Evaluation and Social Research

Also by David Hall and Irene Hall

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Evaluation and Social Research

Introducing Small-Scale Practice

Irene Hall and David Hall

Consultant Editor: Jo Campling

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book has developed from our working with students conducting evaluation research with voluntary and welfare organizations in the city where they were studying. Through the years, we have seen how they have responded to the challenge of conducting research designed to be of use, providing benefit to organizations and their clients through feedback on service provision, and how they have been able to develop recommendations for future action as a result of their investigations.

Our previous book, *Practical Social Research*, was designed to support those wishing to engage in applied social research, as well as to show through examples how this can be achieved by student projects. Over the years, it has been noticeable that a good many of the requests for projects coming from small and medium voluntary sector organizations are for evaluations of one kind or another. So the idea emerged to write another book, this time making the evaluation process accessible to students.

It has been heartening to see how engaged students have become with the work of small-scale evaluation, and the high quality of their reports has been acknowledged by external examiners. It has also been rewarding to note the increasing awareness by the organizations that the evaluations are valuable for their progress – in making them reassess the way they operate and in making them think about options and potential for future development. For some organizations, the evaluation reports have become an evidence-base for funding applications.

These small-scale evaluations have had long-term impact on the careers of students, because of the skills and experiences they gained working in the community. When interviewed long after their projects were completed, it was noticeable how many felt their evaluation work was the highlight of their degree. Ainé Wolstenholme, the assistant transcribing the interviews, commented on the warmth and

enthusiasm which entered their voices when students were asked to recall what they remembered as being important about their experiences, and what they were now applying in their jobs. This research is referred to at the end of the first chapter, but the tables do not capture the feeling or really sum up what the achievement meant to those participating – students and supervisors.

The long term effects on organizations are also noted – how findings have been applied to make the organization more effective, or used with success as evidence of effectiveness to back proposals to funding agencies for their work to continue or expand. Small-scale evaluation, originally part of the teaching of final year undergraduate students, is now also central to the Masters degree programme with which the authors are involved. The reports being produced by students at this level are finding recognition in conferences and publications, as well as in direct use by community groups (and of course, by students as part of assessment for their degrees). This book tries to encapsulate the learning from all these projects, and the authors recognize the central importance of the students' work and the community partnering in developing and extending the model of small-scale evaluation – which is continually being refined with each unique evaluation activity.

Engagement with the community is now being promoted as part of the 'third mission' of universities in the UK (in addition to the traditional academic pursuits of teaching and research). However, to date, much of the engagement with the world outside academia has been with the business world, and involves scientific and technological know-how being shared and developed, rather than social scientific knowledge being made available to those who can benefit from it (and who, in turn, can contribute their own expertise to the discourse with academia).

There are signs, however, that community engagement is becoming more significant for higher education in the UK, and that opportunities for small-scale evaluation will increase. There are converging movements in Europe and North America, for instance, which indicate that the 'third mission' should be understood as part of a wider trend. In Europe, from its origins in the Netherlands, the 'science shop' movement (www.scienceshops.org/) has developed in order to help open up universities to their surrounding communities and their needs for information – to democratize knowledge through scientific/social scientific applied

research conducted by students. The authors have been involved with this movement for some time, and as partners in the INTERACTS European Union funded project, are comparing science shop activity across seven nations, in order to develop policy recommendations at the European level to expand science shop activity, where science shops already feature in the European Science and Society dialogue.

In the United States, the ‘service-learning’ movement has become widely established through Campus Compact (www.compact.org) to enable students in higher education to apply their learning through service to surrounding community groups. While such ‘service’ may not involve research or evaluation, it does support a major theme of this book – that knowledge, skills, time and commitment can be applied to the benefit of student and organization – and can energize the teaching experience of supervisors. High quality service learning involves the encouragement (and assessment) of reflection by student volunteers. The importance of reflection is also stressed in this book – as an essential part of being an effective evaluator. Working with community groups for research and evaluation means there is plenty to reflect upon – skills are developed, academic learning or theorizing is tested against real-life experience and commitment and enthusiasm can yield results which surprise the participants.

This book is written against this wider backdrop of rethinking the role of universities in their communities. It develops a specific way of negotiating partnership between academia and community organizations through evaluation conducted by students as part of their degree programmes. The book provides guidelines and advice based on many years of practice, and is intended to make a contribution to the literature which is now beginning to emerge for evaluators whose work is not part of national large scale programs, but small scale and local to one agency.

We would like to thank all the organizations who agreed to their reports being used and would like to thank them for their willingness to allow the students to develop their research and evaluation skills in a real life setting. Managers and mentors within these organizations were often very generous in their time and support, in spite of the pressures they were facing as people who work hard in an under-resourced sector.

We are also indebted to the students who responded to the opportunity to do evaluation research, and whose hard work and

energy produced so many valuable reports. Their work has helped to develop and improve the small scale model and provided continuous learning for their supervisors. We would like to thank all the students who have participated, and in particular the following whose ideas and experiences are referred to in the text: Anne Aitken, Julie Anderson, Jamie Arnold, Kathryn Bird, Martin Chamberlain, Laura Cockram, Annemarie Cronin, Shirley Fong, Vicky Foster, Julie Gornell, Kate Hayes, Jeremy Iankov, Pat Jones, Jackson Li, John Kavanagh, Kathryn Brady Kean, Andrew Kirkcaldy, Christina Lawrence, Jessie McCulloch, Susan Molesworth, Diane Ogden, Anne Payler, Fiona Quarrie, Joanna Rice, Janine Richmond, Tina Sadler, Aileen Scott, Lucy Senior, Janis Stanton, Katie Sullivan, Julie Thompson, Catherine Thorpe, Hameera Waheed, Elizabeth Walker, Claire Whitworth.

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