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Whose ethics is it anyway? Improvising ethical evaluation in access and participation.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

It is perhaps obvious to say that evaluation related to higher education should be ethical. However, precisely how we ensure ethical practice in evaluation is less clear. Evaluation is often classified as distinct from research, placed outside of ethical review processes, and those conducting evaluation in this context are rarely formally trained or inducted into specific professional guidelines. Where then should the principles that might guide ethical conduct come from? Using self-interviews and shared discussion groups, this research explored the ethical dilemmas navigated by those evaluating access and participation work in England. We identified that many dilemmas arose, not as a conflict *between* ethical principles, but from circumstance that make it difficult to honour ethical principles. In this context, evaluation practitioners are often forced to improvise their ethical practice. We ask what this means for the practice of evaluation, for evaluation of equity work, and for evaluation professionals themselves.

Full paper

As part of conditions of registration with the regulatory body, the Office for Students, Higher Education (HE) institutions in England must set out how they will address differences in student entry rates and outcomes, such as the differences in degree awarding rates between white and black student groups. In many cases, this is formally documented within an 'Access and Participation Plan'. In the most recent iterations of these plans, institutions must provide details of what and how they will evaluate 'interventions' designed to support access and participation (AP) and are also expected to publish their findings. This publishing requirement has prompted many delivering AP evaluation activity, both in and outside HE, to seek formal ethical approval for their evaluations. This has also prompted greater scrutiny of evaluation practice within AP work, including aspects not covered by standard ethical review like the ethics of reporting and dissemination, the independence of the evaluator, or the potential role of evaluation in social justice.

In contrast to research, evaluation is assumed to take place within political and organisational contexts where stakeholders will have a more immediate interest in process and outcomes due to the impact that a positive or poor evaluation may have on their organisation, funding, activities, or even careers (Barnett & Camfield, 2016). Consequently, discussions of ethical practice within evaluation relate to navigation of their political and economic environment (Morris, 2015) in addition to consideration of ethical principles more broadly. To support ethical practice, several organisations allied to evaluation have produced guidelines or codes of conduct. In AP work, evaluators are rarely formally trained, and evaluation practice is still emergent, including ethical evaluation. Evaluation practitioners have access to ethics guidance published by the affiliated 'what works' centre for AP, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), and may also draw on disciplinary research guidelines or those of organisations like the UK Evaluation Society. However, as in the wider evaluation sector, these tend to focus on the conduct of evaluators and not on institutional settings that are also recognised as a factor (Leone, Stame & Tagle, 2016).

To explore how evaluation ethics works in practice, this research involved thirteen evaluation professionals, including myself, participating in discussion groups and self-interviews reflecting on our ethical challenges and actions. Participants were based in a range of HE and third sector organisations, all in roles with a specific focus on evaluating AP work but varied in their seniority and types of responsibilities for evaluation. An initial workshop identified collective challenges and questions in relation to ethics within our work. Participants then completed a self-interview, using questions identified as most interesting or important within our workshops. A final collective workshop then discussed themes I had identified from our self-interviews, exploring how these fit within a framework of potential influences on our ethical practice.

We identified multiple common challenges, many with serious ethical implications in terms of protecting the rights of individuals, methodological choices, and transparency. In discussing challenges, most were not about conflict between two ethical principles i.e. a true 'ethical dilemma' but what Mackay and O'Neill (1992) describe as a 'mixed dilemma' or a dilemma 'arising when external factors make it difficult to honour in practice one or more ethical principles' (Leone, Stame & Tagle, 2016: 152). Ethical concerns also went beyond consideration of a single evaluation but related to the ethical implications of evaluation work within a system. For example, we questioned whether we were evaluating 'the right things' as a sector, with duplication of effort, potentially over-burdening the marginalised groups we aimed to support, and focus on evaluating 'corrective' interventions rather than systemic change.

In navigating our dilemmas, our actions were akin to improvisation, drawing on the resources within our contexts. Similar to Leone et al. (2016), we identified organisational systems and cultures as key influencers of ethical dilemmas, both in their production and providing resources for their resolution. Secondary to these were external stakeholders,

particularly regulators and funders, whose interests could incentivise practice and build awareness of ethical evaluation. Professional guidelines did have a role to play but practitioners drew more on professional skills such as research experience, managing relationships, and upskilling colleagues, as resources to identify and manage ethical challenges. Understanding these key influences, and how they can vary, offers insight into how evaluation practitioners might be better prepared to support ethical evaluation, and more consistently. Importantly, there is also a significant role for organisations and external stakeholders to consider their systems and cultures, which are crucial in ensuring ethical evaluation as a sector.