

# How valuable are evaluations?

## The need for evaluation of community-based child and family services

Freda Briggs and Shelley Campbell

*The authors have, jointly and separately, evaluated twenty-five government funded child and family community-based agencies and programs in Australia and New Zealand in recent years. They argue for more rigorous evaluation of these organisations as a tool for the development of the sector and as a requirement for the receipt of substantial funding from government sources. On the basis of their experience, they point to some of the inherent difficulties in evaluating community-based agencies that have no history of external evaluation. Unlike government departments, these agencies often experience the tension of short term, unstable funding which (realistically or otherwise) staff and management link to the outcome of the evaluation.*

---

**Dr Freda Briggs**  
Professor of Child Development  
University of South Australia  
Magill Campus, Magill SA 5072  
Email: [Freda.Briggs@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Freda.Briggs@unisa.edu.au)

**Shelley Campbell**  
Health Project Manager  
Hamilton, New Zealand

### THE PRIVATISATION OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

In recent years, there has been a shift away from state provided child protection and family services to relevant government departments acting as brokers, directing funds to the private sector. In both Australia and New Zealand, governments have restructured and are limiting their core business to statutory obligations.

The outsourcing of family related services has resulted in the expansion of large and successful non-government organisations (NGOs) and the contraction (or, sometimes, the demise) of smaller, voluntary, charitable agencies which lack the time and the skills to submit tenders for projects. The fate of non-profit community agencies has always been determined, to some extent, by changes of government and political decisions over which the agencies have no control. From the late 1980s, Australia and New Zealand saw considerable shifts in public policy as right wing economic theories were adopted.

The arguments for the privatisation of essential services are predominantly economic. However, privatisation tends to reduce opportunities for conflicts of interest between government departments and service providers. NGOs traditionally provided services for less than their cost by using bequests and charitable funds and by paying lower salaries to social workers, therapists and counsellors than they

would receive in government employment. Lower salaries sometimes attract staff who lack nationally accredited qualifications. In an agency that does not encourage or reward the acquisition of professional qualifications, they may find themselves unable to seek employment or promotion elsewhere. Thus, a government's emphasis on 'low cost' can result in staff working in services beyond the limits of their expertise, placing themselves, their clients and their employers at risk. This risk supports the need for more rigorous evaluation.

When governments only partially fund projects, there is an unstated assumption that NGOs engaged in family and children's services can access funds from charitable sources. NGOs accept the shortfall, albeit reluctantly and often resentfully, pointing to the fact that no government department would provide only two-thirds of the cost of a road or a bridge and expect civil engineers to raise the balance by selling cakes and raffle tickets.

Competition for funding is not necessarily in the public interest given that it can cause the fragmentation of otherwise complementary services. In both Australia and New Zealand, agencies have recognised the damaging effect of competition on communities and they are now creating consortiums to submit joint tenders. This has the advantage of reducing inter-agency rivalry while increasing the quality of integrated family services within

communities and complicating line management.

New Zealand NGOs have long been funded by the Lotteries Commission and local charitable Trusts, as well as the government department responsible for children's and family services (NZYPFS), often with minimal monitoring or evaluation. There has been an assumption that agencies are worth funding because of historical relationships and the nature of clients' problems rather than on the availability of empirically based evidence of a quality service or outcome.

### HAZARDS IN EVALUATING NON-PROFIT FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

It is the norm in the United States for evaluation to be built into all contracts for funded projects. Although the quality of the evaluation is often variable, the requirement usually ensures that there is some agreed method of record-keeping and some means of assessing outcomes. This is far from true in Britain (Jackson & Thomas 1999) or New Zealand.

In Australia, State Government Departments are now monitoring progress and incorporate independent evaluation in contracts for child and family services. However, community agencies in both Australia and New Zealand lack a history of rigorous, independent evaluation and are now finding that this is required if they wish to expand or maintain their services with government funding. In fairness, it should be noted that community-based services with short term and unstable funding are far more vulnerable to the outcome of external evaluations than those in the government sector.

Where organisations were founded on a voluntary, charitable basis and the independent monitoring and evaluation of services have not been accepted as part of the organisational culture, resistance to the process is likely to be substantial. Workers and managers may lack a sound theoretical framework, claiming that they use 'common sense' methods and do what they do 'because it works'. While this may appear to be successful, it is important for staff to

know why 'it works' and whether it is effective in the long term. Evaluation is especially important if these methods or models are transferred to other communities.

---

*... a government's emphasis on 'low cost' can result in staff working in services beyond the limits of their expertise, placing themselves, their clients and their employers at risk. This risk supports the need for more rigorous evaluation.*

---

Quite frequently, there are disparities between the organisation's philosophies and practice. One of the most common examples encountered in evaluations is for family support management and workers to espouse the philosophy of parent empowerment: 'We start where parents are at'. They claim to develop the existing strengths of the child's living situation rather than expect miracles from isolated and spasmodic intervention. Simultaneously, the agency's programs and methodology often demonstrate the antithesis of good practice.

Non-profit and charitable organisations may be accustomed to hiding weaknesses for fund raising purposes, concentrating on marketing positive images of themselves and their altruistic motives. A common response is, 'We deserve to be funded because we do good work for abused children, dysfunctional families (etc). We do a better job than the Department ever did'.

In evaluating organisations that have a history of voluntariness, emotional attachment can impede the research process. This is particularly true when organisations are led by a founder-manager. Founders have usually made considerable social and financial sacrifices for the organisation, receiving minimal or no payment for work done

prior to mainstream funding. Their sense of ownership of the organisation is such that any criticism is perceived as a threat to its survival. Successful and charismatic founder-managers are usually accustomed to persuading funders that they are capable of undertaking a wide range of services because of their level of commitment. Several international authors have noted the tendency for such managers to be opportunists and persuasive marketers who present their perceptions and aspirations as 'the reality' (Santora & Santos, 1995; Steckle, 1989). Historically, they have not had to substantiate their claims.

Para-professionals with a strong internal agency culture are most likely to present a united but exaggerated or even false picture of their skills and effectiveness. In the authors' experience, they are least likely to be able to articulate their methods in terms of a sound theoretical framework. 'We use lots of different theories' is a common response from people who can seldom name one of them.

Hazards are particularly high when the manager does not fully understand the evaluation process and does not accept the need to identify weaknesses as well as strengths. However unrealistic, such managers expect perfect evaluations consistent with their altruistic motives. They may ignore the positive aspects of the evaluation and demand the removal of researchers' conclusions and recommendations that they perceive as critical of their management style, staff or methodology. In general, the less professional the organisation, the greater the risk of managerial interference in the research process.

In the authors' experience:

- members of staff who contribute to an evaluation may be challenged by management about their confidential statements to the evaluators (and may even be asked to withdraw what they said);
- management may demand group loyalty and engage in emotional blackmail, instructing staff what to say on the grounds that a positive outcome is essential for the continuation of funding for their future employment;

- researchers may be asked to change or delete important statements, recommendations, conclusions and even literature reviews that show the management or service to be less than perfect;
- there may be attempts to identify and challenge clients who made negative criticisms;
- evaluators and their organisations may be threatened with civil action if they do not make the changes demanded by management.

### EVALUATIONS MAY LOSE THEIR INTEGRITY

In a highly litigious climate where Australia and New Zealand seem to be following US trends, there is a danger that evaluations are losing their integrity, given that they are sometimes diluted to protect the evaluators, their employers or publishers. Non-profit organisations and charities are frequently supported by lawyers and politicians on their executive committees and networks. Successful community managers are also practised at manipulating local media to their advantage. In recent times, the authors have noted the use of such lawyers in attempts to influence the contents of evaluation reports.

Given that non-profit and voluntary agencies often lack the money to pay the full costs of in-depth evaluations, on some occasions research has been somewhat superficial. In some instances, it has been undertaken by tertiary students as assignments for courses in social work, business or community studies. Results are then confined to the organisation. Maori community-based organisations in New Zealand (particularly those who receive Iwi or tribal funding) have probably had higher levels of accountability and scrutiny than most, given the number of public forums in which they receive consumer feedback about their staff, services and financial expenditure from their own people.

Altruistic researchers tend to undertake the evaluation of child and family services for much less than their cost on the basis that the agencies 'are engaged in good causes and are worthy of support'. Such researchers are particularly vulnerable to

unprofessional interference and, when threatened with civil action, cannot rely on support from universities/employers which gained little or no financial benefit from the involvement of their staff.

Government contracts are unlikely to protect investigators and, to date, no satisfactory responses to the following questions have been received:

- Can an agency sue an independent evaluator if, subsequent to the publication of the report, government funding is withdrawn from that agency?
- Can the agency's staff sue the evaluators if their contracts are not renewed after the publication of the report?

Given that a professional and useful report will contain information relating to the organisations' weaknesses and how services can be improved, management may perceive negative comments as influencing any later reduction in funding.

---

*It is of concern that, while governments are increasingly reliant on community agencies for the provision of services which were previously in their domain, there is now less control over the quality of services than hitherto.*

---

Further questions surround the ownership of evaluation reports. Governments are likely to stipulate ownership in their contracts. However, the authors can retain ownership if the agency has not paid a 'realistic price' for the project and ownership has not been clarified within the contract. When university researchers are involved, the university is likely to claim ownership. In the meantime, the agency may demand the right to control distribution.

### BUDGETS SHOULD INCLUDE THE COST OF LEGAL ADVICE

Because of these risks, tenders and contracts should always include the costs of draft reports being read by defamation specialists. Defamation is a highly complex issue which is beyond the understanding of most authors. For example, in emphasising the importance of selecting experienced professionals for NGO management boards, a manager explained that, 'with the benefit of hindsight', she knew that she had not chosen her executive committee 'wisely'. The chairperson of another agency emphasised the importance of choosing a qualified and experienced manager, expressing the opinion that the executive had made a mistake in employing one who had no history of involvement in non-profit, child-focussed welfare agencies. Both interviewees went on to explain how their own lack of care led to changes in the organisation's focus, the resignation of the entire staff and the closure of both agencies.

Advice from defamation lawyers was to delete all of the information unless it was certain that the spokespersons would be prepared to reiterate their statements in court. Quite clearly such a guarantee could not be given. The lawyers argued that, in small cities, former members of a committee and former managers might be identified, in which case they could sue the report's authors and the university for defamation.

Publishers of professional journals are also sensitive to the risks associated with the publications of evaluation material. They, too, may remove controversial data and negative findings to avoid legal costs and the risk of civil action. As a consequence, evaluation and subsequent articles are becoming less and less meaningful. In a society where financial considerations take priority, we are rapidly moving towards a situation where evaluators may only say 'kind things' about the organisations they scrutinise.

With competent evaluators, stakeholders are often very open and honest but become anxious when they see their comments in writing. When working with para-professional organisations, the authors have found

no benefits from using an action research model or Tikanga Maori approach where they involve the agency in the early identification of issues and weaknesses. Attempts to role-model community development processes by drawing staff and management attention to criticisms early in the research process is unlikely to reduce the level of resistance to written documentation.

### PROBLEMS IN ACCESSING CLIENTS

Historically, the close scrutiny of community agencies has usually been the result of individual community members raising specific concerns, such as clients' complaints relating to service delivery. Parents who attend workshops or courses are usually asked to provide immediate, written feedback but this information is usually exclusive to the member of staff concerned and there is limited follow-up to ascertain either the long-term effectiveness of intervention or whether criticisms result in program revision. Thus, when staff and managers are asked how they know that what they are doing is successful, responses are often vague and emotionally based. Consideration of how to create successful programs for different cultural groups is still in its infancy.

Another hazard for evaluators is the difficulty in gaining access to both their clients and the professionals who refer them to the programs under scrutiny. Clients in child and family services are usually protected by confidentiality and evaluators are dependent on the agencies to provide access to them. There is an obvious risk that agency staff will only select clients and referral agencies who are known to view their services favourably. This is an unavoidable weakness in evaluation research methodology.

In Australia, some community services are now preparing for future evaluation by asking parent-clients to indicate, in writing, their willingness to be approached for feedback relating to the long-term effectiveness of the intervention. The most valuable insights come from clients who have been associated with the agency for 6-12 months prior to the evaluation. Evaluators also need to take account of

the fact that other interventions may have taken place simultaneously. Unfortunately, it is often impossible to contact former clients given the high mobility rates of families experiencing problems such as domestic violence, drug abuse, etc.

Evaluations usually involve interviews with referral and other professional agencies. Here again, there is a risk that the manager will only direct researchers towards the professionals and agencies with whom they have supportive relationships.

A serious hazard is the difficulty of maintaining the confidentiality of interviewees who live or work in small communities. Although evaluators may be scrupulous in not identifying individuals, those who have a history of involvement with the agency may be recognised by their views and experiences.

### CONCLUSIONS

It is of concern that, while governments are increasingly reliant on community agencies for the provision of services which were previously in their domain, there is now less control over the quality of services than hitherto. This is further complicated by the fact that government departments that previously employed researchers and evaluators to monitor service provision, down-sized and/or restructured those sectors of employment. If evaluation occurs, it is often sub-contracted to a commercial enterprise that has a health economist focus.

Given the risks to clients involved in child and family services, governments and funding agencies should be including regular and rigorous independent evaluations in their contracts.

While acknowledging that the integrity of the evaluation of community agencies is sometimes jeopardised by interference in the research process, we suggest that this relates to a lack of evaluation history in the community service sector and the unrealistic perception of management that a wholly positive outcome is necessary to ensure future funding. Resistance stems from a lack of understanding of what evaluation involves and how it can be

used for the benefit of management, staff and service delivery. In other words, resistance to evaluation may stem from a history of the lack of transparency in the community service sector ('How do we know that what they do is successful and makes a difference') and this can only be changed by more evaluation, not less.

Unfortunately, to avoid the risk of controversy and expensive legal wrangling, evaluators may be instructed to dilute the contents of reports, making them unreliable indicators of an agency's performance, thereby reducing public accountability. In the long term, however, this trend should diminish as evaluation becomes the 'norm' and agencies recognise the value of independent scrutiny as a routine aspect of their professional development.

Finally, the evaluation of community-based organisations should not focus on the health economist perspective. It could be more usefully focussed on process, quality practice, philosophies, relationships, how well the organisation networks with others and whether it can demonstrate that it makes a difference to clients' lives in the long term. Given the nature of the work in the child and family sector, this accountability is crucial to the development of thriving families and communities. □

### REFERENCES

- Jackson, S. & Thomas, N. (1999) *On the Move Again*, Barnados, Ilford (Essex).
- Santora, J.C. & Sarros, J.C (1995) 'Mortality and Leadership Succession - A case study', *Leadership and Organisational Development*, 16(7): 29-32
- Steckle, R. (1989) *Filthy Rich and other non-profit fantasies: Changing the way non-profits do business*, Ten Speed Press, California.