issues we are working on are political 'hot potatoes' and a report that says something that challenges a new orthodoxy on these matters will undoubtedly have implications for our team's ability to work in this field in the future. What this means is that it is all the more important to be rigorous in our research. However, it is equally important for our integrity not to say things that are so innocuous as to allow the important findings of the evaluations to be ignored.

## So how can these pitfalls be avoided?

In some cases it is impossible to avoid the pitfalls. It is almost inevitable that at some point a trap will be waiting to step into. However, I think we have learnt a few things that we can do. These are summarised in the following points.

- **Continuous consultation**, feedback and reporting at two levels: NGO and government (ensuring value for all stakeholders)
- **Maintain ethical standards** (use peers to bounce your questions and ideas)
- **Triangulation of data** sources (what do the various sources tell us about what is happening and why? Do they match up? Why or why not?)
- **Check project assumptions against logic model** anticipated outcomes
- **Establish agreed evaluation questions and then answer them** (It may be tempting to go beyond these but you do so at your peril)
- Some things remain problematic (e.g. hearing Indigenous voices, accessing client perspectives, finding incontrovertible quantitative data, finding the right people to work with) and in these cases we **acknowledge our limitations**.

This is not an exhaustive list of course but we have found that they do limit the risks.

## Conclusions

What I have tried to do in this presentation is to highlight some of the risks and pitfalls associated with complex research evaluations of the kind we have been working on in diverse locations in the Northern Territory. Whether we call it research or evaluation, the issues for those engaged in discovery and learning processes in these contexts are probably much the same. The major professional risk for myself and those I am working with is that we may inadvertently 'shoot ourselves in the feet'. Another major risk is that the hard work we put in and the things we learn and

find are gazumped by a changed political climate that overrides the findings we make. The report may then never get published or just sit on the shelf.

However, the kind of evaluations we are working on relate to practices that are innovative, cutting edge and extremely interesting from a research and evaluation perspective. Further the issues we are reporting on are of critical importance for many people who have had to contend with the issues of violence we are researching. Following on from this—while there are of course risks—there is a real opportunity to make a difference to the way that organisations work and ultimately deliver outcomes for their clients.

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