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Evaluating complex and complicated programs: Issues, approaches, implementation and implications

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Note: The authors are proposing two papers to be presented in sequence. It would not be possible to do justice to the complexity of the topic with one paper and our interest in presenting the papers is conditional on both papers being accepted.

This pair of papers focuses on issues that arise in evaluating interventions that are 'complex and complicated' (a classification used by Glouberman and Zimmerman). It discusses how those issues can be addressed and the implications of doing so. The issues and approaches are identified using as a case example the four year evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2000-2004 of the Australian Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs undertaken by a consortium led by RMIT. The evaluation focused on 7 community based initiatives that funded 635 projects.

Paper 1: Designing an evaluation of a complex and complicated program: Issues and approaches. This paper sets out the complex and complicated nature of the Strategy, by discussing the terms of reference for the SFCS evaluation, the program rationale and the features of the program as a new way of working with communities that presented particular challenges for evaluation and for accountability. The paper then describes how the evaluation was designed to meet these challenges and the issues that arose. The key elements of the design include the use of an outcomes hierarchy and program logic, four different levels of data collection, emergent elements of the design, and qualitative synthesis across four levels of data collection.

Paper 2 – Implementing the evaluation of a complex and complicated program: methodological challenges and lessons learnt. This paper will discuss how the evaluation design described in paper 1 was implemented, lessons learnt in the course of doing so and implications for future methodological development. It will discuss such matters as how the four levels of data collection were used interactively and not just additively e.g. to identify topics for case studies, to identify the relationships between qualitative and quantitative data applying in broad terms realist principles of what works for whom under what circumstances, looking both for patterns and for exceptions. It will also discuss the use of the outcomes hierarchy to code and report qualitative data, processes for appraising and using data of variable quality, and combining many types of information to make global assessments of the success of projects. It will give examples of the types of evaluation conclusions and products that can be drawn from this type of methodology.