



2006 International Conference
Holiday Inn Esplanade, Darwin, Australia
4 – 7 September 2006
Final Papers



Australasian Evaluation Society Conference Darwin 2006

Maintaining Independence in Program Evaluation Fact or Fiction?

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The Question

Independence and objectivity are key words used in the practice of program evaluation, yet there is limited understanding of the dilemmas faced by the evaluation practitioners in the application of these concepts. This paper will examine the ethical and practical dilemmas that can, and do, arise for practitioners of evaluation when they attempt to preserve their independence or objectivity to analyse data, identify findings or present recommendations. The title of this paper: Independence – Fact or Fiction – refers to the conundrum faced by evaluators that evaluation as a process is purported to be objective and independent, able to stand back from the constraints imposed by the broader political environment, yet this independence or objectivity can often be compromised by the evaluator in the pursuit of relationship management with contractors of the evaluation. The dilemma is thus:

Is evaluation really an independent and objective process or can it be bought for a price?

The Context

Program evaluation occurs in a political context with the interplay of diverse, varied and often competing interests. The presence of competing interests among stakeholders in program evaluation has been recognised as a distinguishing feature of the discipline (Guba & Lincoln, (1989); Berk & Rossi, (1990); House, (1993); Alkin et al., (1997); Patton, (1997)). Evaluators are no longer seen solely as experts using scientific research techniques, but rather as navigators of a process of enquiry in a political environment characterised by multiple perspectives, audiences and accountabilities. The evaluation thus becomes a political act as well as an investigatory process (Guba & Lincoln (1989). Patton (1997:356) argues that evaluators need to recognise the political nature of evaluation and enter the process as ‘power players in a game where the rules are subject to manipulation....working to negotiate rules in the power game that favour informed and intended use by intended users’. Berk & Rossi (1990:13) argue that ‘by virtue of its engagement in policy space matters, evaluation research is saturated with political concerns’.

The contemporary evaluator is thus expected to be technically competent in methodological design, data collection and analysis, and reporting procedures, in

addition to being equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills and ethical standards to operate effectively within a political domain. Weiss (1983:10) notes that the stakeholder approach changes the role of evaluators:

They are asked not only to be technical experts who do competent research. They are required to become political managers who orchestrate the involvement of diverse interest groups. They must be negotiators, weighing one set of information requests against others and coming to amicable agreements about priorities. They must be skilful educators, sharing their knowledge about appropriate expectations for program development and program success while giving participants a sense of ownership of the study. Are the expectations for evaluators unreasonably high?

The specification of the exact nature of the skills and competencies required of the evaluator when operating with this political climate is under-developed in the evaluation literature. While there is recognition in the evaluation literature of the essential nature of stakeholder involvement and interests, the implications of this for the evaluator in terms of skills to respond to the challenges potentially arising have not been given a central focus. Codes of ethics and practice standards have been developed by professional associations and societies to guide the practice of program evaluation in its political context, but while these provide an important and useful framework for practice, the challenges faced by the practitioner in their implementation require further development and documentation in the literature.

One significant aspect of the challenge posed by the inherently political environment in which program evaluation operates, is the concept of evaluator independence or objectivity in development of findings or recommendations. Challenges in maintaining independence in undertaking program evaluation is an ethical issue facing evaluators that emerges from the political context.

Independence in program evaluation as I have defined it means:

The process of 'being true' to evaluation methodology in the collection, analysis and interpretation of evaluative data by positioning the evaluation within the commissioning organisation in such a way as to quarantine it from the influence that prevailing agendas and imperatives may have upon the veracity of emerging evaluation findings and recommendations.

Patton (1997:229) highlights that utilisation focused program evaluation transcends the pursuit of pure objectivity to attain 'fairness and balance' using appropriate, credible and useful data. This paper is not arguing that independence and objectivity

are principles to be pursued in a purist sense, regardless of the reality and constraints presented by the context and the environment. Rather, it argues that program evaluation does need to account for contextual and environmental influences, but that this occurs within a process of rigour where the evaluator 'tells the story as it is'. Post modernist theorists would argue that all interpretations of data that result in findings and recommendations are subjective, arising from our personal position and orientation in life. Thus the same set of data could be interpreted different ways dependent on the paradigm being used to interpret it. To an extent this is true, and our subjective lenses do impact significantly on data analysis and interpretation. However, there is also some credence in the notion that listening to your sources of data and informants and hearing what they have to say will result in 'telling the story as it is'. An evaluation that presents the data and allows this data to tell the story can be very powerful, and the findings can logically fall out of this process.

Guidance from Codes and Guidelines.

Evaluation societies have developed ethical codes, practice guidelines and standards to guide the discipline. Fraser (2001:57) identifies the key differences between these documents. He states that ethics are about right and wrong whereas standards are about quality and adequacy. The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) has developed both ethical practice guidelines and ethical codes. The former set out principles to promote good practice in the design and management of evaluations for both the commissioners and practitioners of evaluation while the latter govern the conduct of evaluators.

The issue of independence and objectivity in program evaluation have not been expressly addressed as ethical issues in the AES Guidelines for the 'Ethical Conduct of Evaluations' (2006) (www.aes.asn.au). The guidelines state that in conducting an evaluation:

An evaluation should be conducted in ways that ensure that the judgements that are made as a result of the evaluation and any related actions are based on sound and complete information.

The final report(s) of the evaluation should reflect fully the findings and conclusions determined by the evaluator and these should not be amended without the evaluator's consent.

The AES Guidelines for the 'Ethical Conduct of Evaluations' thus do not specifically refer to Independence but rather imply it in concepts such as 'judgements based on sound and complete information' and 'findings and conclusions not to be amended without prior consent'.

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) 'Guiding Principles for Evaluators' (www.eval.org/Publications/GuidingPrinciples) emphasise evaluators displaying honesty and integrity in their behaviour and the honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process. The guidelines state the following:

Evaluators should not misrepresent their procedures, data or findings. Within reasonable limits, they should attempt to prevent or correct misuse of their work by others

If evaluators determine that certain procedures or activities are likely to produce misleading evaluative information or conclusions, they have the responsibility to communicate their concerns and the reasons for them. If discussions with the client do not resolve these concerns, the evaluator should decline to conduct the evaluation. If declining the assignment is unfeasible or inappropriate, the evaluator should consult colleagues or relevant stakeholders about other proper ways to proceed. (Options might include discussions at a higher level, a dissenting cover letter or appendix, or refusal to sign the final document.)

The AES Code of Ethics (2000) developed to guide the conduct of individual evaluation practitioners, under the heading 'Integrity' also suggest that 'members should practice with honesty and fairness'.

The evaluation standards developed by the Swiss Evaluation Society (2000) (www.evaluation.org.uk/Pub_library/SwissEvaluationStandards_2000_E.pdf) provide a specific section on what they term 'Neutral Reporting'. They state:

Many different perspectives exist in the environment of evaluation. Stakeholders themselves often hold diverging views of the object of an evaluation. Any given evaluation also runs the danger of being instrumentalized or captured by a particular group or interest, though an evaluation should avoid adopting any one specific point of view. Rather, it should be concerned to fairly represent all relevant interests, and it is important for that reason that an evaluation should take as independent position as possible. An evaluation should avoid being too closely linked to those who have commissioned it, but should also avoid being too close to those persons who are responsible for the object of the evaluation.

Ethical guidelines and codes, practice standards and guiding principles developed by evaluation societies provide some guidance and direction for evaluators in negotiating issues of independence, and ideally should be adopted as a framework for the evaluation at the outset.

The Evaluator and Independence

Program evaluators can be external commercial consultants or internal government department or non government organisation evaluators. Both groups (external and internal) can face real challenges to the independence of their work. David Turner (2003) reports on a survey of members of the AES conducted in 2003. In this survey people mentioned repeatedly the situation of:

Managers or funders trying to influence or control evaluation findings, sometimes including pressure on evaluators for positive results, sometimes including pressure to provide 'dirt' on a program.

Commercial providers of evaluation services have to balance their professional ethics to maintain independence with their business interests. Maintaining professional independence in data analysis and findings can provide a real challenge where the two areas of interest compete. For example, an evaluation consultant may find that a program is not working well and develop a number of findings and recommendations to guide improved performance. It may not be in the interests of the commissioner of the evaluation to have the program portrayed as under performing. The commissioner of the evaluation may indicate to the evaluation consultant that the findings need to be softened, distilled or moderated. The evaluation consultant may thus experience a conflict of interest between meeting the needs of the client (and potentially gaining further work from them) versus maintaining the independence of their judgements.

Maintaining independence can also be a challenge for the internal evaluator as they have to balance independence with organisational imperatives and loyalties, and their own career progression. For example, an internal evaluator may experience the same dilemma as depicted above, but risk losing support within their organisation.

This ethical dilemma could be heightened if the contract manager is the immediate line manager of the internal evaluator.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to fully consider the differences between the use of internal and external evaluators, it is worth briefly considering some of the key differences in the application of the concept of independence among these two broad categorisations. Conley-Tyler (2005) examines the issue of objectivity and its implications for the selection of internal versus external evaluators. She notes the inherent subjectivity of the process of evaluation and the personal paradigms and lenses that all evaluators bring with them. Conley-Tyler thus considers that the concept of objectivity should not be a factor in selecting internal versus external evaluators. However, she notes that perceived objectivity can be an important consideration in the pursuit of independence, as there may be a continued suspicion that internal evaluators will be subject to greater levels of political motivation or bias.

The following pressures can thus emerge for both external and internal evaluators:

- To produce findings, recommendations or outcomes that are consistent with those anticipated or expected from the commissioning client with reference to their broader political, economic and organisational **agendas** and **imperatives**.
- To ensure that findings, recommendations or outcomes produced are **palatable** to the field, service or program context, so as not to 'rock the boat'.
- To **highlight positive** feedback and distill negative or critical feedback so as not to disturb the relationship between the evaluator and the client or the field.
- To **highlight negative feedback** and distill positive feedback for a program the commissioner of the evaluation is hoping to scale back or close.

The above pressures can manifest in a number of different ways. The above identified tensions often emerge at the point of writing the first draft of the final report, inclusive of recommendations. Although the evaluator may be more than willing to receive feedback from the commissioning client where there have been errors in the facts presented, missing data or information, questionable analysis, or a need for greater clarity in expression and meaning, the feedback provided by the client can proceed down the path of overt pressure to change the *content* of recommendations. Clients may attempt either soft negotiation ('could you please reconsider?'), medium level negotiation/persuasion ('I would like you to alter or remove the following') to hard level persuasion ('I am going to change or remove certain recommendations

within the document).

Emerging Issues

There are a number of ethical and professional dilemmas for the evaluator when they face a choice between accommodating commercial /organisational imperatives or adhering to professional and ethical conduct in program evaluation by maintaining independence and being true to the process. These dilemmas include:

- The difficulties for the commercial evaluator in preserving their **business relationship** with the client in order to gain further contracts versus 'standing ground' and potentially destroying the commercial relationship.
- The difficulties for the internal evaluator in preserving their **position of employment** within their organisation versus 'standing ground' and potentially challenging their position and future within the department/organisation.
- The challenges to purchasers of evaluation services in commissioning an external or internal evaluation that through the use of evidence based processes of data gathering, assessment and analysis may not produce the **anticipated or desired results or outcomes**.

To illustrate further point 1 above, the following are real exemplars of the challenges that can be faced by an external evaluator.

- **Case Study 1: External evaluation of a program over a 12 month period.** Throughout the evaluation, as indicated in all the interim reports, the program is found to be largely underperforming. Toward the end of the 12 month evaluation period an election is announced and there is an imperative experienced by the commissioning organisation to showcase successful programs and strategies that relate to the particular social issue that has been the subject of this evaluation. The evaluators are placed under direct pressure to dilute the findings and recommendations, reframe the data and generally provide a more positive evaluation profile than the data supports. The commissioning client amends the draft final report in track changes to indicate where such changes should be made and how recommendations should be re-phrased. The client is a major contractor of evaluation studies.
- **Case Study 2:** The evaluation is being conducted of a current program and it becomes clear during its progress that the commissioning client wants to cease its funding. The data and findings emerging from the evaluation indicate that the program is performing very well and has developed a great level of support from the target communities. During discussion over the contents of the draft final report there is pressure placed on the consultants by the commissioning organisation to be more critical of the program and find greater areas of under-performance than the data supports. During final presentation of the report the terms of reference for the evaluation are questioned by the client.

If the above dilemmas were insoluble, then we would have a reducing supply of evaluators as they would find the work untenable. However, with awareness, skill development and experience, the above dilemmas for the main can be addressed and resolved in such a way as to reach a 'win-win' outcome for both parties. The following section identifies a number of strategies for achieving this, some immediate and some longer term. Many of the strategies are designed for use by the external evaluation consultant as this is the frame of reference of the author. However, they can be applied to the context of internal evaluation as well.

6. Suggested Strategies

Immediate

- Outline the **requirements for independence** on the part of the evaluator during initial contract negotiations/ set up, specifying compliance with a code of ethics or ethical practice guidelines.
- Identify at the outset methods or approaches that could be used if dilemmas or difficulties arise along the way. Establish **conflict resolution processes**.
- Open dialogue about the **importance of preserving independence**, both for the reputation of the evaluator, and for the status of the evaluation product.
- Use a **negotiation model** if conflict arises, with the following principles as a guide:
 - Be clear about your position but also be prepared to listen to and understand the position of the client;
 - Carefully unravel the interests which sit underneath the client's position, in an attempt to respond to their interests rather than the more fixed position put forward;
 - Explore the underlying interests - what is client concerned about/ wanting to achieve from the changes?;
 - Use the range of micro-interpersonal skills (active listening, paraphrasing, open ended questioning) to facilitate the above;
 - Once the underlying interests have been explored, establish if there is another way to meet the client's interests/imperatives without compromising independence;
 - Look for areas of compromise and 'give and take' bargaining to achieve a 'win-win' outcome for both parties;

- Be mindful that there are certain areas which are not open to compromise, and that ethical standards act as a guide to this. Explain this to the client;
 - Record all agreements made to ensure there is clarity in any negotiated outcomes;
 - Effective negotiation should avert negative outcomes and preserve positive relationships for both parties.
- Possession of the following range of **skills and principles** may assist the process:
- Clarity about **role and function** and ensuring this is adequately described and documented;
 - Highly developed **negotiation and communication skills** in order to discuss conflicts if and when they arise;
 - Level of skill and **competency** in services delivered to acquire respect for position held ('earned credibility');
 - Preparedness to say 'no' and **turn away** from a job if minimum independence is not, and cannot, be assured.

Longer term

- Increased opportunities for **education/consciousness raising** of contract managers/clients as to what is involved in using the services of an evaluator, and commissioning an evaluation, whether they be internal or external;
- Ensuring that all contracts offered by clients specify that the contractor is to **abide by a code(s) of professional ethics** such as that available through the Australasian Evaluation Society.

7. Conclusion

The political context of program evaluation often results in the emergence of a range of ethical and professional dilemmas that require both the ability of the evaluator to develop clarity about their roles, responsibilities and boundaries and the utilisation of well developed negotiation skills to respond to dilemmas in relationships if and when they emerge.

The question posed at the outset of this paper was:

Is evaluation really an independent and objective process or can it be bought for a price?

The answer is that currently evaluation is often used to achieve the latter purpose but

we should strive as practitioners and commissioners of evaluation to ensure it is used for the former purpose. This paper has argued that the evaluator needs to be proactive about protecting their professional independence, and be able and willing to negotiate with the client if this independence is in any way compromised. Similarly, this paper argues that commissioners of evaluations need to develop a greater level of awareness of the implications of utilising the services of evaluators and the meaning and value ascribed to the concept of independence of judgement and findings.

This is a journey that both the evaluator and the purchaser of evaluation services must continue to travel, hopefully armed with greater levels of knowledge and skills about the nature and features of this relationship as time goes on, and the benefits to be achieved by supporting a credible product.

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