



Monitoring and Evaluation – interpretive and ethnographic approaches

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Never Stand Still

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The 'tense' relationship between policy and evidence

Too often nowadays

- Research and analysis are increasingly shaped to suit the (political) audience, and scholars often end up speaking **their** language, rather than policy makers understanding the value of different kinds of research
- Rather than evidence-based policy, there is an increasing amount of **policy-based evidence-making**.
- The paradigmatic case of this lies in many forms of government discourse, as well as that of agencies such as the World Bank or the United Nations.
- In these context, 'leadership' and what the evidence actually reveals, become seriously confused

Much policy-related discourse on good governance, post-conflict reconstruction and development takes place in a fantasy land that exists only in the minds of international civil servants

Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation, Tufts University, USA

Understanding what works and why

- Need to ground evaluation in the realities of practice
- Move beyond ‘artificiality’ and
 - the observable
 - the carefully controllable
- Programs that are often the most easily measured are often the least transformational
- Outcome measurement by itself de-prioritises the most transformational but least predictable programs
- Need to understand what happens, why it happens, where and when
- Need to allow ourselves to be surprised!

Ethnographic evaluation - 1

- Qualitative research underpinned by ethnographic principles used for evaluation purposes
- Has the potential to reveal
 - Why programs and interventions have and have not been successful
 - What might be needed to make programs more effective in the future
- Help us to focus in on
 - ‘Situatedness’
 - Personal and shared experience and the meanings that accompany this
 - The social collectivity that brings about health improving change
- None of these factors are easily reduced to variables in a comparative or experimental design

Strengths of ethnographic evaluation

Can improve program design and delivery by

- providing a better understanding of the **underlying principles** and assumptions of programme approaches;
- detailing the **socio-cultural logic** influencing decision making;
- a focus on **unexpected** health and development outcomes; and
- concern for local **barriers and facilitators** to programme delivery and efficacy.

Impact – two rather different meanings

- Impact as attribution
- Impact as the final level in a causal chain, theory of change or logframe

Impact evaluation as attribution analysis – some problems

- Do control groups really offer an ethical and credible counterfactual in social development interventions, especially those focusing on health?
- Most attribution analyses are costly and well beyond the budget of national and local-level health and social development programs in the majority world
- Efforts to understand ‘context’ and involve community members in developing a theory of change tend to be weak
- Little attention given to the primacy and capabilities of socially disadvantaged people and communities *vis a vis* the expertise and ‘expert’ knowledge of outsiders

Impact evaluation as the final element in a theory of change or logframe – some problems

- Predetermined nature of most M&E frameworks flattens complex change processes into overly simplistic causes and effects
- Program impact usually measured and understood only against program goals, rather than by examining changes (both intended and unintended) in real lives
- Focus usually at individual level change, not on the social, cultural, economic and political factors facilitating or inhibiting change
- Negative change, reversals or unexpected outcomes rarely tracked – seen as ‘problems’ rather than evidence of interesting and productive change
- Time is normally required for long-term change to become evident, but M&E is often required to take place within a project cycle

Good evaluation

Good evaluation tools should

- track and understand change in ‘harder-to-measure’ formal (e.g. law, policy, resources) and informal (e.g. culture, beliefs, attitudes and practices) realms
- track and interpret backlashes and resistance to change, exploring these findings as evidence of impact and effectiveness rather than programme failure
- assess contribution to change rather than attribution (e.g. cause and effect)
- more fully involve local people in M&E design.

Ethnography

- A method or set of methods whereby the researcher participates, in people's daily lives, typically for an extended period of time
- Aims to understand **cultures** as well as experiences of life within a particular culture and the beliefs and social rules that are used within it
- '**Emic**' rather than 'etic', exploring how participants construct and interpret a programme in the light of their social realities and meaning systems.
- Strives to be **context-sensitive**. Individuals' perceiving, believing and acting varies depending on who they are with, where they are and other factors.
- Knowledge, attitudes and practices arise, develop and change through **interaction**, which is how programme also evolves
- A **reflexive** process. Good ethnographic evaluator is self-critically aware, questioning their own behaviour, attitudes, values, and beliefs in the light of the influence these may have on others

Ethnographic evaluation in practice – *special thanks to Stephen Bell, UNSW*



Ethnographic evaluation in practice

Focus on NGO empowerment strategies to promote sexual health among young people aged 11-24 in rural areas in Uganda

- Mbale programme - sexual health education activities including school-based non-formal education and life skills development and youth-led community-outreach events (e.g. a community education day, a community AIDS march).
- Iganga programme, involved a school-based child rights club, in which sexuality and sexual health was a key educational component, and community-based adult-led HIV prevention outreach work.
- Mpigi programme, aimed to prevent sexually transmitted infections and HIV through a range of activities such as vocational skills training, community and school-based education, counselling and testing, condom distribution, community event days, community drama and post-test clubs.

Mbale and Iganga programs - findings

- Young people told they should not engage in sexual relationships (girls more so than boys)
- Sex presented as an adult privilege
- Health workers rarely made proper provision for young people in their work
- Young people felt discouraged from help and health seeking, and not trusted by health workers
- Very limited dialogue between young people, parents and teachers
- **In consequence**, Young people hid their sexuality and their sexual relationships

Mpigi program - findings

- Better connected to local political administration
- Some limited discussion between young people and adults
- But condom promotion activities had limitations
 - Only young men over the age of 18 distributed condoms
 - Young women and younger men expressed discomfort over ‘teasing’ by the older young men

Uncovering socio-cultural logics

- ‘Subtle strategies’ for living sexual and emotional life away from adult scrutiny
 - Secret meetings
 - Use of ‘alternative contraceptive options’

Revealing unexpected sexual health outcomes

- **Social exclusion**
 - Through school exclusion
 - Through parental restrictions and punishment
- **Poverty**
 - New financial responsibilities
 - Early marriage
 - Parenthood
 - Need to provide

Pointing to barriers to program delivery and success

- Timing and planning of program activities
- Lack of focus on key issues that mattered to young people
 - Livelihoods
 - Preparing for future adulthood

In conclusion

- **Ethnographic evaluation can**
 - Illuminate underlying principles and assumptions of program approaches
 - Reveal the socio-cultural logic influencing particular practices
 - Point to unexpected outcomes of interventions and programs
 - Highlight barriers to program delivery and efficacy
- **Ethnographic evaluation may**
 - Require a degree of capacity building (but what kind of M&E does not?)
 - Not always be as time consuming and costly as is imagined (especially when compared with ‘Gold Standard’ evaluations conducted in other paradigms)

