Trust Matters: Distrust in an External Evaluation of a Public Sector Programme

This article draws upon autoethnographic data to explore distrust in an evaluation relationship, from the perspective of an external evaluator. The study is based within a local-level evaluation of an economic regeneration programme. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for trust and the evaluation relationship to be examined with time and process present - a gap in previous evaluation studies. The exploration demonstrates various causes and symptoms of distrust within one evaluation. It also shows the manifestation of anxiety that stakeholders may have towards an evaluation, and how this may lead to an evaluator being perceived as a danger. The article also reflects on the autoethnographic research approach adopted.

Keywords: programme evaluation, meta-evaluation, autoethnography, trust

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is commonplace in public sector activity, and at times it seems that 'everything' is being evaluated, whilst requiring an 'army of evaluators' to do so (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p.1). A report by the National Audit Office revealed that between 2010 and 2011 evaluation spend in government amounted to £44m, with further evaluation spend likely within 'research to support policy' expenditure (National Audit Office, 2013). Evaluation remains prominent as a mechanism to deliver evidence and prove public value (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2007; McCoy and Hargie, 2001; Sanderson, 2000; Stern, 2008) and also to support programme and policymakers to learn from evaluation findings[1] (Fitzpatrick, Christie, & Mark, 2009; Shaw and Faulkner, 2006).

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[1] Although arguably there are limitations around this such as the under-utilisation of evaluation findings, and matters of ill timing (Wond and Macaulay, 2010).

Against this wealth of evaluation activity in the UK public sector, are academic evaluation contributions that commonly explore methodological dilemmas, and reveal various and interesting evaluation findings in particular domains (education for instance). However, contributions that address the challenges of evaluation practice and the professional growth of evaluation professionals are less commonly addressed (despite professionalisation efforts by evaluation societies worldwide, including the UK Evaluation Society). This article, therefore, provides a meta-evaluative contribution (evaluation of evaluation), noted to be under-represented in existing evaluation literature (Shaw and Faulkner, 2006).

Further, this paper contributes more specifically to trust in evaluation, a vastly under-developed area that Norris (2007) notes as having received, 'little direct attention from evaluators' (p. 1). Finally, this article provides a longitudinal account of trust (where process and time are present) within an organisational setting, a gap noted by Huang and Wilkinson (2013): 'research on business relations and trust has been static…time and process are absent' (p. 455). The use of an auto-ethnographic approach allows for process and temporality to remain.

TRUST AND EVALUATION

Trust is a slippery concept and has been recognised as 'notoriously difficult to define' (Connell & Mannion, 2006, p. 334; Bluhm, 1987). Agreeing on a common meaning, if indeed one exists, appears equally challenging (Mouzas, Henneberg & Naude, 2007). Attempting to identify some commonality amongst these definitions of trust, several definitions are found that commonly refer to the 'positive expectations' that one person or party has of another (Boon & Holmes, 1991; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

Whilst programme evaluation in the public sector, arguably, has a role in supporting learning within programmes (Feinstein, 2002; Shaw & Faulkner, 2006), the majority of contributions concerning the purpose of public evaluation suggest that it supports demands for accountability, transparency and good governance (Barbier, 1999; Clarke, 2003, 2004; Davies, 1999; McCoy & Hargie, 2001;

Newman, 2002; Power, 1997; Sanderson, 2000; Schulberg & Jerrell, 1979; Shaw, 1999; Stern, 2008). The public sector context is important here; Jones, Kavanagh, Morgan, & Norton (2007) state that, 'in the last quarter-century…the efficiency and effectiveness of British government have been widely questioned' (p. 18). Requests for legitimacy, performance measurement and better general management in the public sector incited an era of new public management, and the imperative for evaluation was redefined (Hansson, 2006; Taylor, 2005). Criticism of public spend, driven regularly by the media, has amplified attention towards the use of 'public funds' and 'taxpayers' money' (Barbier, 1999, p. 378), and could be argued to have led to the need for the 'stewardship of public assets' through evaluation (Davies, 1999, p. 150).

The academic literature on trust in evaluation is fragmented and relatively under-developed (Norris, 2007). Norris' (2007) contribution (in Kushner & Norris 2007) made a significant step in presenting the relationship that trust has to evaluation. However, few contributions on trust and evaluation have followed since Norris'.

Research on trust (defining, managing, repairing) more generally has been extensively explored and applied in many contexts. Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman (1992, p. 82), in a market research context, link uncertainty to trust. This is supported widely (including in evaluation by Norris, 2007), for example, by Dietz and Hartog (2006, p. 560), who find 'predictability' to be significant to a trusting relationship. Further perspectives on trust identifiable within the literature could be said to stem from the notion of uncertainty, for instance exploring trust from an ethical perspective (e.g. where one party is *uncertain* that the other is, or has acted, ethically) (Grey & Garsten, 2001; Hosmer, 1995), trust through competence (e.g. where one party is *uncertain* that the other is performing, or able to perform, at a required level) (Barber, 1983; Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010), and the potential for harm to be created (e.g. where one party is *uncertain* that a healthy outcome will be created by the other) (Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010). Applied to evaluation, a great deal of uncertainty can be identified: the manner in which the evaluator will practise, the frankness of results, the consequences of the conclusions, and the risk of being judged to have not performed satisfactorily might all be

uncertainties that affect the trust felt by evaluation stakeholders. McCabe (1980) and McKie (2003) defined the need to 'judge' to be within an evaluator's scope, uncertainty around this judgement could result in an uneasy relationship, lacking trust. The examples just demonstrated assume that uncertainty is unconstructive; however, Coulson (2007) implies that uncertainty can be positive for an organisation and acts as 'a means of keeping an organisation on its toes' (p.234). Despite making individuals and organisations feel uncomfortable, it may well be that we need uncertainty to drive progress and enhance performance.

Why trust matters

There is a certain irony that evaluation is practised to assure trust in public programmes, and yet distrust of evaluation appears to exist (Norris, 2007).

McKie (2003) suggests that certain evaluation stakeholders, including project managers and evaluation commissioners 'can be reluctant to relinquish control' of information necessary to perform evaluation research (p. 309). Trust is required to ensure that evaluators are availed with the data (sometimes sensitive) needed to conduct their evaluation research.

Trust between the evaluator and other parties may also affect how evaluation findings are used; Moorman et al (1992) state that, 'one factor that distinguishes firms that merely possess information from those that use information is the level of trust users have in producers of information' (p. 81). As growing debates emerge on the under-utilisation of evaluation data (Weiss, Murphy-Graham, & Birkeland, 2005; Henry, 2000; Henry & Mark, 2003; Patton, 1997; Sanderson, 2000), it may be that trust, as well as the wider evaluator-evalautee relationship, needs to be explored to identify whether it has a part to play in this under-utilisation. Evaluators must instil confidence in their audience, and conduct themselves and their research well. Hawkins (1981), whilst considering the neutrality of the evaluator role in educational programmes, suggests that evaluators must gain the confidence of those involved in the evaluation, but that this may involve an evaluator fulfilling a number of roles (p. 102).

Trust is, therefore, important within evaluation if its findings are to be impactful and data must be high quality, accurate and credible, and evaluators, as data gatherers, need to be trusted.

EVALUATION CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

A single-site case study (common in ethnographic studies) of a local-level evaluation is the setting for this study. The evaluation was of a multi-million-pound economic regeneration programme in the United Kingdom, where I was the external evaluator. The economic regeneration programme comprised of a number of workstreams designed to support enterprise start-ups, enterprise education, business growth and inward investment. The programme team initially consisted of seven programme members, rising to twelve.

The specification and scope for the evaluation project provided by the programme's management were not particularly defined and specified that the evaluator was to 'develop a comprehensive evaluation framework and implement it'. As the programme was multi-faceted the methodology for the evaluation was designed with much diversity and included some creative components such as the use of survey paddles in school assemblies to measure pre- and post- awareness of the concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurship (through an interactive quiz), and more typical beneficiary surveys and interviews, and the collation of secondary data to feed national indicators.

The autoethnographic research utilised in this paper is part of a wider three-year ethnographic study that looked to capture an authentic view of evaluation, including the subtleties, experiences and interactions that occur in the evaluation setting (see Watson, 2011). Autoethnography is a particularly reflexive approach to research:

> Autoethnography epitomizes the reflexive turn of fieldwork for human study by (re-positioning) the researcher as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience (Crawford, 1996, p.167)

Being autoethnographic, the research shared the lived experience of me as Evaluator, capturing the 'complex interplay' (Rossman and Rallis, 1998) of several factors within the evaluation experience and allowing trust to observed and understood in its live context. Whilst evaluators may see the issues of distrust that occurred in this study frequently, a rich account that explores this is not present in the academic literature; autoethnography allowed me to deliver this account:

> As insiders in the social settings they study, auto-ethnographers have offered detailed descriptions and analyses of the dramaturgical construction of individual and collective identities and activities ranging from the mundane to the spectacular. (Anderson and Austin 2012, p. 136)

This auto-ethnographic account is presented in the first person, in order to best convey my observations.

I initially began recording data contemporaneously in paper-based field note journals. As the study progressed there were times when I felt that the presence of a paper journal was not appropriate and an electronic journal was also introduced and maintained. I also drew upon my personal diary in the analysis; I did not plan for this but became aware that ever more there were situations that were emerging within the evaluation context that I would divulge in my own personal reflections.

Measuring trust is noted to be difficult (Connell and Mannion, 2006). Any expressions of measure referred to in this study (generally high/low trust) are based on the prevalence of positive and negative thematic codes assigned to the field note data. I was able to confirm these through my sense of whether they were right or not, from the lived and felt experience.

The findings are thought to be generalisable beyond the economic regeneration context, and into the public sector more widely. Stakeholders within this programme appeared to be particularly concerned with whether the evaluation would provide positive results in order for continuation funding to be sought, this concern may be particular to the context and affect how generalizable these findings are.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the reliance on a single case evaluation provides only an insight into how trust looked in one evaluation; further research to understand the prominence of the phenomena reported in these findings across multiple evaluation studies is needed. Secondly and on a similar vein, it is recognised that there are critics of autoethnography, and Lake (2015) noted such challenges when trying to publish autoethnographic findings with some reviewers finding the research solipsistic. Whilst I understand this view, I believe there are distinct advantages to this approach, as already outlined, and not least in line with Lake's defence that, 'autoethnography is not an exercise in common-sense or self-indulgence rather an opportunity for practitioners to make their personal concerns public, and to help others through this process' (2015, p. 684).

FINDINGS

The Manifestation of Trust and Distrust

Looking back at my personal diary, in retrospect, I could see that my own concerns for trust had been present even before the evaluation had begun. These concerns centred on my perceived vulnerabilities around credibility and experience as a relatively novice evaluator, vulnerabilities that I felt could lead evaluation stakeholders to not trust my judgement or technical competence (as identified by Barber, 1983).

I analysed my field notes on a monthly basis but also summatively at the end of the study in order to report my wider study findings. It was during these analyses that I recognised that, whilst I hadn't explicitly labelled 'trust' within my field notes, indications of trust (or more precisely distrust) were emerging as a theme throughout my entries.

Trust and distrust appeared in two forms: action and discourse. Distrust indicated through discourse involved programme stakeholders directly questioning me about the evaluation, for instance, 'you will say good things (when reporting the evaluation findings)' (Programme Manager). Distrust emerging through action included the distancing of me from the programme and vital data.

Distrust and Evaluation Stakeholders

Upon analysing the field notes, all of the programme stakeholders were referred to at some point in the three-year study, stakeholders included programme beneficiaries, the programme board, the programme team, programme managers, councillors, and Borough Council representatives (economic regeneration; monitoring and compliance). All but the councillors and council representatives could be seen to reflect concerns that could be associated with trust.

Programme Managers (three in total throughout the three-year study) were noticeably referred to more frequently within the field note journals and emerged as the stakeholder group most likely to exhibit distrust. Programme managers were naturally concerned for programme performance and the opportunity for continuation funding, and this appeared to affect their regard for the evaluation:

> What is very obvious is that the programme needs me to assist in its survival – there is an understanding that if it does well then the funding will be extended by 7 years. Some people I have spoken to who have worked in regeneration and employment initiatives for a while are more apprehensive with an 'it'll never happen' attitude, they don't think the funding extension will happen (Programme Evaluator, Extract from field note journal)

The Programme Team demonstrated distrust through a small number of verbal indications, concerned primarily by how they might be reflected in the evaluation findings. Members of the programme team conveyed fears that the evaluation might predominantly identify the programme's downfalls. A vignette from my field note journal states:

> I think they (the programme team) feel I am out to spot the bad. So far, I think, I have only been constructive in my feedback to them - and all that has been formally reported has been positive (Programme Evaluator, Extract from field note journal)

Whilst evaluation may report on the progress of programmes, within this study there was a sense that the programme team felt very personally about this, with one programme team member commenting that I was there 'to report about' them (extract from field note journal).

Towards the third year of the programme, the Programme Manager raised concerns that a poor evaluation result would impact continuation funding (not the first time this concern had been surfaced), asking, 'you will say good things, won't you?' (Extract from field note journal). This suspicion might be related to the public sector culture within the specific case programme and further research might be needed to understand this observation.

The Chair of the Programme Board also demonstrated anxieties surrounding the evaluation on occasion. The Chair of the Programme Board was particularly forceful in these communications and had different views on the evaluation methodology than had been previously agreed.

Other stakeholder groups included the local authority, the local strategic partnership, and programme beneficiaries, but few indications of trust issues were observed, with the exception of one programme beneficiary concerned that any negative feedback would cause trouble for members of the programme team.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there appeared to be a correlation between vested interest in the programme and expressions of distrust (i.e. those closest to the programme demonstrated indications of distrust more frequently).

Trust Lifecycle

Fluctuations in trust and distrust were observed throughout the study and upon analysing the field notes there was a distinct shift in the general health of the relationship between me, as an evaluator, and the programme. Negative entries gradually grew and more data coded as 'trust-related' were found. The lifecycle of trust could be largely classified into five stages: trust develops; trust peaks; trust declines, trust improves (although to a small extent).

At the beginning of the evaluation, I noted a positive but not overly warm relationship with the programme team and felt that trust was developing and there had been no issues to have damaged

trust (as far as I was aware). I was cautious of the relationship that emerged, concerned at retaining a good level of independence; within my field notes, I conveyed concern that I did not 'want to over-step' my role and was cautious of being sweetened and being kept 'on-side'. The distance initially felt between myself and the programme team, I concluded, was healthy and professional. One member of the programme team did question my presence after the first operational meeting, suggesting that they didn't feel I should be privy to operational meetings.

There was little concern demonstrated for how I might progress the evaluation by the Programme Team and Management, which may have indicated that I was trusted to develop this as necessary. Indications of this developing relationship within the field notes span the first five months of the three-year evaluation. Developing over this period, were field note entries that described explicit attempts to involve, 'please', and keep me 'on-side'.

The arrival of a new programme manager nine months into the programme saw me become closer still to the programme. The Programme Manager asked for my input regularly and the evaluation contribution became more formative and I reported feeling like a 'critical friend' to the Programme Manager. The high level of involvement noted between 12 and 16 months into the evaluation (and the wider study) attracted very positive entries in the field notes, and there were few indications of trust on my part (as the evaluator) or on the part of the programme.

> Today was great. *L* invited me to join the team to conduct a drive-by survey of the area to identify regeneration opportunities…I was treated like one of the team and was invited to input. It was great to see *X (the programme)* being so proactive…I am not sure that I am meant to be so close to them and might need to think about just how close I should get. (Programme Evaluator, Extract from field note journal)

In particular, I described having good access to information and being welcomed to input regularly, although I did deliberate the extent to which independence should be maintained. As such, I felt that trust peaked at this point (13 months).

As the evaluation progressed, my relationship with the Programme Manager began to sour. I had been asked to complete additional reporting tasks unrelated to the evaluation and whilst providing some support and advice I eventually found that I had to push back and reminded the Programme Manager of the scope of the evaluation work. Further, I felt that I was being distanced from the programme as the Programme Manager made it more difficult for me to access programme data:

> I couldn't believe today. I went to ask D for the number of enquirers the programme has had this quarter and she asked me to talk to L first and told me that she wasn't allowed to give this data to me. I don't understand it – I have never had a problem and D has always provided this data without all of this fuss. I don't know what has happened to make this happen (Programme Evaluator, Extract from field note journal)

Previously I worked with the relevant member of the programme team to access data as I needed, however, the Programme Manager, I learned from a member of the programme team, had requested that I must seek her approval first, and gradually gaining permission for this access became more difficult. Physical access also became limited with the withdrawal of a desk, laptop, mobile phone and office access previously held. Reflecting on whether I may have broken the Programme Manager's trust I could not identify anything that may have led this breakdown. However, the programme was not performing as well as it had aimed in some areas, providing a possible explanation for this distance (to keep me at arms-length from any possible 'bad news'). In later discussions with a member of the programme team, it was reported that the Programme Manager had been concerned about the programme being reported negatively, and whether this would reflect poorly on the Programme Manager. As I was forced to conduct the evaluation from arms-length, the formative contribution of the evaluation was also seen to subside, previously my proximity to the programme had worked well in supporting the programme.

By around 20 months into the evaluation, my relationship with the Programme Manager was particularly poor and evaluation activity ceased for a short time. A new Programme Manager (the third during the programme) was appointed, an internal appointment from within the programme team. The new Programme Manager showed little interest in the way in which the evaluation was

performed, although did show interest in whether the evaluation could support the programme to secure continuation funding. The new Programme Manager did allow further data collection for this to happen. Through the professional distance afforded to me I felt that there was an improvement in trust.

Where trust was greater, access to data was also better, and stakeholders appeared interested; where trust was lower, data were difficult to access, and low interest in the evaluation was seen among stakeholders. The trust lifecycle observed within this study provides a temporal view of trust in the evaluation relationship.

CONCLUSION

Programme evaluators are employed to provide a true account of the performance of a programme, and, as such, trust is inherent to the existence of this activity. And yet, incongruously, evaluation can be a moderately distrustful environment, as this study reaffirms.

The Programme Managers demonstrated distrust more often than other stakeholders (other public sector leaders, the programme team, programme beneficiaries). This may suggest a link with the accountability and responsibility of Programme Managers and the surfacing of fear, distrust and suspicion. This aligns with Fiol's (2003) observations of trust: 'where the level of trust is low, people are gripped by worry and fear and use their energies to protect themselves and limit personal involvement' (p. 84). The explicit indications of poor trust related largely to the future of the programme and whether further funding would be gained to sustain it. The stakes of a poor evaluation result appeared high, threatening the continuity of the programme, and it was seen that this affected the response of stakeholders reliant on the programme (programme managers, programme team, and to a slight extent programme beneficiaries) towards the evaluation.

The longitudinal nature of the research allowed trust to be observed over a three-year period, and, over this period, trust (as well as interest in the evaluation, and access to evaluation data) peaked and

troughed. The impact of poor trust on the evaluation was considered to be highly detrimental to the success of the evaluation, for instance with data becoming less accessible over time.

Contributions on trust and evaluation have acknowledged that evaluation can be uncertain (Norris, 2007). The very nature of evaluation breeds these uncertainties with everything from the identity of the evaluator, the research approach, the style of reporting and the evaluation outcomes potentially being an unknown. I was able to identify with these uncertainties. However, within the umbrella of 'uncertainty', and I feel most significantly, I observed anxiety and fear towards the threat of a non-satisfactory evaluation outcome – the Evaluator was perceived as a danger. There is potential for an evaluator to report potentially damaging results about a programme and within this case evaluation this threat was particularly seen. Each of the Programme Manager's demonstrated concern for whether the evaluation outcomes would support the programme to gain continuation funding. Continuation funding was important to the programme, and like many programmes was dependent on the evaluation providing evidence that the programme had satisfied its objectives. This places an evaluator in a critical role where the future of support for a region, and the employment of the programme team could be at stake. Each programme manager exercised trust differently to support this cause: the first verbally expressed a need for the evaluation to support the continuation of the programme; the second used distance to move closer (and later further) from the evaluator; and, the third Programme Manager reinstated a slightly better level of trust than the last but with a specific scope about ensuring the continuity of the programme.

Despite scarce longitudinal contributions on trust and evaluation previously, the experiences shared through this research are not believed to be isolated. I shared some of my experiences with fellow evaluators and this alone yielded numerous disclosures of evaluation reports unwanted and never read, evaluators bullied out of their projects, and the robustness of evaluation methodologies compromised in order to ensure popularity (as preferred evaluation provider). And yet, these tales have seldom made their way into the academic literature for researchers to explore further and for evaluation commissioners to contemplate. For programme teams and evaluation commissioners, these

findings may serve to outline the high tensions that may run throughout an evaluation project, highlighting that a low trust evaluation relationship may not be a productive one. The contribution may also provide reassurance to evaluators that evaluation is not always harmonious.

Reflecting now on the use of autoethnography seen within this paper, I must admit that I feel particularly vulnerable to the doubting eyes of those who feel that autoethnography is perhaps a little too liberal, indulgent and confessional. However, I see a great deal of potential value, it has allowed for the trials and tribulations of evaluation that my evaluation peers regularly confess to, but that remain relatively under-represented within the extant literature, to be dispensed. In common with the pursuits of more 'acceptable' forms of research, it begins to fill the gap that currently exists in relation to evaluation and trust. And, if this autoethnographic account has raised more questions than it answers about trust in evaluation, and evaluation relationships, then it has provided a platform for further (perhaps more 'scientific') research to be conducted.

There are few signs of the UK public sector becoming less evaluative and these findings could be used to enhance the practice of evaluation and support its effectiveness. The utilisation of evaluation still remains a challenge and enhancing the relationship between the evaluator and evaluated may involve a better appreciation of the difficult roles that both public programme evaluators and public programme managers are required to play.

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