A Brief Introduction to Responsive Evaluation

Trudy Norman & Dan Reist

University of Victoria | Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research

A brief introduction to responsive evaluation

The challenge of evaluating complex human service initiatives

The overall question for evaluation is, what is the value of the approach, program, or policy intervention being evaluated? The challenge is how to appropriately assess the value of a particular intervention.

A range of scientific (positivist) methods has been developed in the natural sciences where natural laws operate. In this model, logical chains attempt to link assessed need to intervention and then to outcome. Points or links on this chain can then be tested through implementation and evaluation. The thinking goes something like this … if young people are behaving in risky ways, and we provide certain information, then youth will change the way they think about drug use or gambling, and this, in turn, will lead to behaviour change. However, since this type of evaluation is designed only to assess interventions presented in a sequential way, it does not address the complex nature of human learning and behaviour in the real world. Available evidence from this type of evaluation suggests that changes in knowledge and attitudes do not usually translate to changes in substance use (Brown, Jean-Marie, & Beck, 2010; Kiely & Egan, 2000; Paglia & Room, 1999). Thus, there are issues with the interventions and the method of evaluation. For an in-depth discussion of this issue, please see the full evaluation paper.

In the daily world of human life, the links between information, beliefs and actions are less clear than the relationships in the physical world. They vary depending on the "situational, personal, and interactive particulars of any given context of application" (Martin, 2019, p. 139). That is, the personal characteristics of the individuals receiving and delivering the intervention, and the social and political context all influence the outcome (Paglia & Room, 1999). "[T]wo people meeting just isn't the same as two billiard balls meeting or two chemicals combining, the autonomy and individuality of the human are ultimately what prevent there being a true science of human behaviour (Barrow in Barrow & Foreman-Peck, 2005, p. 28). A positivist evaluation gives little attention to the individual opinions and actions of stakeholders. This can lead to evaluation findings that have little relevance to complex human service initiatives (Klecun & Cornford, 2005; Schwandt, 2015).

What is responsive evaluation?

Responsive evaluation was first developed by Robert Stake to widen the scope of evaluation beyond assessing effectiveness to address a broad range of stakeholder concerns. Others have developed this further to emphasize negotiation among stakeholders in a participatory and transformative process (Abma, 2006). This approach to evaluation is sometimes referred to as "fourth generation evaluation" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), "dialogic evaluation" (Schwandt, 2001) or "interactive evaluation" (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011).

Responsive evaluation focuses on understanding what is happening within a program in a particular context. It is interested in how actors within a context define value and how they interpret the utility of the program in advancing that value. Responsive evaluation does not begin by setting out *a priori* outcome criteria. It recognizes "that one is dealing with situations that are lived, embodied experiences, and performed" (Stake, 2004, p. 93). That is, the priority is to understand as fully as can be how a program is experienced or interpreted by as many of those involved as possible. As a result, stakeholders actively participate in the evaluation, and the evaluator probes to understand not

just their opinions but also their experiences (perceptions, feelings, learnings). The evaluator approaches the task of evaluation with as few preconceptions as possible. Stakeholders are engaged in forming questions, identifying participants and interpreting findings (Abma, 2006).

Responsive evaluation is a holistic approach to evaluation. The program being evaluated is not regarded as a means to a specific end but as a *practice*. People are not seen as independent individuals but as social beings who depend on one another (Abma, 2006). Within the social ecological context of the shared practice, stakeholders may have different (even conflicting) values, and the program may have different meanings for various participants. Responsive evaluation seeks to capture the diversity of stakeholder values, perceptions, interpretations, insights and meanings, not just the commonalities. To use an analogy of a mountain: a responsive evaluator seeks more than a single photo and tries to construct a richer representation, more like a hologram. This incorporates the views and experiences of all program stakeholders. From this vantage point, viewing the program as a whole, what is useful and going well may be clearly seen, and issues, concerns and needed changes may more easily emerge.

Dialogue is central to the process of responsive evaluation. Dialogue involves listening and questioning as well as a desire to learn and a willingness to suspend judgement. These dialogues occur between the evaluator and the various stakeholders, but also among stakeholders. The evaluator must set the conditions and construct the contexts for meaningful dialogue. Through dialogue, stakeholders learn about the experiences and frustrations of others. They gain insight, and mutual understandings may emerge and change may result as people add new, vicarious experiences to their existing repertoires. Dialogue is not primarily a means to make decisions or develop strategic plans. It is about developing relationships and understanding that may make these strategic elements possible, and more effective. The goal of responsive evaluation is to enhance understanding by valuing difference and embracing diversity rather than by seeking a shallow unity or superficial agreement (Schwandt in Abma et al., 2001, p. 166). This allows practitioners to grow and improve their practice.

A number of guiding ideas are common to virtually all responsive evaluations. These include:

- Relationships among stakeholders and with the evaluator are respectful and open
- Power relations among stakeholders are specifically addressed and every effort is made to meaningfully include the voices of all stakeholders
- A climate of willingness to listen to others and learn is fostered in all interactions
- Developing safety and trust are foundational to the evaluation experience

Steps in doing responsive evaluation

Responsive evaluation is less a matter of technical knowledge and more about relational knowledge that takes into account the sociopolitical complexity of the situation and the evaluator's own place within it. It involves a commitment to human flourishing and an acceptance of responsibility for advancing such in evaluation practice (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011). "It is about doing the right thing and doing it well in interactions with fellow humans" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 229). This commitment to relational plurality, the importance of exploring and understanding the range of relationships within a given context, means the actual process for any responsive evaluation gradually emerges in conversations with the stakeholders (Abma, 2005).

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some basic steps for responsive evaluation.

1. The first step is negotiating the scope, purpose and process of the evaluation and identifying initial lists of stakeholders to engage and questions to address. Articulating the scope and purpose of the evaluation includes developing a preliminary understanding of the purpose and theoretical underpinnings of the particular program, approach, or policy being evaluated. This negotiation will involve a dialogue between evaluator and those commissioning the evaluation. The evaluator may have to probe and push to ensure inclusion of relevant stakeholder voices. This initial negotiation is just a starting point, and all decisions made at this point are open to review throughout the evaluation process (Abma, 2005).

2. The second step is to identify and document the various stakeholder issues and perspectives. Ideally, this will begin with those stakeholders often less heard. Their voices are least likely to have been represented in the initial step. Engaging these voices early helps ensure a balanced and fair process and prevents a management bias. Interactive methods such as in-depth conversational interviews, story-telling workshops or focus groups (rather than surveys or structured interviews) are better at teasing out the issues and perspectives of more marginalized stakeholders (Abma, 2006, p. 33; Abma & Widdershoven, 2011, p. 674). The perspectives of more established groups are often already documented or can be identified more easily. Nonetheless, throughout this step, the evaluator must establish contact and develop trusting relationships with all stakeholder groups. The goal for the evaluator is not to be impartial and objective but to live a "multiple partiality" where he or she identifies with all the stakeholders so as to be able to act as teacher and translator between the various groups (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011, p. 673).

3. The third step is to facilitate dialogues and interactions between various stakeholder groups through which they can explore the diversity of issues and perspectives. This step may involve empowering marginalized stakeholders by acknowledging their experiences and helping them critically assess their individual perspectives and construct a shared political voice (Lincoln, 1993). The evaluator seeks, at this stage, to create a social context for respectful and open participation and communication where every voice can be heard and considered. Careful attention must be given to asymmetrical or unequal power relations. If a face-to-face encounter is impossible, the evaluator may first present well-crafted stories that encapsulate the experiences of one stakeholder group to other stakeholder groups. By presenting the issues through engaging stories, a climate of open discussion and dialogue may be fostered (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011, p. 674). Whatever the method used, the goal is to help all stakeholders articulate their issues and concerns and better appreciate the experiential knowledge of others. This may lead to a new consensus, but, even in the absence of consensus, better understanding of the diversity of perspectives may stimulate further learning processes (Widdershoven, 2001).

4. The final step is to document the existing consensus and diversity within an evaluation report that sets the stage for, and encourages, further dialogue (Abma, 2006, p. 34). Rather than a list of recommendations, a carefully constructed list of questions may be more helpful for this purpose (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 378 ff). The evaluation results are context specific and need to capture not only facts, but "include meanings of experiences and events" (Abma, 2005, p. 281). To this end, findings may be represented in two stages, first by a vignette or portrayal of issues or events followed by a written summary of the evaluation (Schwandt, 1991, p. 72). The value of the process is reflected in authentic engagement, increased understanding and recognition of opportunities for growth and improvement.

References

Abma, T. A. (2005). Responsive evaluation: Its meaning and special contribution to health promotion. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *28*, 279–289.

Abma, T. A. (2006). The practice and politics of responsive evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27, 31–43.

Abma, T. A., Greene, J. C., Karlsson, O., Ryan, K., Schwandt, T. A., & Widdershoven, G. A. M. (2001). Dialogue on dialogue. *Evaluation*, *7*, 164–180.

Abma, T. A., & Widdershoven, G. A. M. (2011). Evaluation as a relationally responsible practice. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Sage.

Barrow, R., & Foreman-Peck, L. (2005). What use is educational research: A debate. *Impact*, *2005*, 9–56.

Brown, J. H., Jean-Marie, G., & Beck, J. (2010). Resilience and risk competence in schools: Theory/knowledge and international application in project rebound. *Journal of Drug Education*, 40, 331–359.

Gadamer, H.-G. (2013). *Truth and method* (Rev. 2nd ed. ePub; J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). London: Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1960)

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage.

Kiely, E., & Egan, E. (2000). *Drug education: A social and evaluative study*. Cork: National University of Ireland.

Klecun, E., & Cornford, T. (2005). A critical approach to evaluation. *European Journal of Information Systems*, *14*, 229–243.

Lincoln, Y. S. (1993). I and thou: Method, voice, and roles in research with the silenced. In D. McLaughlin & W. G. Tierney (Eds.), *Naming silenced lives: Personal narratives and processes of educational change* (pp. 29–47). New York: Routledge.

Martin, J. (2019). In defense of Robin Barrow's concerns about empirical research in education. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, *26*, 137–145.

Paglia, A., & Room, R. (1999). Preventing substance use problems among youth: A literature review and recommendations. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, *20*, 3–50.

Schwandt, T. A. (2001). Understanding dialogue as practice. *Evaluation*, *7*, 228–237.

Schwandt, T. A. (2015). *Evaluation foundations revisited: Cultivating a life of the mind for practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Stake, R. E. (2004). Responsive evaluation. In R. E. Stake (Ed.), *Standards-based & responsive evaluation* (pp. 86–107). Thousand Oaks California: SAGE Publications.

Widdershoven, G. A. M. (2001). Dialogue in evaluation: A hermeneutic perspective. *Evaluation*, *7*, 253–263.