Evaluation research as passive and apolitical? Some reflections from the field

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The need to provide an evaluation of policy implementation is an integral part of almost all work carried out by organizations. Accordingly, many social science researchers will undertake some form of evaluation work during their careers. For many, this task will prove relatively unproblematic. However, for some, evaluation research may pose a number of difficulties. This reflexive article explores one area of concern, focusing as it does on some of the consequences and problems that emerge when researchers undertaking evaluations become involved in the consequences of their work.

Introduction

If, as social researchers we lived in an ideal world, many of us would choose the type of work we undertook: some would opt for pure research, some for more applied, some for qualitative and some for quantitative. However, as May (1997: xi) notes the type of research academics embark upon is often dictated by the fact that ‘quite simply, you are not in a position to refuse opportunities which come your way...’. As such, we may undertake work for which we possess the technical skill to complete the task, but we may be ill equipped for some of the unexpected repercussions of our work.

Arguably, this is especially true in the more applied end of social science research. The findings of studies that seek to evaluate organizational activity hold the potential to be employed in a manner far removed from that which was intended by the researcher. Indeed, researchers can enter into a research project with a clear awareness of issues relating to power, values, sponsorship, and vested interest groups. They can also enter into research with the idea that the researcher can be some form of apolitical mirror, simply reflecting the views of those interviewed and/or observed, and yet still have the research findings subverted in order to ‘fit’ a political or organizational agenda. In short, it may be that our assumptions that we can undertake ‘passive’ research, in opposition to ‘active’ participation, are flawed and in need of reappraisal.

This paper draws on some experiences from the field in order to question those assumptions surrounding apolitical research. It begins with a brief review of the literature surrounding bias and neutrality. Following that it provides an overview of the research, moving on to explain the events surrounding a move from passive researcher to active participant.
Finally, it details the experience of being the author of a report that was used, and abused, in order to facilitate change.

**Evaluation research as an apolitical mirror: a review of the literature**

A close reading of some work on evaluation research reveals that there is a tendency to view evaluations as a technical exercise, whose goal is the furthering of policy making (Patton 1982). In short, the evaluator becomes akin to a ‘gun for hire’, unconcerned about the cause or the outcomes of the work and prepared to adopt whichever approach the hirer prefers. Evaluation research thus becomes simply concerned with ensuring that the research process delivers results that can be used to further policy making and development. This is noted by Pawson and Tilley (1997: 14) who cite the Department of Health (1993 emphasis added):

> The main principle governing any Government funding of RD is the Rothschild principle … *the customer says what he wants, the contractor does it, if he can, and the customer pays.*

Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) concerns with this stance revolve around methodological issues. However, there is another perspective here and that is of the evaluator taking a role of a passive object, simply reflecting the research findings, and thus is neither effected by the research nor effects the research site (Miles and Huberman 1994). This gains further credence with calls for ‘objectivity’ (Nachmias and Nachmias 1991) and ‘value neutrality’ (Nagel 1961). This implies a form of passivity on the part of the evaluator which is referred to by Foster (1996: 75) who, in discussing the observer as participant, argues that ‘the researcher is able to maintain his or her detachment from the subjects and take an outsider’s view’.

Thus, in evaluation research there is a tendency to assume that the contractual nature of the relationship between the professional researcher and those who commissioned the research assures a passive and detached approach to the research task, with ambivalence toward the findings. In turn, evaluation is reduced to a ‘craft’ (Patton 1982) furnished by a ‘toolbox’ (Pawson and Tilley 1997) approach to methods. In this scenario, the much referred to difference between passive researcher and active participant appears to be at its widest. The remainder of this paper will employ some reflections from the field to argue that this is not always the case, and the mere act of producing findings ensures that the researcher takes an active role in the research site.

**Setting the scene: some background details**

This paper reflects upon a piece of evaluation into the workings of a managerial level multi-agency committee. The remit was to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with all members of the committee
(n = 26), undertake non-participant observation of full committee and sub-group meetings over an 18 month period, and to interview a small number of ‘front-line’ staff. The research was to conclude with the presentation of a report.

The research found that the committee was failing to perform its statutory duty. This is not the forum to discuss problems associated with joint working, however, it is important to note that the problems identified by those interviewed reflected well rehearsed structural difficulties (Hudson 1987). The research showed that the committee had suffered an exponential growth spurt due to the fragmentation of organizations into purchaser and provider units. This caused the existing control and accountability structures to collapse under weight of numbers and lead to the breakdown of communication, co-operation and collaborative culture, all vital components of good joint working.

Much thought was given to the construction of the final, somewhat critical report. It was composed around a framework that included a review of the statutory requirements, some general observations taken from key academic and practice texts and some statements from the interviews. In this way, the report mirrored the views of the committee and not the subjective interpretations of the researcher. The report was designed to highlight the problems identified by the committee members, locate and comment on areas of process they felt were weak, but not to offer solutions to the problems.

**Presenting the report and becoming involved**

The report was duly written and circulated to the committee. In the subsequent meeting it became clear that the report reflected the general feelings of the membership, a reaction that initially provided much confidence about the validity of the work (Nachmias and Nachmias 1991). However, during the meeting the chair’s response to the report gave rise to an abrupt shift in my role as well as allowing me access to events often hidden to evaluation researchers.

During the meeting the chair divided those present into three groups. Each group adjourned to a smaller room to be chaired by a senior member of the group. The chair asked me if I would chair the social services and police group, which was a surprise to all concerned. At this point my role changed. Unwittingly and unreflectively, I crossed the line between researcher and participant. In hindsight, it was also the point I lost control over my work.

During the sub-meeting, some delegates favoured retaining the existing system and structure. Others opposed the idea and argued against retaining something, which, ‘according to research’, was failing. This sounded a number of warning bells. First, it served warning that the research report was going to be cited by members of the committee in order to pursue a number of agendas. Secondly, throughout my research training I had been instilled with notions of objectivity, value neutrality and the concept of the passive researcher not ‘spoiling’ or ‘effecting’ the research site. I had...
striven for this during the research and yet here I was, agreeing with one side and my ‘objective’ research was being used in a number of highly subjective ways. My work, which I thought of as a mirror, was now being used as a demolition tool.

When the meeting re-convened there was clear agreement, based on the findings of the research, that the committee needed to be completely restructured. For me this was both shocking and frightening—what if the research was flawed? Would I be held personally responsible? My research training had warned me about the dangers of the research affecting the research participants, but had little to say about affecting the researcher or their career! The chair announced the formation of a group for change and co-opted five people on to it, four committee members and me as ‘someone who knows the committee intimately’. I felt uncomfortable about my position in this group, but also powerless to refuse, due to curiosity as to the shape and nature of the changes to the committee this turn of events would herald.

**Designing the changes**

Following an examination of the research report, it was noted by the group for change that the primary area of concern had been identified as a lack of monitoring and evaluation. As the resident ‘expert’ they turned to me for advice on this matter. This was another new development. All of those present attended meetings on a regular basis and were used to me sitting, observing and taking notes, but not taking any active part. Suddenly, because of my changed role, they felt able to include me in their discussions. This caused me more consternation as I saw myself as a researcher and not as an advisor. Yet, in their eyes the delivery of the report, supposedly a passive activity, had moved me from passive to active, and thus an integral part in devising change.

One delegate produced a series of five tasks he believed the committee should fulfil. These were culled directly from the report. Personally, this stage of the meeting became exciting and worrying, because it was unnerving to see points from the research being used as a blueprint for a major committee. Moreover, I was being asked to elaborate on points, which, if adopted would lead to wide-ranging changes, some of which would be unpopular with a significant minority of committee members. I was more than a little worried that, metaphorically speaking, plans were being laid to shoot the messenger. Equally, as a researcher, that was all I felt I had been: a messenger. My research had been a mirror to reflect their opinions, yet the committee were seeing the evaluation as my work and employing it, and me, to justify change.

I also felt unqualified to make suggestions and expand points. The research remit was to evaluate process and locate weakness. The methodology had been chosen to allow the committee to speak for itself and identify trouble spots they saw as in need of attention. Any points in the report emerged from the committee members and not the research team: asking me to elaborate on other people’s points was close to asking me
to mind read. However, because I was the author of the report, the assumption now was that I had become the ‘expert’ and had all the answers to all the questions.

For me this raised the spectre of validity—what if I had got it wrong? Would I be held responsible for the failure and break-up of the committee? Was I in any way accountable? In hindsight, I am now satisfied that the report was both externally and internally valid (Nachmias and Nachmias 1991), nevertheless, it was disconcerting to witness my report, which started life as (and still was as far as I was concerned) an academic exercise, being employed as a demolition tool. Equally, imagine my concern as I realized that my mirror-image findings, conducted by a supposedly apolitical and passive researcher had become an integral part of that wrecking crew.

The beginning of the end

The document from the group for change was circulated at the final committee meeting. Although the final document reflected both my original research work, and much of the discussions that had taken place amongst the group for change, my field notes show that the detailed proposals provided in this document had never been discussed in my presence. Two thoughts occurred to me: either there had been group for change meetings that I had been excluded from, or that there had been an agreement by the group that one person take responsibility for ‘fine-tuning’ the paper. Either way, the decision had been made in my absence; the document presented to the full committee did not reflect any discussions I had been party to. Yet, an interpretation of my original research was clearly at the root of the proposed changes. What disturbed me most was that one person had seized the chance to adapt my research to justify his own vision of the new committee.

However, this attempted coup was short lived. The chair completely dominated the meeting and began to put in place his vision of the new committee, again built around highly selective interpretations of my original evaluation. Whilst both the chair’s and the group for change proposals partially reflected my original work, it was apparent that the chair had focused on the small part of the original work that most appealed to him, with the group for change’s proposals coming a poor second, with the original work a distant third. Thus, in the same short meeting I witnessed the content and message of my original report undermined and twisted, with the findings of my work moulded to suit two very different ends, and arrive at two very different scenarios. However, somehow, both scenarios were justified by reference to the same piece of evaluation research. By this stage I was overwhelmed by the variety of interpretations one piece of work could provide.

This made me disillusioned and confused. I have to admit that when the committee decided to re-organize around my report I was nervous but flattered and excited as well. This, I thought, was what post-graduate social policy was all about: academic work shaping policy and practice. (I now apologise for this; ego and naiveté being in abundance at that stage of my
career.) Even during the group for change process I thought I would witness the creation of a dynamic and innovative committee, although it became apparent very quickly that the original evaluation was being hijacked by a number of factions and being interpreted in a variety of ways to suit numerous (cross) purposes and achieve one of many self-serving ends.

Frustratingly, I had tried to anticipate this in the original work. I had written a section where members from all agencies offered their suggestion as to a new-look committee. By doing this, I assumed I would prevent domination by one of the powerful factions. In reality, political power ensured that these wider suggestions were merely cherry picked by powerful factions to justify organizational and political ends previously hidden from me.

I was naïve. I assumed that I was aware of issues such as power, sponsorship, values and vested interests. I also assumed that my research was an apolitical mirror and thus could be used in an apolitical manner. I acted as a researcher and not a politician. I witnessed, and to some extent was culpable in, the subversion and perversion of an evaluation report by skilled political operators, determined to ensure that the problems highlighted by the research were addressed in terms of their own needs and visions. When I completed the report I felt satisfied that a passive, detached researcher had produced an objective evaluation of the committee. At that point I had not considered the implications of highly subjective interpretations of my work, or of the inherently political nature of conducting evaluation research.

Some concluding thoughts

The above account provides two points for discussion: the loss of control over the evaluation work and the change in role from passive researcher to active participant. Turning to the first point, I had little inkling as to what would happen to my work once I relinquished control. Moreover, as a researcher, I was not equipped to respond to, defend against, or regain control over my work once it became subverted by overt political attempts to control a powerful policy group. In a way, I felt used and abused by those I had researched. This inverts the warnings we are given as embryonic researchers. For me, there is a certain irony that we are provided with ample warnings about damaging the participants, but starved of warnings relating to the dangers of research on the researcher.¹

Admittedly, the abrupt change of role allowed me extended contact with committee and provided me with a close-up of the manner in which my work was employed. Arguably, most evaluation researchers do not have that opportunity. Subsequent research work in the evaluation field suggests that once the report is submitted the research team have little or no access to the reactions to, or repercussions of, their work. Most are spared the sight of their ‘objective’ work being interpreted subjectively and cited to justify any number of personal and political causes. This is perhaps just as well as watching your work being abused for unexpected (and in my case ideologically abhorrent) purposes is not an edifying sight.
Turning to my role, I was amazed at the speed at which I moved from ‘passive researcher’ to ‘active participant’. Moreover, I was equally surprised how, in the eyes of some powerful members of the committee, I seemed to change from a neutral and passive observer to an active and aligned participant. It was as if I had produced a weapon that enabled them to defend their own stance and attack other’s positions. By implication, I had become one of their ‘team’.

On deeper reflection, I now wonder if the distinction I imposed between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ is false, especially from the perspective of those being evaluated. I wish to argue that academics as a professional group impose those distinctions and they are not always recognized by those we research. If this is the case it raises questions about the manner in which we deal with the concepts of passive and active in the methodology literature, and, I would argue, is a point worthy of deeper consideration, especially given the proliferation of evaluation research.

The evaluation work discussed above began as a technical exercise, albeit rooted in academic rigour. My research training and (limited) experience convinced me that I could act as a passive, objective researcher, creating an apolitical mirror to reflect the views of the committee members. However, what I failed to understand was that, in the eyes of the powerful groups within the committee, the act of undertaking research rendered me ‘active’ and ‘participant’. The very act of engaging with the committee to undertake research made me part of the petty political (Pawson and Tilley 1997: 12, original emphasis) milieu surrounding the committee. In short, however much I tried, in the eyes of those being evaluated, my research was never going to be apolitical, and I was never going to be ‘passive’:

It is true that amongst the research community there is a recognition that once our work reaches the public domain we have very little control over it: ...social researchers may have to acknowledge that... despite their best efforts, they cannot guarantee to control the use to which their research might be put, nor to exercise full control over the process.

(May 1997: 61)

However, perhaps as a research community we need to pay greater attention to the fact that the selective interpretation of evaluation research holds the potential to justify $n$ number of options. This can cause problems for those researchers engaged in this work, especially if it leads to a distortion or partial use of the findings. Equally, although researchers can enter the research site with a determination to be passive and apolitical, not engaged and active, it may be the case that this ‘line’ is a construct of the research community that has no bearing on the ‘real life’ situation they are engaged in. Should that be the case, we may need to begin to re-evaluate the manner in which we prepare new social researchers undertaking evaluation research.

**Note**

1. That is not to say that I do not recognize and support the need to protect all research participants.
References


