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Summary: The Political Context of Evaluation: What does this mean for Independence and Objectivity?

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Introduction

Evaluation is a process firmly grounded within its political context. It is also increasingly influenced by the active involvement of participating stakeholder communities. Responsiveness to the prevailing political, policy and stakeholder influences that surround an evaluation has great benefits in ensuring it is relevant, broadly owned and therefore useful. The impact of political, policy and stakeholder influences on evaluation can, however, lead to compromises occurring in the credibility of the evaluative information generated by the process. It would be naïve to suggest that evaluation can operate in a highly politicised environment without being influenced or affected by it. Compromise and influence refer to pressures upon the evaluator to determine certain findings from the process that are more palatable to the audience. The challenge for the evaluator is to balance the inevitable influences resulting from political considerations and the increasing involvement of a range of stakeholders with differing interests, with the credibility of the evaluation, particularly in relation to its findings. This presentation explores the tensions that emerge in evaluation between responsiveness to context, the use of participatory approaches and the pursuit of credibility through the adoption of the concepts of independence and objectivity.

The terms independence and objectivity are often used interchangeably in evaluation to depict the process of adopting an autonomous and impartial position in the conduct of an evaluation. They are distinct but inextricably linked concepts. Independence generally refers to the evaluator being awarded freedom to conduct the evaluation without undue control being exerted by the commissioners of the evaluation, the organisation or program delivery personnel. Objectivity refers to the evaluator's capacity to undertake un-biased and objective assessments and form conclusions during the evaluation. For the purpose of this paper, independence refers to the freedom of the evaluator to pursue the rigour of the evaluation process without compromise to the imperatives and pressures emerging from the immediate political and organisational context, the commissioners of the evaluation or its associated stakeholders, while objectivity refers to the impartiality exercised by the evaluator in their selection of evaluation methodology, approach to the conduct of the evaluation and the interpretation of findings.

The presentation examines the ethical and practice dilemmas that can, and do, arise for evaluators when they attempt to preserve their independence and objectivity, particularly illustrated during the stages of identification of findings and presentation of recommendations. The dilemma investigated is how vigorously independence and objectivity should be pursued as key practice standards in evaluation. The involvement of multiple stakeholders and the impact of the political context upon evaluation are both desirable and inevitable features of the practice of evaluation. The question how to best manage the intersection of contextual influences with goals of evaluator independence and objectivity.

The Evaluator and Independence and Objectivity

Evaluators can be external commercial consultants or internal evaluators. Both groups can face challenges to the independence of their work and their ability to pursue objectivity in methodology development and the identification of findings. In considering the political context of evaluation, there are likely to be numerous influences placed upon the evaluator from commissioners of the evaluation, key stakeholders involved in its development and implementation, and other interested parties such as program beneficiaries. The active participation and involvement of stakeholders is a positive feature of the evaluation process and generally encouraged, however, dilemmas emerge for the evaluator where there is pressure (overt or covert) to curtail independence or compromise objectivity.

Not all stakeholder groups attempt to exert influence, and many are supportive of evaluator independence and objectivity in the pursuit of a credible evaluation product. Motivations for commissioners, key stakeholders or beneficiaries exerting influence can be varied and not always internally consistent. Commissioners may have political agendas within their organisations that impact upon the evaluation approach and findings. Key stakeholders may desire certain approaches or outcomes from an evaluation that intersect with their organisational mandate and interests. Beneficiaries may want programs to continue, to alter or to cease and anticipate evaluations supporting their interests in this regard.

The response of the evaluator to influences brought to bear by stakeholder groups can be varied. Commercial providers of evaluation services can struggle to balance their professional ethics to maintain objectivity with their business interests. Maintaining objectivity in data analysis and reporting findings can provide a real challenge. For example, an evaluation consultant may find that a program is not working well when measured against its purpose and objectives and identify findings leading to 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 consultant that the data requires reinterpretation and findings need to be softened or moderated. The consultant may thus experience a conflict of interest between meeting the needs of the client (and potentially gaining further contracts) and maintaining the objectivity and independence of their findings. Maintaining objectivity 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. The evaluator can thus feel compelled to produce findings or outcomes consistent with those anticipated from the commissioning client and in line with their broader political, economic and organisational imperatives. Pressures can be exerted upon the evaluator to highlight positive feedback and play down negative or critical feedback for a program, or alternatively to highlight negative feedback and reduce the level of positive feedback for a program the commissioner of the evaluation is hoping to scale back or close. There can also be pressures to ensure findings are palatable to the service system or community, so as not to 'rock the boat' in relationships.

Conclusion

There are many potential responses to tensions that emerge in managing the relationship between evaluation and its political environment. Evaluation societies have a role to play in both developing practice and ethical standards for evaluators and increasing awareness of by commissioners of evaluation as to the requirements for, and benefits of, an evaluation that is ethical, rigorous and credible. Large contracting organisations also have a role to play in specifying codes of conduct for evaluations they commission.

For the evaluator, an important step is to outline the requirements for objectivity and independence during initial contract negotiations and the establishment phase of the evaluation, specifying compliance with Practice Standards or Ethical Guidelines. The development of practice standards by the Australasian Evaluation Society would assist this process further. Having external and recognised codification to assist negotiations and specifying compliance with ethical codes or practice standards in evaluation contracts would assist the achievement of shared understandings of the need for evaluations to operate within clear parameters. It may also be appropriate to identify at the commencement of an evaluation the approaches to be used if difficulties arise, with agreed conflict resolution strategies.

There is reliance on the skills of evaluator as negotiator to manage the evaluation process to ensure the ethical and practice dilemmas that arise are managed well. The role of evaluator as negotiator is critical to the success of the evaluation. The evaluator requires skills in managing a process where the political conflicts that underpin an evaluation are discussed, with strategies developed for their resolution.

This presentation has identified a range of issues that require further consideration in order to improve the interaction between evaluation and its political context and produce credible evaluations that reflect principles of independence and objectivity. Further work is required to outline in greater detail the nature of the interface relationships between evaluation and its political context, and the implications of this for evaluation practice. This is a journey that both the evaluator and stakeholders involved in evaluations must continue to travel, hopefully armed with greater levels of knowledge and skills about the nature and features of this relationship and the benefits to be achieved by supporting a credible evaluation product.