Selection of Methods, Ethical Considerations, and Evaluations Management

This brief offers practical guidance on how to design and manage impact evaluations that are credible, useful, and ethically sound. It walks through how to choose the right evaluation approach—whether experimental, quasi-experimental, or mixed methods—based on the stage of the intervention, the data available, and real-world considerations. It highlights how mixed methods can deepen understanding by showing not just whether an intervention worked, but also how it worked, for whom, and in what context. The brief also underscores the importance of ethical practice, offering clear steps to protect participants and ensure responsible decision-making. It concludes with key principles for managing evaluations effectively, from early planning and stakeholder engagement to ensuring data quality and communicating findings clearly.

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Selecting the Right Impact Evaluation Design

Selecting the right impact evaluation design involves more than technical considerations—it requires aligning the method with the intervention's stage, available data, feasibility, and ethical implications. Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) provide the highest level of confidence in causal findings, but they are often impractical due to logistical constraints or simply because the intervention has already started. In such cases, quasi-experimental designs such as Propensity Score Matching (PSM), and Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) provide viable alternatives. And in all cases, using Mixed Methods designs provides additional insights.

Factors Affecting Design Selection:

- **Intervention stage** – Is the program in early design stages (allowing for randomization), or already underway?
- **Ethical considerations** – Can the intervention be fairly assigned?
- **Data availability** – Are there sufficient pre-intervention data?
- **Implementation feasibility** – Can the design be executed within time and budget constraints?
- **Policy relevance** – Will the findings be actionable for decision-makers?

For example, If a government uses a minimum test score as a criterion for awarding university scholarships, RDD can compare students who just passed the cutoff with those who just missed it. Because these students are likely very similar, this creates a natural experiment to estimate the impact of the scholarship.

*"Mixed Methods a*pproaches... help explain *how* outcomes are achieved, *for whom*, and *in what settings*."

The Role of Mixed Methods in Impact Evaluation

Impact evaluations are not just about numbers. While quantitative data tells us whether something worked, it often cannot explain how or why it did. This is where Mixed Methods Impact Evaluation comes in, blending statistical rigor with deep contextual understanding.

Key Components of Mixed Methods Evaluation:

- **Quantitative Data**: Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), surveys, administrative records.
- **Qualitative Data**: Interviews, focus groups, ethnographic studies.
- **Triangulation**: Cross-validating findings through multiple sources.
- **Sequential or Concurrent Design**: Conducting qualitative and quantitative analyses together or sequentially.

Consider a vocational training program that may show a modest improvement in youth employment rates. However, qualitative interviews may reveal that women faced barriers like childcare responsibilities and workplace discrimination that limit their employment opportunities despite receiving training. This insight would be invisible in purely numerical results but is critical for designing more inclusive programs in the future.

By integrating qualitative methods, Mixed Methods evaluations help policymakers and practitioners refine their interventions to maximize effectiveness. They provide not just evidence of impact, but a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind that impact.

Ethical Considerations in Impact Evaluation

Ethics are the backbone of any credible impact evaluation. When people participate in studies, they place their trust in evaluators to conduct research responsibly. This trust must not be taken lightly.

According to United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) guidelines, four ethical principles should guide evaluations:

1. **Integrity**: Ensuring honesty, transparency, and adherence to ethical principles in all aspects of the evaluation process.

2. **Accountability**: Taking responsibility for conducting evaluations rigorously, reporting findings accurately, and using results to inform decision-making.
3. **Respect**: Valuing and protecting the rights, dignity, and perspectives of all stakeholders involved in the evaluation.
4. **Beneficence**: Ensuring that evaluations maximize benefits while minimizing harm to participants and communities.

Fig. 1: UNEG Principles of Ethics in Evaluation

These translate to the ethical practices in Impact Evaluation studies:

- **Informed Consent**: Ensuring participants understand the study's purpose and risks.
- **Confidentiality**: Protecting participants' personal data and responses.
- **Fair Treatment of Control Groups**: Using ethical alternatives like phase-in designs.
- **Honest and Transparent Reporting**: Presenting findings without bias or omission.

A common ethical dilemma arises when evaluators uncover sensitive issues—such as corruption in education programs or discrimination in hiring practices.

Should this information be reported, even if it could put informants at risk?

Ethical principles demand a balance between honest reporting and protecting participants from harm.

Moreover, the treatment of control groups in evaluations—especially in RCTs—raises ethical concerns.

Is it fair to withhold a potentially beneficial intervention from those in the control group?

One solution is phase-in designs, where the intervention is gradually rolled out so that control group participants eventually receive the benefits.

Ultimately, ethical impact evaluations require a do no harm approach, ensuring that research is not exploitative, manipulative, or dismissive of local realities.

In the figure below are some steps you can take as an evaluator regarding ethical considerations.

Fig.2: Ethical Consideration Steps

Managing Impact Evaluations: From Planning to Execution

A high-quality evaluation doesn't begin with data collection—it starts with planning. Clear objectives, skilled teams, and engaged stakeholders are crucial from the beginning.

Key Steps in Managing Impact Evaluations:

- Define clear evaluation objectives.
- Assemble a multidisciplinary evaluation team.
- Engage stakeholders early and throughout the process.
- Develop a realistic timeline and budget.
- Ensure high-quality data collection and analysis.
- Communicate findings effectively to different audiences.

Stakeholder engagement is another key factor. Policymakers, donors, and implementing agencies should be involved from the beginning to ensure that findings will be relevant and actionable. This prevents situations where evaluations produce valuable insights that ultimately go unused due to a lack of alignment with decision-makers' priorities.

Finally, impact evaluations require careful budgeting and realistic timelines. Large-scale evaluations, particularly those involving baseline, midline, and endline surveys, can be resource intensive. In such cases, leveraging existing administrative data or using piggybacking techniques, where evaluation data collection is integrated into ongoing surveys, can help reduce costs while maintaining data quality.

Further Reading

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