



Standards & Ethics in Evaluation

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Structure

- Reflections on guidelines/principles/standards/quality
- Ethics - nature of
- Relational concept - people
- Situated practice - context
- Intertwined with politics – power
- Cultural awareness

Some reflections on Principles/Guidelines/Standards

Definitions and Differences

- No universal usage of terms - guidelines, principles, standards, codes, norms
- One way of distinguishing is degree of specificity and purpose
- **Guidelines** - suggestions to guide but not pre-empt ethical decision-making
- **Principles** - general statements embodying ethical precepts to guide action - often normative & aspire to good practice
- **Standards** - specific statements to which others should conform, often prescriptive and reflect model behaviour
- **Norms** – agreement on principles and/or standards among particular groups

Organizations producing standards/principles/guidelines

- The DAC Evaluation Network
- World Bank
- UNDP
- Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation

- United Kingdom Evaluation Society
- American Evaluation Association
- Australian Evaluation Society
- French Evaluation Society

Organizations producing standards/principles/ guidelines

- **Serve slightly different purposes**
- **Focus on quality of product & audit of process,**
- **On methodology and outcomes**

- **Rather than on how the evaluation was conducted – in fair and just ways**
- **Or how the relationships (power & personal) affected the outcomes**

Principles or Guidelines

- More open
- Allow more scope for interpretation
- For evaluators to demonstrate their intelligence and sensitivity in the field
- Responsive to cultural & socio-political settings
- Provide basis for participants, commissioners and evaluators to interact
- With overall aim of promoting good practice.

Major Purposes of Guidelines/Principles/Standards

- **Promote good practice in evaluation**
- **Enhance status of evaluation as profession**
- **Protect evaluators, partic. & public interest**
- **Help build culture for ethical evaluation**
- **Educate members of professional societies**
- **Enhance management of evaluation**

Drawbacks of Guidelines, Principles, Standards

- **Standards can also detract from ‘good’ evaluation**
 - **Prescribing too tight a template – restrict initiatives**
 - **Presenting false hope that all can be met**
 - **Providing too many indicators- counsel of perfection**
 - **Can lead to invalid comparisons as no agreed universal standards**

Different Messages in Standards

- Messages in the language
- Martial – **rallying principle** (e.g. raise the standard of revolt)
- **Judgment** – ‘weight or measure to which others conform or by which the accuracy or quality of others is judged’ (OED)
- **Double standards, standards bearer, gold standard.**
- **Degree of excellence** -does not come up to standard, standard of living
- **Specific agreed properties** of a group

Standards in Practice

- No international standards (Russon & Russon (2005))
- Important how established & whose values reflect
- Usefulness likely to be enhanced when culturally/context specific
- Need to distinguish between growth of quality standards in organizations and standards for professional evaluation practice

United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES)

Example of Guidelines from UKES

- ‘Guidelines for Good Practice in Evaluation’
- Grounded in practice
- Purpose is educational
- Provide frameworks for action
- In four sections – evaluators, commissioners, participants, self-evaluations
- Procedural – suggest what each of these groups should do
- Aim -promote dialogue & understanding to inform better evaluation

Absence of ethical statements

- ‘word ethics is assiduously avoided’ in Joint Committee Standards (Newman & Brown, 1996)
- Similar lack in debate over AES Standards (Fraser, 2001a, 2001b)
- Possible reasons - different function
- Sets of standards often more about governance than ethics
- Ethical practice too difficult to embody in codes and standards
- No consensus over what constitutes ethical practice in relatively new profession of evaluation

Ethics

Purpose of Ethics

- To promote good behaviour in the field that respects people and does no harm
- To ensure social justice and equity in evaluation practice
- To appreciate and protect sensitivities of people in process of evaluation & reporting

Ethics

- **Nature of ethics, different from governance**
- **Ethics is about how we behave (or should behave) as individuals and as part of society in interaction with others**
- **Fundamental precept 'do no harm'**
- **Distinguishing 'right' from 'wrong' - may differ in different contexts**

Ethics – a relational concept

- Ethics is a relational concept - about people
- At three levels
- **Personal level** – e.g. values of integrity, respect,
- **Community level** – e.g. equal respect; predictable relationships, consistent behaviour
- **Professional level** – common principles, leave the site open for another evaluation

Ethics - a situated practice

- Ethical principles are abstract – not always clear how to apply in specific contexts -
- Ethics is a situated practice in...
- Particular socio/political contexts
- Need to interpret principles in precise contexts
- Same principle can lead to different ethical decision.

Ethics and Politics

Ethics and Politics

- Often gets embroiled in politics
- Clash between 'right and right' - often need to balance/trade off one principle against the other
- May have to make **political** decision to keep **professional** evaluation afloat
- Example – national evaluation, one stakeholder seeking data to settle political dispute, other stakeholder disagreeing. Both had a case.

Ethical theories

- Different ethical theories to which we can appeal in making decisions
- **Utilitarian** – greatest good for the greatest number
- **Ethics of consequences** – utility and outcomes
- **Relational ethics** – focus on care for immediate relationships
- **Duties and obligations** – e.g. duty to tell truth may be revoked by higher duty to do no harm
- **Rights theories** – fairness and justice
- **Virtue** – character-based – integrity, responsibility

Ethical Decision-Making

Ethical principles, guidelines, codes, theories inform & guide behaviour but.....

It is how you behave in the field that indicates whether you have *acted ethically*.

- ‘The balancing of such principles in concrete situations is the ultimate ethical act’.

(House 1993, p.168)

Cultural Awareness

- Principles general/abstract - need to be interpreted in specific cultural contexts
- What is valid consent may differ in different cultural contexts
- Rights and obligations may also differ
- Need to explore how cultural norms affect evaluation practice and reporting

References

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