

**Evaluation in Black and White: two perspectives on the evaluation of an
Aboriginal Access and Equity project in the inner south of Adelaide.**

Catherine Hurley & Gayle Rankine

Catherine Hurley
catherine.hurley@fmc.sa.gov.au
Research Officer, SA Community Health Research Unit
Gayle Rankine
Co-chair of Access and Equity Project Advisory Committee

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Abstract

In 2003, five human service agencies in the inner south area of Adelaide set up a project that sought to identify and link with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in their area and to increase the accessibility of their services to this group. The project formed an Advisory Group that comprised agency managers, Aboriginal workers and local Aboriginal community members. The evaluation was contracted to the SA Community Health Research Unit and undertaken by a non-Aboriginal research officer. However, the nature of the evaluation was of necessity, highly collaborative between the research officer and the Aboriginal community members.

This paper describes the knowledge and experience brought to the evaluation from two perspectives: that of the non-Aboriginal external evaluator and the Aboriginal co-chair of the Advisory group who played a key role in the evaluation. The two presenters will also discuss what they didn't know prior to commencing the evaluation and what they learnt through the process.

This presentation will give a real life example of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can work together on an evaluation in a way that results in a meaningful and useful experience for both groups. Mistakes made and knowledge gained will be presented as a way of showing the complexity of evaluation in this context. The presentation aims to go beyond the principles of cultural diversity in evaluation to an analysis of evaluation practice from dual perspectives.

Introduction

The Putting Access and Equity into Practice: Inner South Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collaboration project was developed between five human service agencies in the inner south of Adelaide in an effort to improve the provision and utilisation of their services by local Aboriginal people. The project sought to identify and consult with the local Aboriginal community about levels of service use and the appropriateness of agencies and staff to Aboriginal people. This project was designed to act as the first phase of an ongoing collaboration between the agencies and the community to make services more accessible and appropriate. The evaluation of this short-term project was contracted out to an external source: the SA Community Health Research Unit and undertaken by a non-Aboriginal research officer. However, it was clear from the very early stages that close collaboration between the external evaluator and the Aboriginal members of the Project Advisory Group (PAG) was an essential pre-requisite to conducting the evaluation. In particular, the co-chair of the Advisory group and the Aboriginal project officer employed on the project had key roles in the evaluation planning, data collection and feedback of the findings.

The experience of an evaluation team that includes both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers is the focus of this paper. In undertaking this collaboration, the evaluation in a sense, mirrored the experiences of the project itself in which the two cultures came together to attempt to develop shared understandings of the same activities alongside their own separate viewpoints. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants brought particular skills and knowledge to the evaluation and both had shortfalls in areas that needed to be addressed in order for the evaluation to be successfully completed. The learning's that each of us took from the evaluation experience can potentially give some substance to the issue of cultural diversity in evaluation, beyond basic principles.

Background to evaluation collaboration

In recent years, an increasing amount of literature has been published on the subject of undertaking research and evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Humphrey, 2001). Much of this literature has reflected on the negative attitudes toward research and researchers that Aboriginal people have developed as a consequence of improper and insensitive conduct by non-Aboriginal researchers along with the lack of identifiable benefit to the community arising from the research. This situation has begun to be addressed through a number of means including the introduction of requirements for researchers (eg the NHMRC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, 2003), the implementation of Aboriginal Ethics committees to satisfy before their proposals are accepted and an increasing role for Aboriginal organisations and communities as active initiators and participants in the research project. Many articles and books have identified the need for non-Aboriginal researchers to form close links with the community they are proposing to work with and to implement research or evaluation that is a reciprocal process in which each party gains some knowledge or skills from the other (Colin and Garrow, 1996). It has been suggested that the primary function of research or evaluation activities with Aboriginal people should be to give them a voice in the wider community, to help them better understand their needs and ways to meet them and to help determine their own future directions (Scougall, 1997). The

importance of using a truly participative research model with a variety of mainly qualitative methods and inbuilt consultation and feedback to the community at every stage is considered crucial (Colin & Garrow, 1996; Henderson, Simmons, Bourke and Muir, 2002). There are some specific recommendations including the use of Aboriginal people to carry out data collection where possible, the need for flexibility of timelines and full gender representation in the processes (Henderson et al, 2002). However, there is little in the way of active reflection from either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal researchers or evaluators about what they have learnt from the process of engaging in cross-cultural work in a community. This paper aims to present such reflections from the two perspectives as a way of “fleshing out” some of the guidelines and rules outlined in the literature.

The non-Aboriginal External Evaluator Perspective

Knowledge held

When I was appointed to undertake the evaluation of the Access and Equity project, I had both significant skills and experience in the field of community-based evaluation of human services and very little knowledge and no experience of evaluation involving Aboriginal people. I had worked for eight years in research and evaluation in predominantly the health field and in that time had learnt a great deal about evaluation methods, processes and reporting. I had also dealt with a wide range of people from consumers, agency staff, agency managers and government bureaucrats.

I knew from the project brief that the evaluation would need to focus on the formative processes and the relationships between the stakeholders, the agencies and the community. I knew that predominantly qualitative methods would answer the questions in the evaluation plan about whether the project had achieved its objectives. Also it was clearly important that the “how” of the project would be important to tease out as others involved in similar work would want to know about this. Finally, I also had gained some information from attending a seminar given by an Aboriginal presenter, of the negative history between Aboriginal people and the research community dating back many years. I understood that frequently research had been a one-way process in which researchers took information from Aboriginal communities and used it for their own purposes without the community receiving any tangible benefits or knowledge for their participation. I was also aware on a theoretical level of the need to involve Aboriginal people at every stage of the evaluation if I was to have access to the members of the community, to be able to find methods that were acceptable and to report back in a way that was accessible and appropriate. The reality of these last two points of knowledge was something that only became apparent as the project proceeded.

Knowledge gaps

The list of things I didn't know prior to starting the evaluation is equally long and not nearly so impressive. Like many urban white Australians, I did not personally know any Aboriginal people apart from some brief interactions with an Aboriginal worker in one of my previous evaluations. I was ignorant of many details of Aboriginal culture, norms and attitudes, particularly as related to health issues and research or even that these are not uniform among Aboriginal people across Australia. The role of context is an important one and the group I was dealing with- Aboriginal people living as a small minority in an urban community, was significantly different in many

respects to other Aboriginal people who lived in rural or remote areas where there are larger numbers and, in some cases, stronger ties with traditional culture. Aside from the raw ABS data on how many Aboriginal people lived in the area and other demographic details, I had no real idea of who they were and what their issues and concerns were. And the project itself soon identified that even local Aboriginal people who were surveyed did not have a full awareness of all Aboriginal people in the area, where they were from and how they fitted into the community. These issues were unclear, due mainly to the high mobility of people in the area and a lack of a widely accepted place where local Aboriginal people could meet and know one another. This was to emerge as one of the key needs of the community.

As the project proceeded, some of the real impacts that our past history of colonisation and dispossession of Aboriginal people had had on those living in the Australian community today, became clearer to me. An Aboriginal elder came to one of our project meetings to share with us her life history including her early employment in the early 1960s as one of the first Aboriginal child health nurses in the state. However, she was not able to interact with her non-Aboriginal nursing colleagues outside working hours as this was against the law at that time. Other stories that I heard through my interactions with Aboriginal people involved in the project really brought home to me the impact of racism and how Aboriginal people frequently face multiple obstacles in their efforts to maintain the health and well-being that most non-Aboriginal Australians take for granted.

Finally, while I knew that in theory, I would need to make links with community members, find acceptable evaluation methods and report back appropriately to the Aboriginal community, I had no concrete ideas of how to go about this. With the benefit of hindsight, I was quite naive and plunged into the evaluation without giving it nearly enough thought or examining the literature that was available in any depth. However, it is possible that what I did learn could only have been obtained through direct experience and it is this that I will now speak about.

Learnings

One of the first things I learnt about evaluation in an Aboriginal context is that the Aboriginal community members of our reference group did not have the same view of evaluation as I did. They quite rightly saw it as an administrative exercise, designed to keep the funders happy and that it had no relevance to them and their needs. They also had the natural distrust of research and researchers that I have already mentioned. Therefore, one of the first things I needed to address was convincing them that the evaluation could serve their needs and that this was its primary purpose. This task took the full length of the project and there were a number of hiccups along the way which I will mention further on. I was greatly assisted in this task by one of the co-chairs of the Advisory group, an Aboriginal man experienced in evaluation himself and by the Aboriginal project officer who took a keen interest in research and how it could be used to benefit the community. Her role proved to be very important in overcoming the natural reluctance of the community in taking part in evaluation activities. She also developed a close knowledge of many of the community networks and was able to access them for involvement in the evaluation.

In keeping with my theoretical understanding, I began to consult with the Aboriginal members of the Project Advisory Group about the methods to be used in the evaluation. In one of the first project activities, the community members and the Aboriginal project officer undertook a survey designed by PAG members about service use and needs among Aboriginal people in the local area. This data collection exercise saw me take a back seat in that my role was to just receive the de-identified survey data and to analyse and report its findings. The processes and learning involved in its collection were something that belonged to the community members involved. When it came to running focus groups with the community to follow-up on the survey data and to get further input, I was told nicely but firmly that my presence, even as an observer would inhibit the community members' participation. Two focus groups were held, one week apart with Aboriginal members of the PAG interacting with community members to collect the information and discuss what was needed. I was able to get some feedback afterwards about how the groups had proceeded.

When I did the final evaluation activities at the end of the project, I already knew that I would have to be clear about what information I was collecting and for what purpose. Before running a focus group with community members, I wrote an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the groups that was approved and signed by the Aboriginal co-chair and distributed by the Aboriginal project officer. They assisted with choosing an appropriate day and time for the group, suggested an introduction followed by lunch followed by the group. Their attendance on the day encouraged the community to participate and share their concerns. Without, this input, I doubt that we would have had either much attendance or much participation.

The importance of using appropriate feedback mechanisms was also something I needed to address during the evaluation. With every data collection exercise, I made sure I wrote a simple one page summary of the findings, printed on coloured paper that could be distributed at the cultural events and lunches that were part of the project activities. Findings were also discussed by word of mouth through the feedback of the Aboriginal members of the PAG. I also utilised photographs to record project events and used these in my introduction to the final focus group to remind people what the project had been about.

All these activities were relatively successful but it would be wrong to imply that I did not make mistakes in the course of the evaluation. The most significant of these occurred because I took for granted that people had understood me without checking if this was in fact the case. Owing to the natural distrust that many Aboriginal people have of research activities, it is necessary to continually check that you are on the same page.

For example, one of my final data gathering exercises was semi-structured interviews with members of the PAG. I conducted these in the normal manner, using a schedule and taping the responses and offering to send transcripts for checking to those who wished to see them. The transcripts were hurriedly typed up and I posted them out to those who had requested them. One Aboriginal community member of the PAG rang me shortly afterwards and gave me a blast as she was most unhappy about several aspects of her transcript. It turned out that I had not checked them carefully enough in my haste and there were inaccuracies and I had failed to ensure the word 'Aboriginal' was capitalised. This was highly offensive to this person and I think all her innate

fears about researchers appeared justified by my sloppiness. This was a critical point as she was so unhappy that she threatened to relate her concerns to other community members and make sure they did not speak to me.

I dealt with this situation more carefully than I had dealt with the transcript. I spoke to a couple of other PAG members discreetly and asked their advice. I corrected the transcript and sent the revised copy to the person with a note of apology and a request that she let me know if she wished to have the interview excluded from the evaluation. When we next met at a PAG meeting, we spoke privately after the meeting about the problems and trust was re-established. This experience taught me how fragile a thing such trust was and that it could easily be destroyed. I learnt to check my transcripts carefully and to explain to people that their own words often look odd when translated from tape to transcript and that this does not reflect on them personally.

A further reminder of the vulnerability of Aboriginal people came when I was asked to suggest methods for evaluating the success of some community lunches that the project planned to hold. I came to the meeting with my plan which included a suggestion that someone be delegated to be an observer at the lunches to note whether they were achieving their objectives. This struck a negative chord with the Aboriginal people present as it reminded them of their previous role in research as purely the subject rather than as an active participant. I needed to pause and explain this more carefully and stress that I had not intended this but rather a participant-observation role that could be carried out by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers in an informal manner, reflecting on the experience of the lunch. . The importance of making clear explanations of the who, what, where and how of research was brought home to me again by this experience.

The Aboriginal Evaluator's perspective

Knowledge held

My knowledge and connection with the inner southern suburbs of Adelaide began in 1965. Dad, Mum, one son and three daughters moved into Mitchell Park. Karen the youngest was born the following year. Prior to moving to Adelaide, we had a house on 'the hill' at Point McLeay Aboriginal Mission which sits on the shores off Lake Alexandrina. Today it is known as Raukkon. I am a descendant of the Ngarrindjeri people of the Coorong area.

Talk about a culture shock, there we all were smack in the middle of predominantly white working class suburbia. The Housing Trust at the time had done a survey in our street, which housed other cultures (eg. Maltese, Dutch, German, English, as well as the good old Aussie) asking "*If they would mind having a couple of Aboriginal families living in the neighbourhood?*" This was part of the 'Assimilation Process' being carried out by the government of the day. Here we were, living in the big city and yet we were not recognised as citizens, nor were we given the same rights as the 'white' Australian. Gradually, more families moved into the area and we slowly developed our contacts in the community and helped each other out.

The late sixties through to the seventies were a very political time for the Aboriginal people of Australia. We had not long been officially counted and citizens in our own country, the Government of the day started handing out money for Aboriginal Education and Land Rights issues were happening along with the establishment of 'Tent Embassies' around Australia.

I remember my mother and grandmother being involved in the formation of advisory groups etc. At that time it seemed the Aboriginal women took the lead at pushing issues and establishing networks. The people were always informed of what was happening and encouraged to participate. Getting the news around the community was not a hindrance despite having no telephones; the "black grapevine" was enough. Although my family has been in the area for almost forty years not everyone is known to me. It is important to have community events to give the people a sense of belonging - instead of being isolated in the wider community. Because of past experiences and different cultural groups within our own people, it takes time to establish an open line of communication where information can be exchanged freely.

The Aboriginal way of doing things can seem somewhat tedious and slow to outsiders. We do not walk into peoples homes asking for information, walk away never to be seen or heard of again- that was the white man's practice. In these cases, you didn't even get some kind of feedback on whatever it was the survey was about. Half the time you don't remember, because of the speed in which the knowledge was collected. Then down the track they (the Government) bring out a 'policy' on Aboriginal affairs/issues.

There was misuse of information and I guess you could almost say, obtaining information illegally - we were never asked, just told to answer their questions. Many a time the information was used to the detriment of the people. After all, as far as they were concerned we were just "poor ignorant blacks". As a result, now the people are very distrustful of any sort of survey/questionnaire, and rightfully so. Health services did not consider Aboriginal needs- the last review of health services (before the current one) in SA was done in 1964, a time when we were not even counted as part of the population. Once the lines of communication are open and there is trust established, only then will people commit to participating. Even then, there is still a reluctance to offer information. The Aboriginal project officer and myself spent considerable time with people talking about the project and the expected outcomes. There were problems understanding questions and terminology used. These obstacles were overcome during the times spent talking with the people at the grass roots level.

Over the years I have performed a variety of duties during my working life. For example, I have worked as a deputy director and financial officer for the Aboriginal Sobriety group and an administration and finance officer with the Aboriginal Artists agency in Sydney. The knowledge and skills gained have enabled me to be able to communicate effectively with both my own people and the non-Aboriginal community and various levels of Government. These skills assisted me with my involvement in the project and helped me to conduct myself professionally to both the community and management of the agencies involved.

Due to my own health issues, I have had to access a variety of medical services. Most of these had never met an Aboriginal person and had no idea of how to communicate

respectfully with me. Some of them seem to think black or disabled people are deaf. One of the reasons I worked on the project was to bring these issues out to the open. I felt that it's now time for these agencies to be more culturally aware and appropriate. For some Aboriginal people, I know it would be ten times harder for them, without my knowledge and experience, to access the services that they need.

I attended the initial project meeting with reluctance. However, at the end of the planning day, I was more willing to participate because improving services was an issue I could relate to. When they asked me to be Co-chair of the Advisory group, I was even more reluctant but agreed because of the overwhelming support from the group, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and the fact that I had knowledge of the area and being a local Aboriginal. This meant I was able to help the Aboriginal project officer who was a Noongar from WA, by introducing her to the local community people.

Knowledge gaps

I had no idea of what evaluation was or what it was meant to do. I did pick up some knowledge, not all the technical side but came to understand why and how the evaluation supported the findings of the project. I was aware that there were strings attached to the funding for the project and one of those strings was evaluation. When the managers committed themselves to supporting the project, and acting on the recommendations, I was convinced this project would have positive outcomes and would create pathways for other issues. It is a building block for other issues and can be adapted to any community. Evaluation was a way of documenting what happened and what should happen after the project was finished. It gave a before and after picture of the community's needs.

There were a lot of questions about collecting the information and we had to keep the communication lines open constantly. There were always questions about what was happening with the information. There were issues of confidentiality, such as many people did not want to be identified for fear of "something coming back". The PAG discussed the collecting of information and it was stated that it would go no further than the project officer and have no personal details evident when it went to the evaluator. There was also discussion of community ownership of the project's data and agreement that any presentations or writings would have Aboriginal representation and acknowledgment of the community's input. There is a positive feeling about the project and it is important for managers to follow through and keep the community informed otherwise it becomes "another survey".

I came to see the evaluation was relevant because it gave us the picture of the needs of the community and what they wanted done about it. It made us aware of new issues such as the way in which community needs have changed over the years. For example, many people in the survey and focus groups were concerned about youth issues such as employment, schooling, alcohol and other drugs and the effects of these on the family and the community.

There was also some question about whether a non-Aboriginal outsider could evaluate the project effectively. In this case, a non-Aboriginal external evaluator was seen as the only option given there was no local Aboriginal person with the skills required available. One of the co-chairs of the PAG had the skills but because he was not from

this country he would have been judged and seen as offending the elders of the community if he took up the role. However, there were questions about whether this non-Aboriginal person would understand what we were talking about. What was her experience in working with Aboriginal people? Would she be willing to listen and can we trust her? All these questions had to be answered during the project.

Learnings

I really enjoyed the whole experience of the project and the evaluation which was surprising given I was sceptical at first. I formed a lot of contacts with the agencies and other staff. It was good to see things happening and managers learning and taking advice, with a willingness to work with community people. This has been a real turn around where people have actually asked us rather than just being told what would happen. It is important to keep the information flowing constantly to the community. Any lapse will create negative feelings and the process of building up trust would have to start all over again. My role as co-chair has brought me more out into the community and has given me the confidence to step up into a leadership role. After years of being the subject of culturally inappropriate research, this project put me upfront in a position to advise and raise awareness of the relevant issues.

I learnt through the survey and other local programs, how many Aboriginal people were now living in the area. The lack of a sense of community meant there was no real interaction between the services and also within the community itself. We've now established a database and we send out a regular newsletter to the people on it. This is another way of continuing to reach out to the community. However, it must be remembered that personal contact is a must.

As a result of the project, more people are becoming vocal and active in pursuing the results and recommendations of the evaluation. The community has a greater sense of togetherness and ability to have a say and have it heard. There are still doubts but it has given people a little more faith in the system (maybe).

Working with the evaluator has been an experience and a good exchange of knowledge and skills. I have learnt that I was able to take on tasks that I would never have considered ten years ago; for example, presenting at conferences about this project. Also, the fact that I was nominated as co-chair was an acknowledgment that I was a responsible enough person to hold this position on behalf of the community. If you are too young in our community, you cannot speak for others but once you are older you are able to represent the people. However, it was also a risk taking it on because if it backfired, the blame would have been on myself and the Aboriginal project officer.

Discussion

This experience shows clearly the complexity that arises when two very different cultures come together to work jointly on an evaluation. The natural mistrust of research among Aboriginal people and their differing priorities are elements that cannot be ignored by non-Aboriginal evaluators. This evaluation could not have proceeded beyond the early stages without the close and ongoing involvement of local community members. Their input and advice about the structure, delivery and feedback of evaluation activities meant that the chances of obtaining some information from the community were much better than they would have been without it. Likewise, the input of the knowledge of the external non-Aboriginal evaluator meant that no community members needed to risk their group status by carrying it out and skills could be developed among Aboriginal members of the PAG that could be used again in other projects.

The trust built between the two groups could also serve to advance the aim of providing more culturally relevant services to a population that has high needs for them in many cases. In this project, it was also clear that both groups have a great deal to learn from each other and that it is only by linking up that such information exchange and changes in practice are possible. Attention to the important details such as accuracy of transcripts, and careful explanation of research procedures and use proved vital. If these things were overlooked, the detrimental effect on the evaluation was likely to have been significant.

From the Aboriginal point of view, the most significant learnings from collaborating in the evaluation appeared to be two-fold: the value of evaluation in identifying community needs and providing recommendations for action and the personal skills and confidence acquired as a result of active participation. The ability to use knowledge and understanding already held to advance the project and the evaluation was also important.

Conclusion

As we have shown, the experiences of both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal evaluators in the Access and Equity project provide some important reflections that flesh out the principles of appropriate cross-culture evaluation. While the literature outlines the importance of the full participation of indigenous people in the evaluation of projects that are conducted in their communities, there are rarely any descriptions or analysis of the successes and shortcomings of this collaborative process. We hope that by sharing our learnings from this project and its evaluation, we have gone some way to addressing this lack.

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