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Reflections on the Key Elements and Challenges of a Summative Programme Evaluation: A Case of a Social Project Rendered to a Disadvantaged Community in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Social projects are implemented by many communities to meet the increasing demand for community support and development. The present study highlights the significance of efficient and effective summative evaluation of social projects. It discusses specific procedural challenges that may be faced by project evaluators and provides recommendations. Interviews, focus groups and reflective journals were used to collect data during the evaluation process. Results indicated there can be no text book prescription for conducting a successful summative evaluation, as it evolves within the process of interaction between all stakeholders. Constant reflection on the procedural challenges during the evaluation process is important as compared to only focusing on the outcomes of the evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Social projects are an essence for many communities as they assist with the delivery of services that are critical for community survival and growth. This is especially true in South Africa where, over the past twenty years, social projects have been a useful tool in an attempt to redress the anomalies of the past by creating and supporting community development (Potter et al. 2007; Lazarus et al. 2014). It is, therefore, crucial that projects become successful. In order for them to succeed, a considerable effort has to be made to evaluate their operational and tactical completion process. Evaluation of project implementation and success was initially proposed by Scriven (1967), who proposed two forms of evaluation, namely, formative and summative. Scriven described formative evaluation as being done throughout project development to improve or make changes while the project is proceeding in implementation, and summative evaluation as an assessment of effects and outcomes which is completed at the end of a project and serves as a decision-making tool about project continuation or change (Puddy et al. 2008; Schultes et al. 2014).

In South Africa, project evaluation has grown and diversified rapidly over the past years (York 2010; Lazarus et al. 2014). The South African government has recently, through such efforts as the National Infrastructure Plan (South African Government 2012), increased its budget for educational and social projects and consequently there has been an increased need for project evaluation as it can provide objective evidence that a project is effective and worthwhile for the funding sources and the community.

While much attention has been focused on developing project evaluation terminology and instruments, there has been paucity of efforts to identify and analyze specific procedural challenges impacting on the evaluation process, as informed by the evaluators' direct experiences (Thamhain 2014). It is the researcher's belief that the study of direct experiences is one of the critical components for understanding the project evaluation procedure and may have a positive impact on future research and practice in the field of project evaluation.

This paper presents the researcher's and his students' (henceforward referred to as "the team") reflections on the project evaluation they engaged in and, in the process, elucidates the key elements and challenges involved when conducting a summative evaluation of a social projects.

Project evaluation was a component of a Community Psychology module in the Masters degree, whose requirement was that students had to be placed in the community where they completed a practicum. The two students were place in a Non Governmental Organization (NGO), which tasked them with conducting an evaluation of two of its social projects which had ceased to operate but were considered as being valuable to the organization's service delivery efforts. The NGO hoped to revitalize these projects either in their existing forms or in adapted forms. It therefore was expecting to learn from the summative evaluation and was hoping that the evaluation was going to improve the effectiveness and the sustainability of the two projects.

The starts by presenting an overview of the NGO concerned and the two projects that were evaluated. Following the objectives, a theoretical formulation and methodology is discussed. Thereafter a discussion on the challenges experienced, and the lessons learnt during the process is presented. And finally, the recommendations for future project evaluators are discussed.

Synopsis of the Ngo and the Projects That Were Evaluated

The NGO concerned was fundamentally dependent on fund raising for its continued existence. It was mandated by its funders to build capacity and make meaningful contribution towards mental health within the historically disadvantaged communities. It had to do this by, among other things, developing a number of social projects which were to be rendered by their trained therapists, counselors, interns and community workers.

This NGO had a collaborative relationship with our university through which it provided service learning opportunities for student psychologists. The university, in turn, undertook to provide relevant supervision for students in placement, to help them maximize their contribution towards the services rendered by the NGO. This service learning contract allowed the students to join the NGO at the beginning of each year, spend one full day per week at the NGO's site, and leave the NGO at the end of October when the year-end examination begins.

The two social projects on which a summative evaluation was conducted had ceased to operate. The first project was called the Perinatal Mental Health Workshops (PMHW). It was developed to empower the nurses from a local clinic with skills for tending to mothers of newly born babies. The other project was called Umdlezane Project and it focused primarily on empowering community healthcare workers with skills for facilitating the attachment process between the mothers and their newly born babies.

Objectives

In line with the brief by the NGO, the objectives were, firstly, to conduct a summative evaluation of the two projects and, secondly, to provide, in a form of the recommendations, an insight on what could have been the drivers and barriers to the two projects' success and sustainability. The results of a summative evaluation was not only important for the NGO to be able to improve their services but was also supposed to serve as essential feedback to the funders.

THEORETICAL FORMULATION AND METHODOLOGY

Initially, the team's conceptualization of the evaluation process was largely informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR). The team's primary aim was therefore not only to contribute towards the NGO's practical concern of evaluating the two particular projects but also to empower the NGO with skills to evaluate all of their projects in a rigorous yet manageable manner. As informed by PAR, our aim was "to try to know with others, rather than about them" (Bhana 1999:230). The plan was to encourage egalitarian research relationship with the NGO and the full involvement of all stake holders in every aspect of the evaluation process, from initial conceptualization to final implementation (Stocke 2007).

However, as the evaluation process progressed, owing to the nature of the challenges the team was confronted with, we found ourselves increasingly becoming eclectic and incorporating the principles of the interpretive approach to our evaluation. Herr and Anderson (2015) explained that interpretive evaluation designs are based on the assumption that different project stakeholders are likely to have different perspectives on the projects, and that understanding these different views is essential to understanding the project. The evaluation design that emerges is, therefore, conceptualized as responsive to the needs of different project stakeholders, rather than being inflexible and predetermined. In responsive evaluation, the position of the evaluator is not of an outsider to events in the project, but a person with a mandate to collect information concerning the development of the project, interpret this information and share it with all project stakeholders (Potter 2007).

The team also applied the principle of methodological triangulation (Kelly 2002), whereby multiple methods were used to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the two projects. Convergent evidence was sourced from different sources and stakeholders such as archival resources, individual interviews, focus groups and reflective journals. The significant stakeholders that were identified were the NGO personnel and all the beneficiaries of the two projects concerned.

EVALUATION PROCEDURE

The following procedures were followed:

Information Gathering

The first step that was followed immediately after the initial briefing was to conduct an archival study of the two projects. Among the relevant documents that were reviewed were the funding proposals which outlined the aims, objectives and the historical background to the projects.

The study of the archives indicated that the original aim of the PMHW project, as stated in the proposal, was to reduce the prevalence and consequences of potential mental health problems of women within maternity units of the local clinics. Its prime objective was to facilitate awareness and develop a deeper understanding of the peri-natal mental health problems among the mothers as well as the health workers involved in maternal care.

The original aim of the *Umdlezane* Project was to develop and implement a project for the identification of emotionally-at-risk HIV and Aids infected mothers and their infants who might be struggling with the mother-child bonding and attachment issues. The project aimed to develop a project whereby health workers and professionals directly involved with assisting mothers and their infants would be empowered with basic skills to identify signs of emotional distress and other factors which may interfere with the mother-baby bonding as well as to assist in addressing those identified emotional problems.

In addition to the archival study, the team designed protocols for individual interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with all participating NGO personnel as well with all the health workers and professionals that were directly involved in the projects. Overall, ten individual interviews were conducted with three nurses, four health workers and three NGO personnel. Focus groups were also conducted with a sample of the project beneficiaries. Ten beneficiaries were identified through purposive sampling procedures and two focus groups, each with eight participants, were conducted by the team.

Since the team members' participation in the evaluation process was part of their training as psychologists, it was decided that they use reflective journals which was going to provide them with an opportunity to understand their own learning processes, to increase their active involvement in the learning process, and to gain personal ownership of their learning or empowerment during the evaluation process. Dianovsky and Wink (2012) referred to this process as having a strong metacognitive component that helps the learners to monitor their learning or empowerment process and to engage meaningfully with the empowering proves. Crème (2006) also refers to the process of using a reflective journal as "transitional writing" (p50), both in their form and function and in the learning space they offer the participants in an empowering program. She postulates that participants in a program need a space for the free exploration of their own and others' thinking. Each member of the team kept a reflective journal throughout the evaluation process. The journals were used to analyze the team members' subjective and personal thoughts as they were engaging in the process.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a qualitative approach. Throughout the process the team was engaged in an ongoing process of data reduction through creating summaries, coding and discarding irrelevant data. This process was accompanied by a continuous verification process, which involved developing conclusions and verifying them through reference to our field notes and reflexive journals, further data collection and critical discussion among the team members.

Reflection on the Evaluation Process and the Lessons Learnt

As the evaluation process unfolded the team was constantly challenged to make introspection and confront own preconceptions, misunderstandings and weaknesses regarding the task at hand, as well as to tolerate and work within the constraints imposed by the setting. Below is the team's reflection on the challenges encountered, which includes an outline of how, with the benefit of a hind sight, the team thinks they might have responded to such challenges:

Engagement with the Community and the Dynamics Involved

A valuable lesson was learnt within the first week of entry into the community. Our entry was disquieting as we arrived with a preconception and expectations of the nature of the brief and how the briefing procedure should be handled. Our preconception was largely defined by what were the areas of emphasis at that point in time in our academic training program at the university. The researchers were, at a point, where much focus was put on the collaborative approach in community project design. The nature of the tasks in hand did not allow the team to put this approach in practice. For instance, it did not allow for a typical needs assessment process whereby the team was supposed to collaborate with the community in identifying and defining the nature of the problems to be attended to during our stay in the community. As we found ourselves required to shift paradigms to focus on a completely different aspect of community work, we immediately felt underprepared for the task at hand.

Further, the team felt that the nature of the task could have been explained more comprehensively. The perceived inadequacy of explanation combines with the contradiction to our expectations, left the team with a feeling of disempowerment as we found ourselves confined to the strict boundaries as outlined by the NGO. Such defined boundaries left the team with the perception that we were voiceless and unable to negotiate entry.

The team members' inability to communicate their thoughts and feelings about the dynamics during entry meant that the NGO was unaware of our discontent and manifestly interpreted the situation as being the team's lack of enthusiasm for the set task. In hindsight it would have helped if the team promptly raised this concern because the NGO management would have probably comprehensibly explained the nature of the task and consequently this would have opened up the doors for further essential communication.

It, however, appeared later during the process that the problem of inability to communicate our concern did not lie with the team only. The NGO management acknowledged during one of the feedback sessions that the manner in which the initial briefing was presented to the team seemed to discourage collaborative negotiations and discussion between the NGO and the team of evaluators. Unfortunately, such lack of communication led to a conspiracy of silence which merely fueled the team's feeling of alienation.

The vital lesson learnt from such an experience was that it is essential for project evaluators to enter a community site with no preconceptions or expectations. Instead, entry should be characterized by empathic understanding of the site's needs and the openness and confidence to discuss grey areas to avoid a breakdown in collaborative interaction. Entering with no preconceptions also helps circumvent the danger of both sides becoming antagonized and resistant in case the entry process does not meet expectations.

Further, the team realized that its reaction of inefficiency and consequent anxiety were likely to have impacted on the feeling of disempowerment and in many respects the team might have projected these onto the NGO.

Another noteworthy point is that during one of the feedback sessions the NGO indicated their lack of experience when it came to project evaluation since they were engaging in it for the first time. Their level of experience may also have had an impact on our relationship dynamics during the evaluation process. For instance, it may have resulted with a clash of expectations. The NGO management was under the impression that evaluation was mainly going to involve the team exclusively focusing on the sites where projects due for the evaluation were rendered, instead of the evaluation being directed to within the NGO. They had hoped that, right from the start, the team was going to spend time out there on the field and they seemed frustrated when the team was confined to the office doing archival work. In this instance the NGO's expectations were undoubtedly incongruent with the usual requirements of summative evaluation and might have resulted with further discomfort on their side.

Challenges were also encountered at the point of data collection. One of the challenges was the difficulty to access people who were part of the projects and who needed to be participants in the evaluation process. Accessing the participants was largely exacerbated by the characteristics of the community in which the projects were rendered. This was a community in the informal settlement area. Informal settlement areas in South Africa are often used as temporal residence and are characterized by intermittent move from one area to another depending on the perceived chances of getting jobs and better living conditions (Statistics South Africa, 2005). As a result it was not an easy task for the team to locate and access the participants. The longer it took for the team to secure appointments for individual interviews and focus groups the more the NGO appeared frustrated by what they felt was the team's inability to do field work diligently. The challenges in accessing the participants were a lesson to the team, with regard to the timing of project evaluation. It became apparent that in order for the evaluation to be more effective, it should be conducted during project implementation or, in case of a summative evaluation, soon thereafter. Paralleling the implementation and evaluation processes allows for the immediate capturing of essential data that could be vital to the sustainability of the project. Besides, it makes it easier for the identified problems to be attended to and resolved as the project evolves thereby increasing the likelihood of project sustainability efficacy.

The intricate entry into the community set the tone for the collaborative work between the team and the NGO and consequently had an impact on the content of the team's first feedback report. In compiling the first feedback report the researchers felt anxious and reluctant to include content which the researchers felt would antagonize the NGO. The researchers found ourselves consciously couching our statements in non-critical terms. Such an act resulted with a bland non-academic report that failed to meet NGO's expectations and our goal of providing a succinct and worthwhile feedback. This did not go down well with the NGO because funding is so important that it becomes imperative for them to produce quality reports that portray a rosy picture whether real or not.

Intra-group Dynamics

The confusion, anxiety and uneasiness experienced by the team during the evaluation process had an impact on its internal dynamics. Team members appeared to be dealing with their feelings in different ways. One team member seemed more willing to grapple with the "not-knowing," while the other one seemed to have quick textbook solutions which resulted in the team needing to impose premature structures on to the process to cope. As a result, timelines were prematurely drawn up, tasks were allocated, and an outline of the feedback reports were designed before the team had even gained an overview of the projects to be evaluated.

In the team's state of uncertainty, the initial route was to buy into the quick solution. As a result the "us versus them" attitude was portrayed towards the NGO while the team bonding was being formed, based on a response to feeling attacked. This resulted with the team embracing any suggestions provided by its own members too enthusiastically, without subjecting them to necessary academic critique. In fact, the breakdown in communication between NGO and the team mirrored what was happening internally within the team. While one member took control of the process, the other member felt disempowered and, therefore, was not always ready to voice her disquiet. This resulted with unhealthy power dynamics which ended up undermined each member's meaningful contribution towards the evaluation process.

However, when the first feedback report was not well accepted by the NGO, the team was forced to reevaluate the process and renegotiate each team member's contribution towards the process. Consequently the team became more flexible to accommodate its member's different strengths and weaknesses. Such an action worked well as team began to gravitate towards aspects which suited its member's characteristics. For instance, the team began to realize and recognize the fact that one group member had a skill when it came to conducting interviews and was able to elicit rich information from participants, while the other member was particularly skilled in working tactfully and in negotiating entry into the communities. This shift in strategy led to a team being more efficient and productive.

CONCLUSION

From this team's experience, it became evident that there is no text book prescription for conducting a successful summative evaluation, as it evolves within the process of interaction between all stakeholders.

The first lesson learnt was that a key element of successful project evaluation is negotiating entry into the organization or community. The second lesson was that the foundation for successful summative evaluation is openness and honest communication between all concerned parties. A lack of communication can impede the process and can lead to misconceptions and ill feelings among concerned parties. Thirdly, project evaluators should avoid entering the organization with preconceived ideas and agendas. Fourthly, there is a need to monitor the anxiety levels of all concerned. In particular, any form of evaluation can be threatening to organizations involved, especially when those organizations are dependent on positive evaluations for their financial survival. Fifthly, project evaluation is invariably group orientated, and as such evaluations are often conducted by teams. The researchers found that working within the context of a group presented unique challenges. Unresolved issues within the groups involved can impact on intra-group dynamics. Intra and inter-group anxieties, misconceptions and conflict have the potential to undermine the process and result in a breakdown in group efficacy. Lastly, project evaluation by its very nature is not defined by clear parameters and neatly structured processes; hence the researchers discovered that the most informative lessons were learnt from grappling with issues and confronting mistakes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, it is recommended that future project evaluators be prepared to address issues arising from the process immediately and in a non-confrontational manner. Secondly, it is recommended that a situation for self-awareness within as well as between the concerned parties be created throughout the evaluation process. Lastly, the concerned parties will benefit from engaging in regular climate meetings to assess whether they are functioning optimally.

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