

Issues in the Evaluation of Programs for Indigenous Communities in Australia

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Why Topic is Important



- Evaluations of programs for Indigenous Australians should reflect good practice that all evaluations strive for
- Additional complexity from context of Indigenous people's history, culture & current levels of disadvantage
- Indigenous Australians 2.5% of population (ABS 2006) but generally experience poorer health, lower life expectancy & over representation in justice & child protection systems

“Closing the Gap”

- Campaign commenced 4th April 2007 to close life expectancy gap within a generation
- ‘Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage’ report compiled every 2 years by Productivity Commission measuring 50 indicators of disadvantage between Indigenous & non-Indigenous Australians
- Showed no improvement in 80% of the economic & social indicators

NT Government Vision by 2030 Closing the Gap

- Indigenous children born will be as healthy and live as long as other Territorians
- Opportunity to participate fully in social & economic life of the Territory, while having a strong cultural identity



NT Government Report 2007- 08

Need to Evaluate Well



Programs designed for Indigenous Australians need to be evaluated to determine 'what works'. Evaluations should be underpinned by:

- **Understanding** of Indigenous *history/ culture*
- **Cultural sensitivity** appreciating Indigenous worldviews & differences
- **Ethical Practice**
- **Capability** of informing and leading program design and social policy

Premise



- Until greater capacity is developed within Australian Indigenous communities for management & conduct of evaluation activities, the presence and involvement of non-Indigenous evaluators is likely to remain
- It is important that issues and challenges involved in undertaking evaluations of programs for Indigenous communities are identified, recognised and responded to



Historical and Systemic Factors

- **Historical:** colonisation, racism, & discrimination leading to breakdown of social cohesion & negative life experiences
- **Social:** separation, loss & institutionalisation potentially resulting in sub-optimal parenting, normalisation of violence, substance abuse
- **Economic:** inter-generational unemployment, poverty and limited educational advancement
- **Psychological:** intergenerational trauma, stress & negative childhood experiences potentially resulting in social disconnection, isolation, disempowerment, lack of coping strategies & social skills, mental health & substance abuse

Implications of History & Context for Evaluation

- Causality seldom simple or linear
- Cause and effect difficult to disentangle
- Difficult to evaluate programs in silos of education, employment, health, mental health, income support, child protection, alcohol & drug abuse, crime, family violence, housing, other areas of social provision
- These areas tend to intersect and evaluations need to be able to identify the complex inter-relationships that reflect the lives of Indigenous Australians



Implications of History and Context for Evaluation

- Recognition that Indigenous community is diverse and variations in appropriate programmatic responses will inevitably arise
- Evaluation of one program as successful may not be transferable to another state/territory or another community
- Need to understand and appreciate what may be common and shared and what may be different



Good Practice and Ethics

- Lack of trust of research by Indigenous community members led to development of ethical guidelines
- NHMRC guidelines for ethical conduct in Indigenous research – six core values
- Guidelines of interest to evaluators as a reference point for ethical conduct, particularly given absence of specific guidelines developed for Indigenous evaluation in the Australian context



Good Practice and Ethics NHMRC



- ***Spirit and Integrity:*** Respect for & support of richness and integrity of common cultural inheritance of Indigenous communities and their cultural, spiritual and social cohesion, whilst also recognising diversity
- ***Reciprocity:*** Equitable benefits for participating Indigenous communities: enhanced capacities, opportunities or outcomes that advance people's interests and are wanted by them
- ***Respect:*** For people and their contribution, acknowledging differences and diversity

Good Practice and Ethics NHMRC

- ***Equality:*** Acknowledging & valuing Indigenous experiences, with equal levels of involvement and distribution of benefits
- ***Survival and Protection:*** Respect for social cohesion & commitment to cultural distinctiveness amongst Indigenous Australian communities.
- ***Responsibility:*** Commitment to doing no harm, accountability and transparency

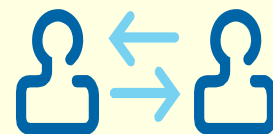
Ethics - Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies AIATSIS

Three main areas:

- **Consultation, Negotiation & Mutual Understanding:** Consultation with those affected by the research, negotiation, informed consents, transparency of research methods & use of findings
- **Respect, Recognition and Involvement:** Cultural diversity, cultural property rights of Indigenous peoples in relation to knowledge, ideas, cultural expressions & materials
- **Benefits, Outcomes and Agreement:** Use of & access to research results, with benefits for peoples and communities from research process

Implications for Evaluation: Respect for Culture

- Impact on design, choice of methods, process of interviewing, way data is collected, interpreted, analysed, reported, disseminated
- Capacity of evaluator to create a context that is non-judgemental, sensitive and empathic
- Interviewing and interpretive skills of evaluator



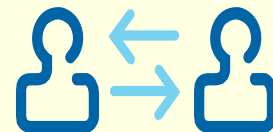
Implications for Evaluation: Respect for Diversity



- Evaluations can encompass most common, or general features of program results
- For evaluator, challenge in responding to diversity within scope of evaluation time frame, budget & design
- Challenge to develop good understanding of issues facing range of community members & also appreciate differences that may exist between communities or within a community

Implications for Evaluation: Reciprocity

- Appreciation for the contribution made and process for dissemination of the results
- Most appropriate use of appreciation fees, gifts or donations requires forethought
- Process for ensuring findings are presented back to the community can be difficult for evaluator to control or achieve



Implications for Evaluation: Responsibility



- Potential areas for possible harm need to be identified during evaluation planning process
- Informed consent can ameliorate some, but not all, potential harms involved in interviewing people about sensitive issues
- Some projects approved by an Ethics Committee, others will not have been through scrutiny about questions to be asked
- Careful consideration of questions to be asked and their implications

Inform Social Policy and Guide Good Practice

- For evaluations to have benefits to the Indigenous peoples and communities who have participated in the process, they need to be used to guide the development of good practice in programmatic and service delivery responses and inform social policy development



Areas of Potential Influence from Evaluation

- Enhanced ***understanding*** of issues impacting upon Indigenous Australians
- Representation of ***Indigenous perspectives***
- Facilitating ***discussion and debate*** of current programmatic approaches & policies
- ***Developing, informing or reviewing*** government funded programs, designs & implementation
- ***Influencing, developing or changing*** government policies & measuring impacts

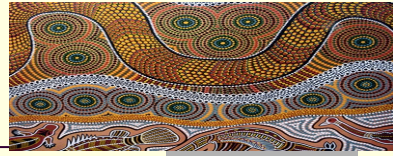


Influence

- Evaluations should provide credible information to enable incorporation of lessons learned into decision making processes
- Some factors impacting on influence include organisational learning culture, value and credibility of data and findings generated and timing of findings in concert with decision making processes



Influence



- Evaluations of Indigenous programs need to address the salient policy issues and concerns, be reliable and credible, timely in relation to policy making time frames, effective in communicating findings, fostering a policy environment favourable to use of evaluations as part of decision making

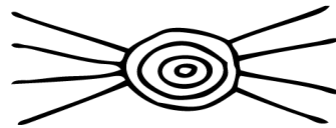
Concluding Comments

- Presentation has provided an overview of some challenges experienced by evaluators undertaking evaluations of programs established for Indigenous Australians
- Evaluators concerned with programs established for Indigenous peoples and communities should aim to:



Appreciate Indigenous Context

- History, culture & social context reflected in design & interpretation of the evaluation and its results
- Indigenous perspectives & worldviews incorporated whilst also allowing for differences from people to people and community to community



MEETING PLACE

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Act Sensitive

- Cultural sensitivity at all junctures of the evaluation
- Negotiating with participants about the evaluation to ensure understanding of purpose/use
- Sensitive Interviewing skills



Consider Benefits



- Consequences of evaluation in order to 'do no harm'
- Consideration of benefits for participants in direct reciprocity and/or dissemination of evaluation findings
- Ensure evaluation is capable of producing findings that can inform future program design and social policy wherever this is possible & achievable