What about me/us?
Advance materials for
Evaluator safety and self-care campfire co-design session
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“I caught some pieces in my back that I didn’t even feel”
- I was only 19, Redgum 1983

“Let’s hope that we don’t get shot or kidnapped during our field visit”
- No. 2, Top 10 List of Things evaluators don’t like to hear, Roger Miranda 2010

A recent episode prompted us to commence this work.

As we said in our original abstract:

“Evaluators often - and increasingly - work in high risk, high stress situations. These include data collection in fragile states and conflict situations but also working in relatively 'safe' environments with evaluands in traumatic situations if the experience is sufficiently intense that the evaluator experiences vicarious trauma. Data collection when evaluating institutions of power presents its own challenges.

Reporting also may provide a high risk, high stress point for evaluators. 'Telling truth to power' is seldom easy, and there are situations where it can have impacts on evaluators' career prospects and, in some settings, personal safety. Even the stress of juggling multiple projects with tight timelines that impose periods of little sleep, let alone adequate space for reflection, can impact on evaluator well-being.”

Like other evaluators we know, we have each experienced ‘burn out’¹ and ‘vicarious trauma’² in our professional lives.

Such experiences can have significant, negative impacts on the person concerned both in terms of their personal and professional capability and functioning. The effects are often ‘creeping’ in nature, with the person affected only becoming aware they have been impacted after first experiencing either a personal or professional crisis.

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¹ Burnout manifests as a) emotional exhaustion b) depersonalisation e.g. negative attitudes to clients, detachment, loss of ideals c) reduced personal accomplishment & commitment to profession (Maslach 1993 in Bell et al 2003)
² Vicarious trauma has been defined as “the transformation that occurs in the inner experience of the therapist [or worker] that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with clients’ trauma material” (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995 in Bell et al 2003).
We have come to the conclusion that evaluation practitioners and our institution overall would benefit from having formal guidelines and procedures in place that would specifically address psycho-social risks for those going into the field, and provide appropriate responses where this had occurred.

Being evaluation practitioners, we began some research to inform drafting any such guidelines. Our initial work suggested this was not just a matter of simply updating our own instructional guidelines, but that there was a current gap in Australian evaluation theory & practice. It seemed time to have a conversation with the broader evaluative community and ask questions such as:

- “How do we need to care for ourselves in order to be able to sustainably produce good outcomes for others?
- “How can we avoid burnout and the impact on our evaluations that can come from working too long in high risk and/or high stress situations?”

In the months since the presentation was accepted, we have continued with our research\(^3\), including realist interviewing (Manzano 2016) with six participants - three male, three female - comprising:

- Two with experience in first response, disaster recovery risk management,
- Two with experience in commissioning evaluations, internal evaluation,
- Two with experience working as independent evaluation consultants,
- Two with experience working in academic settings,
- One with experience working in a for-profit consulting company

and importantly,

- two Australian Indigenous evaluators, able to talk about cultural safety and cultural risk for evaluators.\(^4\)

In selecting literature for a realist reading of the literature (still underway), we have identified that:

- There is very little written on the topic of evaluator risk outside of the ‘telling truth to power’ risk, which focuses on risk to truth and risk to livelihood
- Organisational risk literature, where relevant, seemed to focus on physical risk, but not psychosocial risk

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\(^3\) Ethics approval has been obtained for the project, but was granted later than originally anticipated.

\(^4\) Noting that this list reflects that a number of those interviewed had multiple experiences and practice contexts
There is a striking contrast between the emphasis on participant safety in HREC processes and ethical guidelines (e.g. AES 2013, Yarbrough, Shuhla, Hopson & Caruthers 2011) versus the lack of complementary awareness of evaluator risk anywhere, leading us to ask ‘what about us?’

Literature in risk management strategies for other professions, eg first responders, indicates the importance of both personal characteristics and of accumulation of stress (e.g. Maslach 1993, Bell, Kulkarni & Dalton 2003). It stresses the value of steps can be taken before entering the situation to prepare participants for what they will face and its potential impact on them, as well as debriefing afterwards (Barrett, Stephens and Palmer 2018). However, it notes that timing is important and that the credibility of the debriefer and the process is critical. Counselling is also noted, but as an extra step for some people, rather than as a general technique.

Through our interviews we were able to identify a variety of risks for evaluators, including:

- Vicarious trauma may arise from interviewing traumatised participants over hours, days, weeks.
- Some evaluation topics may be distressing due to personal/family/friend connections, e.g. eating disorders, homelessness, family & domestic violence – and it may not feel safe for evaluators to identify that these topics have personal relevance for them.
- It was noted that some requirements of evaluator competencies seemed almost antithetical, e.g. empathy and being dispassionate. There are many professions in which both are required, as in counselling, but where counsellors receive substantial training in this area, some evaluators might struggle with balancing these.
- Cultural risks for Indigenous evaluators include participating in evaluations that do not incorporate adequate cultural protocols
- Feeling of responsibility for ensuring a beneficial outcome for participants emerged as a frequent key factor, placing stress on evaluators who had little or no control over how findings would be used

Exacerbating factors identified included stress and exhaustion, physical danger or life stressors, fear of telling truth to power, telling truth to ‘friends’ (where the evaluator has built a relationship with the evaluand), and the worst - telling truth to power about friends.

Borrowing from Pawson (2013), we have begun to categorise risk factors found at four context levels:

- Individual (e.g. personality);
- Interpersonal (especially the relationship between the evaluator and evaluand, evaluation participants)
• Institutional, e.g. the degree of support and understanding provided by the evaluator’s organisation

• Infrastructure, e.g. the funding policies that drive short timeframes, the ‘post-truth’ environment, but also the lack of policies and standards in the AES and elsewhere in evaluation about evaluator safety and self-care.

So, where did we get to?

If we had to write the abstract over again, we would do it a little differently, and look at:

• Institutional guidelines and tools for improved evaluator safety

• Adding one or more items relevant to this to AES Professional standards

• Self care knowledge

• Commissioner education/negotiation (as timelines but also evaluation use emerged as important factors in risk but also ethics)

However, we promised certain materials and here are our initial drafts. Together, at the session, we believe we can advance considerably on these and we hope some of you may wish to continue on afterwards, to help prepare a paper for the AES and/or publication. We look at this presentation as the start to a longer conversation.

1) Self-care guidelines based in part on a transformation of ethical practice questions. (As we noted, these often assume that the researcher/evaluator holds power and is therefore not at risk; reverse-engineering the questions to consider potential risks to evaluator well-being proved a fruitful source of self-care guidelines.)

Physical risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?

Social risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?

Legal risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?

Psychological risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?

Cultural risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?

Any other risks – Are there any for this evaluation project? Have they been fully identified, and what risk management strategies are in place?
Risk vs benefit – Am I satisfied that this project has more benefits than risks? How do I know that good outcomes are likely to come from this project – or am I just hoping that the commissioner will use findings appropriately?

2) Briefing and Debriefing guidelines: for use by evaluators after particularly stressful situations, based in part on transformed disaster management tools

These guidelines are underpinned by the following principles:

• It is recognised that evaluation practitioners may operate in situations where there are physical or psycho-social risks
• Organisations should have processes in place to identify evaluator vulnerability/resilience in regard to different types of tasks and topics
• Practitioners should have channels through which they can report their awareness of potential vulnerability without penalty (and ideally, without shame)
• Processes should be in place that help identify and prepare evaluators for potential risk
• Briefing both before and after the project should be available to the evaluation team
• Managers should be aware of these issues and understand what resources there are to support practitioners

Pre-briefing of practitioners - particularly those undertaking fieldwork should occur where:

• Staff may be at risk of physical harm e.g
  o DFAT travel advisory is in place
  o police and/or other relevant authorities advise that environment has high rates of violence such as assaults, domestic violence, and/or high rates of alcohol and drug usage

• Staff may be at risk of psycho-social stress or harm e.g;
  o interviews with traumatised or vulnerable participants who are likely to share examples of their lived experience
  o the subject matter is contentious and the evaluation and its report to be high-profile and subject to public scrutiny
  o evaluator(s) will be exposed to and/or tasked with synthesising evidence from or facilitating forums with a range of stakeholders with diverse and strongly held views.
  o evaluator(s) will be exposed to reputational risk (either in terms of professional standing, inter-personal or cultural relationships)
  o evaluator(s) will be constantly working to very tight timeframes and/or with limited resources while being required to deliver high quality, robust work that is defensible

Debriefing - should be offered as a standard procedure where a pre-briefing was held, or where the above circumstances become apparent during the course of the project.

• Staff providing the debriefing should have knowledge and understanding of the issue(s) that the practitioner has experienced, in addition to strong inter-personal skills
• The debriefing should be provided in a safe manner – if the practitioner does not feel comfortable with the allocated debriefer, another debriefer will be arranged

• Following debriefing, if there are concerns about ongoing effects, staff should be referred to or provided the contact details of appropriate supports and resources

Critical incidents - where a critical incidence occurs, affected staff should be offered a debrief and any other required support as soon as is practicable

3) Self-assessment: This checklist is a first attempt at one that would enable evaluators to assess their own capacity - including capacity for evaluative judgement - in high risk, high stress situations.

How aware am I of my personal strengths and weaknesses? How aware am I of how and when my strengths can become weaknesses? (for example, work ethics leading to work overload, high standards turning to perfectionism).

What experience do I have of stress and risk, and how I react under pressure? How aware am I of the way my body gives me warning signals that I need to step back, take a break or do something different? What strategies do I have for those times?

How healthy is my support system, professional and/or personal? Are there people in my workplace/life I can talk to about evaluation-related issues and know they will understand? How much do I feel that I can trust their judgment as well as their good intentions?

How much effort and resources am I putting into my own self care and my nurturing of my support networks? Enough, or have I put that on the back burner so I can deal with urgent issues? What steps can I take/sustain to ensure that I am prepared for whatever combination of life stressors and professional challenges I might face?

How well am I positioned to cope with a project or ongoing workload that involves:

• risk or threats of physical harm?
• topics that resonate with me due to personal experience or connections, and that could cause me psychological stress?
• potential social risk, such as working within my own local or cultural community?
• engaging with traumatised or vulnerable populations, where I regularly hear about their lived experiences?
• the evaluation by its nature being high profile and/or contentious with its findings likely to be in the public domain and scrutinised?
• being exposed to and/or tasked with collecting and synthesising evidence from or facilitating forums with a range of stakeholders with diverse and strongly held views?
• being exposed to reputational risk (either in terms of professional standing, inter-personal or cultural relationships)?
• constantly working to very tight timeframes while being required to deliver high quality, robust work that is defensible?


