Multi-Modal Evaluation: Meeting the Challenges of Evaluation for Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

Much evaluation practice for Indigenous communities and services has been dismissed as inappropriate for meeting client needs and ineffective for facilitating the improvements required. Some key issues which require greater consideration in such practice include:
- Who sets the agendas and objectives of the evaluation?
- How can evaluation be designed in culturally-appropriate ways?
- Who owns the outcomes of this evaluation?
- How can the at times conflicting evaluation needs of communities and external funders be met?
- What evaluation processes can improve the impact of recommendations for improving the lives of indigenous people?

Multi-Modal Evaluation (MME) offers a model to address these issues but remains contentious in the steadily evolving context of Indigenous evaluation.   This paper explores the rationale, potential and limitations of applying MME in Indigenous program and service evaluation.

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Introduction

Evaluation processes do not occur free of a cultural or political context. When evaluation discounts or ignores specific socio-cultural factors it perpetuates a continuation of hegemonic marginalization of disaffected social groups such as Indigenous Australians. Australia has a diverse society with a multiplicity of cultural and social groupings many of whom are disaffected. The viewpoints of these disaffected social groups will not gain equal treatment as long as they must contend with evaluation practices that reinforce a Western hegemony (Morgan, 2003a), allow little space for differing views and discount these views when they do not accord with Western predispositions or taxonomies. This paper argues that the perpetuation of the dominant hegemony engenders resentment, non cooperation, non-disclosure or gratuitous compliance from disaffected community groups. This paper makes the case that social justice obligations will remain unmet and recommendations will not be adopted until the evaluation processes can engender ownership by those for whom they are intended to assist.

We propose that Multi-Modal Evaluation (MME) has the potential to address these issues and so overcome some of the key problems inherent in many other forms of evaluation. It is particularly relevant to cross-cultural evaluation in making explicit the differences in underlying ontological and epistemological beliefs free of errors of judgement that are culturally derived. Further, we argue that MME enables unalike programs to be more readily compared, predictions of success to be made and a greater engagement of affected groups and communities in implementing recommendations. This paper does not advocate MME for all evaluation contexts, nor does it suggest that it will save on time and resources or that it will provide an objective measure of value for the blanket application of recommendations deriving from one community to be implemented in another. This paper argues that

the advantage of MME is that it offers a way of representing and accommodating disaffected groups and their diversity of views within the dominant culture.

Comparison of Evaluation Modalities

The following table summarises some broad characteristics of three evaluation models, their strengths and limitations. In particular, this table compares so-called 'objective evaluation' (non-situational dependent), 360 degree evaluation (non-situation dependent) and MME (negotiated situation dependent criteria) models.

Evaluation Type	Strengths	Limitations
Current Mainstream Practice / 'Objective Evaluation' - • tends to be non-situation dependent. • un-negotiated evaluation process, criteria.	• Time and resource efficient. • Explicit 'up front' evaluation criteria available.	• Difficulty with representing diverse views. • Often fails to build ownership of outcomes by some key stakeholders. • Tends to preserve the 'status quo' of community power relations, marginalizing already disaffected groups. • Difficulty with comparisons between different programs. • Difficulty with program comparisons over time.
'Multi-Source Evaluation' eg. 360 degree Performance Feedback • non-situation dependent. • potentially -negotiated evaluation criteria. • metricated aggregation of multiple sources	• Potentially explicit 'up front' evaluation criteria available. • Equalising weighting of multiply sourced voices eg. managers, staff, clients. • Efficient aggregating of multiple perspectives. • Enables ready time-repeat comparisons.	• Additional time and resource requirements. • Empowerment of marginalized voices limited by imposition of the model.
'Multi-Modal Evaluation' – • situation dependent. • negotiated evaluation process, criteria. • metricated aggregation of multiple sources	• Equalising weighting of multiply sourced voices eg. managers, staff, clients. • Efficient aggregating of multiple perspectives. • Enables comparisons of diverse programs within a common evaluation framework. • Enables ready time-repeat comparisons. • Creates the impetus for cooperation on program development and implementation.	• Potentially time and resource demanding in the short term ie. negotiating an evaluation process and criteria. • Potentially 'neutralises' priority voices eg. marginalized, disaffected clients opinions given equal weighting to managers. • Number of sources limited if key groups are to be heard eg. 'triangulation'. • Potential for 'simplistic representation' of community voices • Concensual agreement on

		outcomes is required after stakeholder negotiation.

This table highlights some of the advantages of an MME approach to evaluation in indigenous communities, raising themes to be further explored in the discussion below.

Who sets the agendas and objectives of the evaluation?

The process of evaluation is never context free. Those who control the design and implementation of programs and services will invariably dictate evaluation agendas and objectives (Cartwright, 1997). With its sparsely distributed population and great distances these processes in Australia are often controlled by policy makers and program bureaucrats located in distant regional centres or capital cities. While program and service development is responsive to national and state policy frameworks and political agendas, those who control this process rarely possess a local knowledge of the context to which this work will be applied.

In this process, specifically local factors tend to be deemed irrelevant and ignored. In general, the further the development site is from the implementation site the greater the likelihood that programs and services will be inappropriate for local application. The development of these programs and services by centralised bureaucracies tends to marginalise local expertise, overlook local, needs and agendas and discount some program and service outcomes which may be highly valued by service consumers. A bureaucracy reflecting the diversity of a particular society is likely to be more attuned to local constraints. However, it is a sad reality that those who have achieved positions with the authority to oversight programs and services are too often reliant upon 'fieldwork' experiences which are twenty or more years out of date. The homogeneity that exists within many bureaucracies develops a self-perpetuating gulf between the program development environment and the delivery situation. It is not unusual for organizations to recruit from particular academic disciplines where the social values can be identified and where there is a common shared experience.

Without evaluation processes that reflect local social and cultural variables the results, whatever their intention, will be inclined to reproduce structures which marginalise disaffected social groups, including Indigenous Australians. The views of the powerful will prevail over the powerless. While the creation of intermediary authorities such as ATSIC (recently disbanded) and ATSIS (soon to be disbanded) may be problematic in achieving empowerment for these disaffected groups, as they are situated outside the mainstream political and bureaucratic processes, they do at least signal an intention to include Indigenous Australians in important decision-making processes affecting their communities (Vanstone 2004).

Against the background of an increasingly diverse society, a multiplicity of cultural and socio-economic groupings need to have their agendas, objectives, interests and aspirations represented in decision-making and evaluation processes. To do otherwise contradicts the social justice principles which underpin the conceptions Australians' have of themselves. While the voices of the disaffected are excluded from these processes the principles of fairness, inclusion, recognition and social support will be transgressed. MME offers program and service developers a mechanism by which local agendas and objectives can be accounted for within the evaluation process. MME of programs and services is a combination of assessments involving:

- an external assessor (eg. the program or service consultant or bureaucrat - adhering to policy and procedure);
- the implementing organisation and its staff (eg. self-assessment and feedback in response to external agendas); and
- participants / users of programs and services including Indigenous Australians and other disaffected social groups (eg. an assessment of program applicability);
- potentially other stakeholders such as the local community leaders and service non-users.

It is a process whereby programs and services are assessed equally by each of these interest groups. This mode of evaluation overcomes many of the impediments affecing other forms of evaluation when administered alone (Cartwright, 1997; Morgan 2003b; Print, 1993). While the role of the external assessor and the implementing organisation is significant in the process of evaluation, the perceptions

of hegemonic control are lessened through the representation of other voices, including those of the disaffected (Cartwright, 1997; Morgan 2003a). The potential for some stakeholders to evaluate programs and services inappropriately through inexperience, low self esteem, bias towards or hostility against those involved is mediated by others involved in the evaluation (Staniforth, 1997). From a procedural point of view MME incorporates the best features of assessment and addresses the attendant shortcomings that result from decisions isolated by physical, socio-economic and cultural distance.

MME is not a panacea for all the problems faced by assessors. It is time and resource consuming which, in an environment that demands that service providers do more with less, will need to be valued in funding provision. If however the provision of programs and services becomes more responsive and thus more effective, this additional expense can be readily justified.

Another potential complication in implementing MME involves identifying who from the community or group will have their 'voice' registered in the evaluation process and so have their agendas and objectives considered. Communities are not homogenous and there may be a number of 'voices' within a community seeking to be privileged through a MME process. It is up to the community however to resolve this question rather than the program or service providers or some external authority. When providers take this role, no matter how well intentioned, MME may become no more effective than other forms of evaluation in addressing perceived hegemony.

How can evaluation be designed in culturally-appropriate ways?

In cultural terms, most current evaluation practices reflect the dominant Western approaches and assumptions. These practices are largely unable to recognise and accommodate multiple perspectives (eg. ontologies) and remain unduly sceptical of unfamiliar epistemologies – seeking to resolve 'dissonance' in favour of concrete certainties (Morgan 2003a; Morgan and Slade 2000). This strategy has an intuitive feel of 'rightness'. On the surface it seems illogical to acknowledge the validity of views which are counter to one's own – in fact it results in a paradox which must be resolved in order to reduce cognitive dissonance. Logic dictates that if one's views are right then they should prevail and if they are not then they should be modified to reflect the right view (Morgan 2003a; Morgan and Slade 2000).

There is little space in Western thought for the simultaneous equal recognition of diverse views and no place for this inclusive process in evaluation, where evaluators search for a single 'correct' view upon which they can make authoritative decisions and recommendations. However, if alternative views cannot be represented in the evaluation of a program or service then the past hegemony will be perpetuated, existing social inequalities entrenched and social justice will be little more than rhetoric (Morgan 2003a).

Inconsistency or dissonance with one's own views should not be a basis for discounting the views of others. Western thinking itself involves many such inconsistencies and resultant logical paradoxes (Morgan, 2003a). This dominant culture makes little effort to resolve the dichotomies that exist between religion and science or between the sexes. Where these inconsistencies are identified in the views of a disaffected group however they are cited as concrete reasons for ignoring cultural differences and implementing evaluation practices which ignore cultural taboos and are culturally insensitive (Morgan 2003a and Morgan and Slade 2000). This process was well illustrated in the so-called 'Hindmarsh Island Affair', a case which will be discussed further in the discussion below.

The hypocrisy of accommodating inconsistencies within the dominant culture while insisting that the views of disaffected groups be consistent before they can be incorporated within the evaluation discourse is acute for those affected (Morgan 2003a). It engenders an environment of resentment, non-cooperation, non-disclosure or gratuitous compliance, though this is often unrecognised by those evaluators who are members of the dominant culture. The evaluation of programs and services conducted in this environment is predisposed to produce distorted and inaccurate evaluation outcomes. Thus in cross-cultural situations the effectiveness of recommendations is undermined as they are often 'culturally unworkable'.

For some the foregoing discussion raises questions about the possibility of conducting cross-cultural evaluation at all. They would argue that we cannot put ourselves in the cultural shoes of another because to do so would require the re-examination of our ontological beliefs, as Western rationality

demands that the cognitive dissonance resulting from conflicting 'truths' be resolved - one way or another (Morgan 2003a). MME requires no such re-evaluation or contextual schizophrenia as a number of views can be accorded equality within the evaluation process (Morgan 2003b). Dissonant voices are accorded a place and have a role in shaping both the evaluation process and outcomes. The respect given to these frequently marginalised community voices is more consistent with an egalitarian ethical practice, promoting a process that is fair and more inclined to produce non-maleficent and beneficent results. A useful hypothetical application of this approach could be in relation to evaluating appropriate land use on, for example, Kangaroo Island. Here, following an appropriate negotiation of the evaluation process and broad criteria, local non-Aboriginal views could be summarized in an aggregated score alongside those of the two 'mainland' Aboriginal groups who maintain a significant Dreaming about the island (the Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri). The latter would include the distinctive views of both males and females, as each hold their own Dreaming beliefs.

As stated above MME is potentially more time and resource demanding but it does offer a way forward in representing and accommodating the distinctive cultural perspectives of disaffected groups within the dominant culture. In the interests of efficiency it may prove tempting here to adopt a summative numerical scoring of these diverse views. This method will however experience the same problems that any form of evaluation has that tries to derive an objective measure from contextual or relational data. (McCloy 1998). For instance, how does one evaluate community voices that take the form of a painting, music/song or performance (which can be intensely informative to those inculcated within a particular cultural community) and accommodate these within the overall evaluation process? When this is coupled with issues such as multi-community involvement, gender and hierarchical considerations and the application of cultural protocols the role of cultural brokers who are familiar with the ontological preconditions of their own and the dominant culture become crucial to the success of the evaluation process (Morgan in McIntyre 2005).

Who owns the outcomes of this evaluation?

Program or service evaluations developed without a genuine engagement of the 'end users' can be expected to produce outcomes which will be viewed as an imposition by those for whom they are supposed to benefit (Cartwright 1997). Such outcomes are likely to provoke anger and dismissal. An approach is required which as far as possible enables the outcomes of these evaluations to be owned and accepted by all stakeholders.

One clear advantage of MME is that the program or service is not owned by any particular entity. It does not involve the imposition of outcomes including recommendations without ownership of the process by the all participants – who in this process are equal partners. Where there is a sense of community ownership, and MME encourages this to occur, there is a greater probability that a program or service evaluation will be successful according to the criteria that evaluation partners have agreed to and that recommendations will be more willingly adopted.

Effective ownership of program or service evaluation involving disaffected communities can only occur when these communities are consulted with and involved in the process from the very beginning. As with any other evaluation method, if MME is imposed upon communities then it is unlikely that that it will become an empowering process and it will not facilitate commitment to the implementation of evaluation outcomes.

Furthermore, MME cannot provide solutions where the nature or 'truthfulness' of the underlying knowledge being presented in an evaluation process is in dispute. Such a situation was demonstrated in the notorious 'Hindmarsh Island Affair' where issues of truthfulness were resolved in favour of the dominant ontological understanding despite the unresolved or unrecognized paradox which this process represents (Morgan 2003a). Here, the truthfulness of Western religious thinking indigenous Australians was accorded primacy over the truthfulness of those inculcated with indigenous Australian beliefs and the latter were finally left unrecognized by Anglo-European Australians and their legal system.

How can the at times conflicting evaluation needs of communities and external funders be met?

While program and services environments have always been mindful of the need to meet service obligations, the current practice is becoming increasingly pragmatic. There is an increasing attention from the media in dramatizing social conflict, a growing willingness among many groups to use the

media to advance particular agendas and a political drive to speedily and superficially resolve perceived conflicts resulting from dissonant and disaffected voices. There is currently no social forum in which conflicting needs can be genuinely met in a process that accords them respect and equality. For evaluators operating in this milieu, the evaluation needs of external funders are given precedence while community resentment simmers. It is only when the views of the dissonant and disaffected are built as an integral part of evaluation is the real potential for conflict reduced.

This use for MME can be witnessed in an recent application in a South Australian government department when it sought to evaluate the achievements of a work practice change program introduced in response to the national 'Deaths in Custody' and 'Stolen Generation' reports. In this case, recommendations became generally accepted by both program managers and Aboriginal community leaders when both came to recognise the need to accommodate the views and needs of those for whom the program was designed.

Additionally, this process produced a change in organisational culture in relation to service planning and delivery, a change which more fully engaged indigenous Australians. Participants reported the following outcomes:
- work change projects created a new sense of optimism that indigenous and cultural issues can be meaningfully addressed;
- greater understanding of the need to work collaboratively with Indigenous stakeholders;
- enthusiasm to further develop and implement work change projects;
- opportunities to network, discuss experiences and develop strategies and ideas to facilitate the implementation of projects;
- an understanding of the construction of stereotyping;
- learning about the need to focus upon developing relationships with Indigenous stakeholders;
- gaining of an overview of where other internal organisations were in relation to addressing cultural inclusivity issues.

MME does not offer a simple objective measure for resolving conflict. It serves as process to elucidate the relative value of a number of perspectives. It is arguable in fact whether agreed objective measures can ever be established that would have efficacy across cultural contexts.

What evaluation processes can improve the impact of recommendations for improving the lives of indigenous people?

Evaluation processes that involve the establishment of partnerships with communities improve the chances that recommendations will be adopted within communities (Morgan in McIntyre 2005). However, when evaluating programs and services, there are real difficulties in transferring recommendations derived from one context, to another. In a sense each time a program or service is implemented, situational factors come into play which makes comparison between them difficult. There are also considerations of prioritising unalike programs or services where there is no transparent evaluation framework in which this can occur. A scoring system is required that allows such evaluations to be made and affords some certainty that resulting recommendations will elicit community support.

MME enables comparison between programs or services. It advocates a broader range of measures such as a measure of community engagement. And it proposes a framework where the views of multiple stakeholders are scored against an agreed set of criteria. The greater the score given by each of the parties in this process, the greater the potential that the implemented program, service will be successful. Recommendations that result from this process, as argued above, have a greater likelihood of being adopted and actively implemented.

The current service environment is sequential in nature. Within this environment the failure to recognise or the non-responsiveness to or by any of these factors will adversely affect all other areas of the environment. A failure in evaluation of the issues will result in poor policy, procedures and programs that cannot be implemented effectively and will not be engaged in by the community. Likewise with policy, procedure, program or service development and implementation that does not respond to the previous stages. This approach is shown in Diagram 1 below.

Diagram 1: **Current Service Environment**
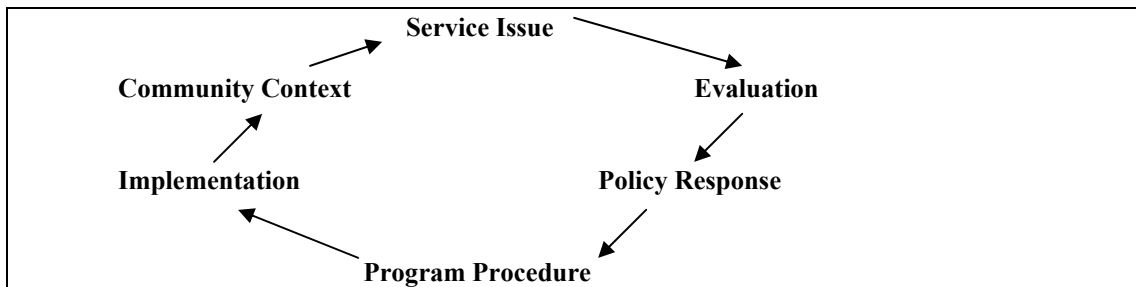
MME proposes an environment that is interrelated where all aspects of the process refer to all other aspects through evaluation feedback. In MME the evaluation is central to a) understanding the issues within the community, b) framing policies in response to the issues, c) developing procedure, services or programs to address these issue, d) implementing procedures, services or programs and e) the community context in which the issues arise. The engagement by parties in the evaluation process ensures successful identification of the issues, proper policy responses, effective development of procedure, appropriate implementation and a receptive community context. This is illustrated in Diagram 2 below.

Diagram 2: MME Service Environment
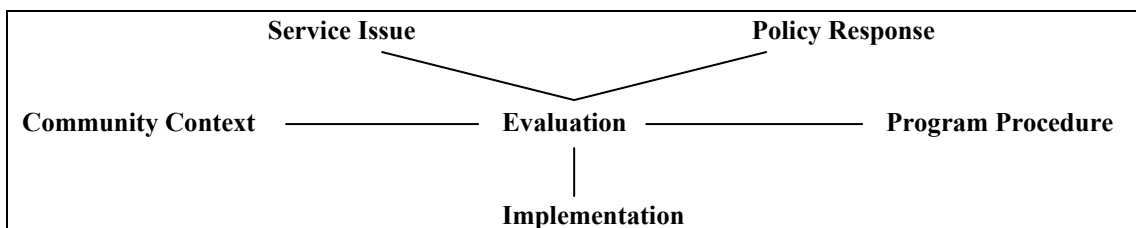
MME encourages greater engagement of the community in which programs and services are implemented. As 'success' partly depends upon the community's assessment, it behoves program and service implementers to build community capacity, through education and training in evaluation, alongside their involvement (Gibbs cited in Cartwright, 1997). MME encourages and rewards incorporation of the 'local' in the formulation and development of programs and services projects. Local consultation and negotiation of program and service agendas and evaluation objectives become integral to the success of the implementation process and provide a feedback loop that is currently missing from evaluation processes.

As part of a consistent, long-term policy and process of community empowerment, MME has the potential to build recognition and trust in a partnership approach. Participants will thereby become an integral part of program and service implementation, in equal partnership with other stakeholders (eg. government officials, service professionals etc) rather than subjects and recipients of such services and programs (Morgan 2003b).

The MME process does not allow the blanket application of recommendations derived from programs or services implemented in one community context being applied in another context. The literature is full of the failure of recommendations that have been developed in a specific context failing when applied universally.

Concluding Remarks

Evaluation does not occur free of context. When specific local cultural and socio-cultural factors are deemed to be irrelevant and have been ignored, evaluation ensures the continued marginalisation of disaffected social groups such as Indigenous Australians. Despite the need to represent an increasingly diverse society, current practice has yet to accord equality of input into the evaluation process. This has resulted in the perpetuation of the dominant hegemony, and outcomes which are inclined to produce resentment, non cooperation, non-disclosure and gratuitous compliance from disaffected community groups. Until program and service evaluation processes engender respect for and ownership by community end-users, service obligations will continue to be unmet and evaluation recommendations will not be adopted within marginalised communities and groups in particular.

MME offers a mechanism through which local situational elements can be accommodated, encourages greater engagement by community, encourages community empowerment and build support for and trust in partnership arrangements between service organisations and their communities.. From a cross-cultural perspective this approach does not require a re-examination of ontological or epistemological beliefs as the cognitive dissonance that results from differing 'truths' does not need to be resolved. Cultural viewpoints are not tested for validity nor is the process owned by any particular entity, all are accorded equality within the process. MME offers a pragmatic response to the demands of service environments for evaluation processes which allow comparison between unalike programs with appropriate predictors of success.

MME should not be considered as a panacea for all evaluation contexts. It does not indicate for example which among competing community 'voices' should be chosen to contribute to the evaluation process. Nor will it save time or use less resources – in the short term at least it is potentially more demanding in this respect. And it can only be effective where they have been consulted and involved in the process from the outset and where there is a genuine shared ownership of programs and services by disaffected communities. MME does not provide an objective measure of value which will facilitate the ready transfer of recommendations from one program or service to be implemented in another. The great strength of mixed mode evaluation is that it offers a way forward in representing and accommodating the views of disaffected groups within the dominant culture.

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