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Decolonizing Evaluation: The Necessity of Evaluation Advisory Groups in Indigenous Evaluation

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Abstract

Research was and is central to the colonization and contemporary political realities of Indigenous communities. Because evaluation is a form of research and evaluation researchers are not immune to these oppressive practices, it is essential that evaluators acknowledge and engage with this history. One way to do this is through the use of advisory groups in evaluation research. This chapter will explicate how evaluation advisory groups can help evaluation practitioners decolonize their practice. Decolonized evaluation is centered in Indigenous values and goals. It ensures that evaluation processes and outcomes are appropriate to native communities by centering Indigenous worldviews, actively including Indigenous participation, and focusing on relevance as defined by Indigenous communities. ©Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Part of the colonization process is to render invisible the successes of indigenous science and knowledge while simultaneously infusing public discourse with images of Indians as intellectually inferior. (Walters et al., 2009, p. 148)

A Brief History of Research in Indigenous Communities

Research was and is central to the colonization and contemporary political realities of Indigenous communities. The word *Indigenous* refers to the communities, clans, nations, and tribes that are “Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire” (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). It is used in reference to the international and intertribal collective of communities who claim this experience. In this article, the word *Indigenous* will be capitalized as a proper noun so as to acknowledge and convey respect for the political status of native tribes.

Indigenous peoples have often engaged with colonial research agendas (Smith, 1999) and research that has served to “advance the politics of colonial control” (Cochran et al., 2008, p. 22). Researchers in Indigenous communities have been involved in unethical medical experimentation, “including the removal of organs and radiation exposure” (Walters et al., 2009, p. 149), unauthorized genetic testing (Cochran et al., 2008), and the deliberate infection of Indigenous peoples with sexually transmitted diseases (Presidential Commission, 2011). Researchers have further attempted to “patent” Indigenous bodies (Smith, 1999, p. 56) and establish “pedigrees of degeneration” to argue for eugenics and sterilization policies (Gallagher, 1999; Wilson, 2002). This is how research has become “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith, 1999, p. 1).

These dubious research practices are sadly not the only concern of Indigenous communities. According to some researchers, native peoples have been “researched to death” (Castellano, 2004) and all too often, that research provides no tangible benefits to the community. This happens so frequently, in fact, that researchers are known in tribal communities by epithets such as “drive-by” researchers (Walters et al., 2009), “mosquito” researchers (Cochran et al., 2008, p. 22), and “helicopter” researchers (Robertson, Jorgenson, & Garrow, 2004).

Because evaluation is a form of research, and evaluation researchers are not immune to these oppressive practices, it is essential that evaluators acknowledge and engage with this history. In native communities, research and evaluation are often indistinguishable and both are in many ways considered political acts. They are intricately tied to the colonization of the tribal community and as a consequence, researchers and evaluators must pay meticulous attention to the ways in which their practices might replicate and/or be seen to replicate these colonial patterns. This chapter will explicate how the participation of evaluation advisory groups (EAGs), commonly referred to as Community Advisory Groups in the literature on Indigenous research and evaluation methods, can help evaluation practitioners decolonize their practice and by doing so, contribute to community ownership of this type of research knowledge.

Nothing in this chapter should be read simply on a level of evaluation intention and perception, but rather more broadly, as a discussion about the evaluation function and practice. An awareness of colonial history in evaluation practice is essential to the practitioner, but even with awareness and the best intentions, evaluation practice remains shaped by things the evaluator may not be aware of, as well as by perceptions of evaluation held by others. Hence this chapter is deeply about method and practice, about developing a collaborative relationship within which to conduct an evaluation meaningful to community, one that meets its tests for epistemology and method as well as those of the normative evaluation practice. Moreover, although the chapter is particularly helpful to evaluation work within Indigenous communities, the information and processes herein could also benefit evaluation practitioners who work with other marginalized and culturally othered communities.

Why Evaluation Advisory Groups?

Why EAGs, one might ask? First, because Indigenous communities, quite frankly, are demanding them! Indigenous peoples and researchers have made entirely clear that they want evaluations that are “of, for, by and with us” (Kawakami, Aton, Cram, Lai, & Porima, 2007, p. 321) and research that doesn’t “plan about us, without us” (Walters et al., 2009, p. 151). EAGs can work to decolonize evaluation practice through the direct involvement of community members as advisors to, and even employees of, the evaluation.

Yellow Bird (1998), in his model of the effects of colonialism, proposes the creation of “community think tanks” as an intellectual antidote to colonialism. The establishment of EAGs is one such way to create these community think tanks, which can serve to decolonize the evaluation research process. EAGs can make space for the “recovery and use of Indigenous approaches to research and evaluation, processes of knowledge creation that were once under Indigenous control but have been supplanted by Western ways of knowing” (Robertson, Jorgenson, & Garrow, 2004).

EAGs have a long tradition in many disciplines, including environmental, education, and health research. EAGs, for example, are variously defined as “made up of representatives of diverse community interests. [The] purpose is to provide a public forum for community members to present and discuss their needs and concerns” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2012) or a “dynamic group of local individuals who consult with us to make sure our work is responsive to the needs and concerns” of communities (Help Fight HIV, 2012). EAGs are particularly vital for evaluators working in Indigenous contexts because the American Evaluation Association’s professional standards of *respect* states that “evaluators have the responsibility to understand and respect differences” and *competence*

states that evaluators must seek “awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions, their understanding of the worldviews of culturally-different participants and stakeholders in the evaluation, and the use of appropriate evaluation strategies and skills in working with culturally different groups” (American Evaluation Association, 2004). This focus on competence and respect implies that evaluators be “familiar enough with evaluation participants to be able to deliver such respect” (Kawakami et al., 2007, p. 321) and competence.

EAGs can serve to decolonize the research process and ensure the relevance of the evaluation through community-based participation. They can provide these direct benefits to the evaluation:

1. Centrality of Indigenous worldviews
2. Participatory inquiry/evaluation
3. Relevance and service to community

Centrality of Indigenous Knowledge

[D]ecolonizing research methods include deconstructing and externalizing the myth of the intellectually inferior Indian, while simultaneously privileging and centering indigenous worldviews and knowledge to promote revitalization of indigenous epistemologies, research practices, and ultimately, indigenous wellness practices. (Walters et al., 2009, p. 148)

EAGs consisting of community members who are knowledgeable about and invested in the inclusion, promotion, and practice of Indigenous worldviews are essential to decolonizing evaluation. Evaluations must consider Indigenous identity, epistemology, values, and spirituality (Kawakami et al., 2007, p. 332). Evaluations should not be designed to measure how accustomed or assimilated Indigenous tribes or programs are to Western practices. Rather, they should be situated in the “context of a specific place, time, community and history” (p. 319). They should seek to understand and measure Indigenous practice and the “value added to quality of life that the community cares about” (p. 332). In order to accomplish this, an awareness of Indigenous values and epistemologies (Meyer, 2003) in the evaluation process is necessary. EAGs can assist in this awareness and in establishing indispensable relationships that will ensure the evaluation design, implementation, relevance, and overall success of the evaluation.

Some examples that often arise in research and evaluation result from conflicting values and epistemologies. For example, many tribes place a strong value on sacred sites and spiritual practices. Because Western research and evaluation paradigms tend to see *science* and *faith* in mutually exclusive ways or in ways that prioritize science over faith, this can cause tension in the evaluation process. Western philosophies are also often anthropocentric—prioritizing humans over animal relations and sacred

places, or refusing to recognize the *mana* or spiritual energy in things non-human (Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2010). Moreover, *who* holds certain knowledge, *how* that knowledge is taught/learned, and what protocols are used to *share* knowledge become critical points of contention.

Evaluations must be guided by tribal knowledge, protocols, and epistemology—in other words, the *how* of the knowledge should guide the evaluation (Meyer, 2001, 2003). “Knowing” in many Indigenous communities is different than in Western communities. This seemingly benign statement is particularly difficult for many evaluation researchers who are educated in institutions of higher education that promote and practice certain epistemologies without acknowledging the existence of others. Western beliefs about knowledge are often so entrenched in science that they are hard to identify, let alone wrestle with.

Indigenous values and epistemologies cannot be placed on the margins; they must be central to the evaluation process for authentic engagement and evaluation to occur. Indigenous values, protocols, and epistemologies must be respected in evaluation practices. For example, members of the HONOR Project team worked into the early morning preparing food for a kick-off feast for their new project. “[P]ersonal involvement [in values and protocols] is expected to nurture meaningful partnerships” (Walters et al., 2009, p. 147).

This is not to say that Western knowledges or practices are not welcome; indeed, many tribes see Western knowledge as complementary or helpful in their evaluation processes. But an awareness of the typical privileging of Western values, goals, and paradigms and a conscious effort to center Indigenous paradigms in the investigation of Indigenous communities is necessary to decolonizing evaluation practice.

Participatory Inquiry and Evaluation

Over the past few decades, researchers have begun to recognize how vital community participation is to research and evaluation projects. The rapid rise of community-based participatory research (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Walters et al., 2009) and participatory evaluation methodology is one such indication of this recognition (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003, 2004; Cousins & Whittmore, 1998). Participation is especially vital to decolonized evaluation because community members are invited to design and participate in the evaluation. Decolonized evaluation demands that the process and the results of evaluations meet the needs and desires of the community as well as those of the program and funding agencies. Local ownership of projects has been shown to “generate a sense of even greater possibility” (Robertson et al., 2004, p. 506).

The Kawakami et al. (2007) conceptual framework for Indigenous evaluation practice provides a map for participation, shaping the purpose and goals of the evaluation, the driving question/problem, the methodology,

the depth and breadth of data to be collected, the analysis and recommendations of the evaluation, and the format and dissemination of findings. Indigenous evaluations are always political and moral. For example, Lakota approaches to research and evaluation support the idea of “creating knowledge in order to accomplish an end that is desired by the people” (Robertson et al., 2004, p. 500) found in the concepts of *wopasi* or inquiry and *tokata wasagle tunpi*, or something you set up to go into the future.

Participation is essential to knowing precisely what the evaluation goals, questions/problems, and methods should be. Research often frames Indigenous communities in deficit-based ways. EAGs can help to frame the inquiry in a way that asks questions pertinent to the way the community views the issues, collects suitable data for that analysis, and provides findings with real “value” (Kawakami et al., 2007, p. 331). For example: how might this evaluation help to address our questions and those “social issues” we are concerned about? In-depth participation of EAGs can also send a message to other community members that the community’s opinions and participation matter to the evaluators, hence enhancing the study’s credibility and utilization by decision makers for policy and program improvement and other important decisions (Cousins & Earl, 1992).

Outside evaluators may have the financial resources and Western qualifications to conduct evaluations in other communities, but a purposeful emphasis on participation allows those evaluators to share the power and “put local researchers in the driver’s seat” (Robertson et al., 2004, p. 507). EAGs allow for “multiple points of entry into dialogue and gathering and confirming observations and interpretations are necessary to obtain accurate data, draw conclusions and interpret those data” (Robertson et al., 2004, p. 333). This participation is often more time-consuming and challenging to outside evaluators, but it is well worth the effort because it strengthens the validity and the relevance of the findings, explored next.

Relevance and Service to Community

EAGs are one such tool that evaluators can use to help ensure that their work holds relevance to a particular community. EAGs promote the native community standards mentioned above, but they can also assist in the analysis process, dissemination, and overall usability of the evaluation findings. This process, moreover, can help build capacity among the Indigenous community to conduct its own evaluation and research, which could potentially increase the relevance of future projects.

For example, EAGs can serve as sounding boards; they can be first to hear the findings (Kawakami et al., 2007) and provide a critical feedback loop to strengthen the data analysis or call attention to alternative or misinterpretation of findings. They can also support the dissemination of research findings through the identification of appropriate knowledge-dissemination methods (Kawakami et al., 2007). Written research reports, while valued in

Western evaluation traditions, may not always be appropriate to the community's paradigm. If story, or *mo'oelo* (narrative), *oli* (chant), or performative (tribal song) methods are most appropriate for the dissemination of the findings, then it is the evaluator's obligation to know about and use them (Lai, Yap, & Dom, 2004 cited in Kawakami et al., 2007). If evaluation findings are grounded and valid and the dissemination methods are relevant, the evaluation is more likely to be utilized. EAGs are integral to this process.

Finally, evaluation processes and outcomes that provide value to a community also help to build the capacity of those communities to conduct their own evaluations and to develop relationships for future collaborative evaluation efforts. Focusing on the relevance of the evaluation creates space to allow the community to struggle with knowledge paradigms, their own priorities in evaluation and dissemination. This struggle is key to building capacities for evaluation among community members otherwise not trained in this area, and it also allows the community to speak back to the institutions and curricula that train "evaluators."

Summary

[W]e remain a sovereign people who insist on the right to find our own solutions and our own ways of evidencing social transformations. Evaluations that support us in this effort must exhibit both academic and cultural validity. We look forward to the day when this approach becomes the norm of our evaluation experience. (Kawakami et al., 2007, p. 344)

Evaluation must be relevant to the community. It should center Indigenous knowledge paradigms and include the participation of Indigenous peoples, and it should produce outcomes and processes that are meaningful to the community and provide service to the community in a variety of negotiated ways that move beyond a cost-benefit perspective of evaluation study (Kawakami et al., 2007). Indeed, as Robertson et al. (2004) claim, evaluation should not only be relevant to a community's wants, needs, and understandings, but explicitly used in service of that community while simultaneously serving "larger goals of decolonization and liberation" (p. 500).

An evaluation study is often shaped without the knowledge or control of the Indigenous community. Until the time that Indigenous researchers and communities have full control over their own evaluation projects, EAGs are essential to complement evaluation practice. These groups can deconstruct Western assumptions, norms, and practices in order to ensure that the evaluation is centered in Indigenous epistemologies, values, and goals (Kawakami et al., 2007). They further use processes and outcomes that are appropriate to native communities by asking relevant questions and delivering relevant answers.

EAGs, however, are not only beneficial to outside evaluators. EAG participation can assist inside researchers as well. They may help call the

research team's attention to mundane aspects of everyday life that may go unnoticed. They may challenge *practices as usual* that Indigenous communities have grown accustomed to, but upon further reflection counter their own decolonization, liberation, or community values. Furthermore, EAGs can provide a space for in-community variation in opinion and goals and an opportunity to dialogue further about the value of the evaluation process and the program(s) being evaluated.

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