

231 Care-Full Evaluation: navigating ethical challenges in policy and program evaluation with an ethics of care

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Abstract

The evaluation of policies and programs within and across higher education institutions in Australia and the UK is a field of applied research increasingly guided by toolkits, frameworks, organisations, and government policies and statements designed to support increased evaluation practice. This constellation of forces typically presents key tools of evaluation – such as credible evidence, rigour, expertise, accountability - as technical, uncontested, “value-free” terms with a clear, singular meaning and purpose. Work in the scholarship of evaluation has attempted to reclaim these tools as “value-full”, politically charged and requiring decisions regarding their deployment. Recently, the notion of ethical conduct has appeared more prominently in these frameworks. In this paper, we illustrate how the four dimensions of an ethics of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness) provide entry points for constructing shared participatory evaluation spaces and can also guide critical reflection and learning with regard to evidence, rigour and accountability.

Full paper

The evaluation of policies and programs within and across higher education institutions in Australia and the UK is a field of applied research increasingly guided by toolkits, frameworks, organisations, and government policies and statements designed to support increased evaluation practice. This constellation of forces typically presents key tools of evaluation – such as credible evidence, rigour, expertise, accountability - as technical, uncontested, “value-free” terms with a clear, singular meaning and purpose. There has been important work done in the scholarship of evaluation to reclaim these tools of evaluation practice as “value-full”, politically charged and requiring debate and decisions on how to deploy them (Schwandt and Gates, 2021). Recently, the notion of ethical conduct has appeared more prominently in these frameworks and policies. The Australian Federal Labor Government in 2023 invested \$10 million to establish an Australian Centre for Evaluation to ‘improve the volume, quality, and impact of evaluations across the Australian Public Service’ which will shape federally developed frameworks including with higher education (e.g., Australian Department of Education, 2021). The evaluation toolkit associated with this announcement calls for evaluation that is ‘robust, ethical and culturally appropriate’. In another context, the UK federal government established a What Works Network that guides the sorts of approaches taken up by What Works Centres such as the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes hub for higher education. This group also state the importance of ethical considerations, with a view to delivering ‘best practice in research/evaluation while respecting the rights of participants and minimising to potential harm’ (TASO, 2023). There is no doubt the need for foregrounding ethical considerations in evaluation practice in higher education is long overdue, yet, in a similar way to the deployment of other evaluation tools, ethical conduct is often presented with little depth, nuance or need for debate on how it might be deployed in an evaluation context.

In this paper, we propose an approach for navigating the ethical questions that underpin evaluation practice. Drawing on Tronto’s () work on an ethics of care, we explore how her four dimensions of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness) offer helpful provocations on how to approach evaluation, what type of questions we might ask, and on whose terms these questions are crafted. The context for this exploration is the work of equity and widening participation in higher education. We draw from a widening participation program within an Australian university, sharing from attempts to navigate the challenges of normative orientations within processes of evaluation, and we develop this in relation to our own commitments to pedagogical methodology.

Reclaiming My Place, is an arts-based initiative delivered in partnership with community-based service providers by the University of Newcastle’s Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education. The program engages with women who have lived experiences of gendered violence and stalled education histories. The initiative seeks to open up

opportunities for engagement in education pathways and in lifelong learning more broadly. The evaluation of the program was designed around methodologies that seek to generate new knowledge but also to highlight practices that may (unintentionally or otherwise) function to limit or circumscribe the development of new knowledge. This is described as a pedagogical methodology and its intent is to acknowledge evaluation (and research more broadly) as a process where learning and new knowledges are generated in contested contexts and to offer ways to navigate this contested terrain. The role of the pedagogical methodology is not to create some level playing field of knowledges but rather to prioritise and create a space for the traditionally invisibilised knowledges of the participants of the program. Such an endeavour relies on relational evaluation practices that prioritise participation. Tronto's approach to an ethics of care allows for a fine tuning of what to consider important in participatory evaluation methods and can guide practice towards efforts to avoid patronising or hierarchical forms of care that can play out in evaluation, particularly when focused on equity and widening participation initiatives in higher education.

In this paper, we illustrate how the four dimensions of an ethics of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness) provide entry points into constructing shared participatory evaluation spaces that can also guide for critical reflection and learning on the key tenets of evaluation of evidence, rigour and accountability. Exploring carefully these building blocks of an evaluation through the perspective of the program participants allows for pedagogical moments for all involved and the co-construction of program knowledge that is guided by the people the program is intended to benefit.

References

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