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Background Report: Right or Wrong? What Values Inform Modern Impact Evaluation?

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Policy Anticipation, Response and Evaluation theme.

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Abbreviations

AfrEA	African Evaluation Association
CDI	Centre for Development Impact
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UEA	University of East Anglia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Background

This background report supported an event hosted in January 2015 by the Centre for Development Impact (CDI) – a joint initiative between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Itad and the University of East Anglia (UEA) – with the objective of opening up the debate on ethics and exploring how it can become more relevant to the field of impact evaluation. In doing so, it provided the setting for discussion around key themes: outlining definitions of ethics; the landscape of official ethical guidance in evaluation; and shortcomings of ethical guidance. For more details of this event please refer to the event report, IDS Evidence Report 139.

1 Introduction

Ethics is about a set of moral principles that guide an individual's behaviour or the conduct of an activity. For researchers, ethical guidance is well established in the social sciences (through standards, codes and institutional setups) and yet it is generally undervalued in impact evaluation, particularly in international development. The recent focus of evaluation debates on methodology and analytics (for example, as documented by Picciotto 2014) has skewed attention away from the 'value' dimensions of evaluation. And while, at the most general level, evaluators may agree that their practices must be ethical and that evaluations make some form of value judgement about what is being evaluated (Julnes and Bustelo 2014), ethical debates can be narrow and limited in their scope. Indeed, even though evaluation associations and international agencies have produced a proliferation of ethical guidance, these have tended to be more focused on the ethical dilemmas that are concerned with a 'respect for persons' (i.e. the protection of the subject); whereas the ethical literature within and beyond development studies is far more extensive. Furthermore, there are many inconsistencies in the way ethics are applied in evaluation practice, with a gap that often exists between idealised principles and the realities of the evaluation process; or equally, between those that follow rigid research procedures (e.g. institutional review boards) and other evaluations that rely almost solely on professional and personal behaviour.

In this Evidence Report, we discuss some of the limitations of current ethical debates in the field of impact evaluation, and evaluation more broadly, reflected in the interview data reported below. Firstly, we argue that evaluation is different to research, being inherently about resource use decisions, and often politicised in some way because significant interests are at stake (a point we discuss at length in Section 6). An approach that is primarily about the 'protection of the subject' – as borrowed from research – underplays the potential role of ethics in the value judgements made by evaluators, as well as evaluation's broader ethical role in society (such as accountability to citizens, or the moral obligation to make data available for re-analysis). And secondly, we argue that the reality of evaluation ethics is ultimately achieved through a series of value judgements that are 'situated in practice' and are not guided solely by ethical principles.

This report goes on to conclude that a new ethical agenda is needed to broaden the debate so that ethical practice within evaluation is not limited to complying with procedures borrowed from medical research where the moral imperative is the protection of the subject.

2 Scope

This Evidence Report is based on a small-scale study that involved reviewing guidelines for major evaluation societies, coordinating organisations, and funders; reviewing papers in evaluation journals and blog posts; and interviewing evaluators working in international development about their understanding of ethics and the challenges they face in their work. It also draws upon the CDI's framing event on ethics in impact evaluation held in July 2014. That event focused on exploring the potential for a broader ethical model, where ethical values and principles inform every part of the evaluation process – from the conduct of the evaluation to its contribution to society. Furthermore, consideration was given to how evaluation fits within the knowledge system that informs international development – and by implication, the extent to which evaluation could/should perform a role in better understanding and critiquing what constitutes 'good' (ethical) development.

3 What is ethics?

Ethics is notoriously difficult to define. However, for the purposes of this report, we draw extensively on the work of Simons (2006) who suggests that there is no single, context-free set of (abstract) principles that can be applied to guide ethical judgements in evaluation. Instead, what researchers/evaluators usually encounter in practice are ethical dilemmas where complex judgements need to be made, taking into account a range of factors and competing interests in a particular socio-political context (*ibid*: 243–44). Learning how to deal with ethical dilemmas is a challenge inherent in evaluation practice.

When asked to define ethics in impact evaluation, most of our ten interviewees who comprised consultants and researchers from inside and outside academia listed a set of obligations that they adhere to, ranging from confidentiality, informed consent and protecting the participant from harm; to sharing findings and respect for others' wellbeing, including marginalised groups in the evaluation process. They also emphasised that ethics is about balancing these principles in a way that is most relevant to the context in hand: judging the situation and weighing up the most ethical way to deal with it.

4 Ethical guidance for evaluators

The vast majority of internationally respected guidelines have originated in the global North. In 1994, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) in the United States issued programme evaluation standards, encompassing themes such as utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and evaluation accountability as a general rule or set of advice for practitioners. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) (2010) produced a set of guiding principles, which include responsibility for general and public welfare, competence, quality and relevance, systemic inquiry and use, and evaluator integrity. These have influenced other professional associations and international agencies who have generated their own guidelines, principles and/or standards over the past decade.

While guidance on evaluation principles is widely available, the principles that apply specifically to ethics, rather than other governance or methodological matters, are less clear (such as in the OECD-DAC, Department for International Development (DFID), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Global Environment Facility (GEF) evaluation guidelines) (Barnett and Munslow 2014: 6). The evaluation function is often portrayed in ethical terms as a requirement to 'respect human rights and differences in culture, customs, religious beliefs, and practices of all stakeholders' (OECD 2010: 6). This focus on human rights and protection of the subject as an ethical requirement is echoed by the evaluation policies of UNDP (2010), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2013), International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie 2012) and DFID (2011). The Uganda Evaluation Association and African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) also argue that 'evaluators should discuss in a *contextually appropriate way* those values, assumptions, theories, methods, results, and analyses significantly affecting the interpretation of the evaluation findings' (Uganda Evaluation Association 2013: 11).

A larger body of work (Brookings Institution, DFID, GEF, 3ie, Wellcome Trust) moves beyond many of these evaluation guidelines, and the usual focus of research ethics on 'care of the subject', to address broader issues such as data availability, lack of transparency or distortion by funders, and the ethics of development itself. These are the sorts of ethical issues which were most evident in the small set of interviews described earlier. This more expansive approach to ethics discusses responsiveness to stakeholders, transparency in decision-making, and the inclusion of socially excluded groups in the practice of evaluation. Such an approach provokes an examination of the tension between personal and professional values alongside broader responsibilities to the public. The overview in Table 4.1 shows that while multilateral organisations go beyond the 'subject' to include 'general and public welfare', several bilateral organisations (DFID, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and USAID) still focus primarily on 'duty to the subject' at the expense of a broader 'duty to society'.

Table 4.1 Review of ethical guidance¹

	<i>Care of the subject</i>		<i>Ethics of development</i>			
	Respect	Competence	Integrity	Systematic inquiry	General and public welfare	
						Other main concepts
AfrEA	x ²	x	x		x	Stakeholder values assessed in context
American	x	x	x	x	x	
Australasian	x	x	x			Accessible reporting
Canadian		x	x			Accountability
DFID	x	x	x	x		Responsibility with evaluators' institution, accessible reporting, broadening participation in evaluation
European Commission	x		x			Triangulation in reporting, addressing systems not individuals
French	x	x	x			Pluralism (considers all legitimate points of view)
GEF	x	x	x	x	x	
OECD-DAC	x		x			Responsibility with professional guidelines
Sida	x		x			Addressing systems not individuals
Uganda Evaluation Association	x	x	x	x	x	Utility and feasibility when discussing findings with the stakeholder
United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES)		(x) ³	x	x	x	Separate initiative on competencies; not seen as part of ethics
UNDP	x	x	x	x	x	The rights of institutions and individuals; verification of findings
United Nations Evaluation Group	x	x	x	x	x	Human rights (equity, participation, social transformation, inclusiveness, empowerment)
USAID	x	x		x	(x)	Safeguarding the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in research supported by USAID is responsibility of the organisation to which support is awarded
Wellcome Trust	x	x	x	x	x	Moral reasoning, robust ethical framework to assist everyday decision-making
World Bank		x	x	x		Code of professional ethics
3ie	x	x	x	x		Responsibility with evaluators' institution

Source: adapted from Camfield (2014).

¹ The data used to populate the table were taken from both ethical guidance and evaluation standards.

² 'x' refers to presence of the issue in the guidance.

³ Competence is not specifically referenced in the UKES, but it is alluded to.

5 Current ethical practice

A shortcoming of much ethical guidance within evaluation is that it does not specifically deal with some of the problems inherent in evaluation. In most cases, it is seen as the task of the evaluation manager (or in certain circumstances the commissioner) to define and integrate ethical dimensions into all aspects of the evaluation criteria (UNEG 2011). Recent guidance to integrate human rights into evaluation states that, 'there are also criteria that can be applied to evaluations that are derived directly from the human rights principles of equality, participation, social transformation, inclusiveness, empowerment, etc. and their use is strongly encouraged' (UNEG 2011: 25). While these principles may not be equally applicable in all contexts, broader concepts around transformation and empowerment are rarely considered as ethical issues (Newman and Brown 1996).

Interviews with evaluation practitioners suggested that there is no universally accepted guidance – practitioners consult different sources of information depending on their own professional experiences and/or familiarity with various organisations. In fact, interviews illustrated that evaluators working within international development also make use of guidelines published by external organisations including the Social Research Association and the Market Research Society, when considering restrictions on publication. Interviews also illustrated a tension between data collection and publication of findings, where it was felt that the confidentiality of data was emphasised at the expense of disclosure. Simons (2006) discusses this as an ethical dilemma; where ethical guidelines point in different directions (disclosure versus confidentiality) they are best solved through contextual argumentation, seeking advice from 'applied principles' that could resolve an issue.

When the evaluator has been commissioned by an organisation with its own explicit set of minimum standards, there is an additional risk that these standards cease to be considered as 'minimum' and are increasingly viewed as 'sufficient'. There can often be little room for manoeuvre on budget to go beyond these, stifling opportunity for innovation and progression – for example, if making an effort to feed back to stakeholders/society does not feature in the guidelines explicitly, it is unlikely to be included in the budget.

6 Evaluation, not research?

So, should evaluation simply take ethical models from research, where codes and institutional set-ups are well established? Indeed, many posit that impact evaluation ought to be grouped with research – given the methodological similarities between the two. Others, however, put forward the case that the context in which impact evaluation operates forces the consideration of the profession as an entity in itself, distinct from research (Thomas 2010). Patton (2014), for example, distinguishes between research as something that informs science and useful evaluation as something supporting action. Whilst research often has the flexibility to address wider, more fundamental questions to the end of generating knowledge for the public good, evaluation is targeted at investigating the results or process of a particular intervention, a particular institutions' or set of individuals' actions, and their success, failure, or something in between. For this reason an ethical model taken directly from research may not be appropriate (Barnett and Munslow 2014) and our aim in the two CDI events on ethics is that discussions should be made applicable to evaluation situations encountered by evaluators. As Picciotto (2014) states:

Whereas social scientists deliberately steer clear of evaluative conclusions, the evaluation process sets values and standards against which policies or programs are assessed following empirical investigations... Evaluation identifies what stakeholders consider valuable and it reports findings that reflect distinct perspectives and interests.

The implication of this is that the contexts in which evaluations take place are inherently political. Those commissioning an evaluation often have a large amount at stake, possess their own agenda, and have a vested interest in the results of the evaluation demonstrating a certain outcome. Morris and Cohn (1993) (in Camfield 2014) reported that 42 per cent of respondents in a survey undertaken by the American Evaluation Association experienced pressure to misrepresent findings, and of those, 70 per cent experienced this more than once. This finding is supported by evidence from both the interviews and the first CDI event on ethics where participants recalled how they were asked by commissioners to 'improve the negative findings'. A question increasingly facing evaluators relates to this required 'improvement' (the tweaking necessary prior to publication of a given report). This might encourage the professional evaluator to neglect their commitments to the stakeholders and their discipline in order to placate their funder (Clark and Cove 1998).

7 Conclusions

Ethics is difficult to define and its application is driven by context. Ethical guidance in impact evaluation tends to focus much more on 'care of the subject' rather than address broader obligations to society. Careful empirical research is required to understand how guidelines are actually applied. Insights from evaluation practice suggest that there is no universal set of principles that are applied, and that there is considerable onus on evaluators to pick and choose – with a tendency to focus on the minimum as sufficient within budget constraints. Research does offer some possible codes and institutional models for ensuring ethical practice, but it is argued that these are not wholly applicable to evaluation. While evaluation shares many features with research, there are important differences which mean that a different approach may be needed. This points to several further questions for the workshop to consider, including:

1. How might evaluation move beyond a narrow conception of ethics?
2. How do evaluation values differ from the values within development more broadly?
3. How do we bridge the gap between principles and practice?
4. What are the implications of new methodologies and modalities for ethics in impact evaluation?

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