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Lessons for Researchers and Evaluators Working *in the Extreme*

Colleen Duggan and Kenneth Bush

This book has sought to explore the ways in which research, power and politics interact and have impacts in violently divided societies (VDS). In this concluding section, we direct our attention towards two questions. First, *what should we learn* when we cast our eye back over the preceding chapters, and when we sift through the thick, rich, detail of case studies, literature reviews, theoretical and methodological debates, and discussions of how to build this field of work? Second, what are the implications for the way we think about, undertake and assess the role and impact of research in VDS?

The Variable Roles of Evaluation and Research in VDS

The first and most obvious lesson to be learned is that in the absence of *good* evaluation of research in/on VDS, policy and programming decisions may come to be based on impressions, anecdotes, or worse, opaque political, economic or particularistic interests. However, as we see in Kelly's chapter on the evaluation of HIV/AIDS research in South Africa, even research that is methodologically sound and widely accepted may be challenged, ignored or actively rejected by power-brokers when it

conflicts with the cultural or social world views. So too is research likely to be rejected when it challenges entrenched political or economic interests. In such settings—regardless of evaluation—conditions are ripe for what Boden and Epstein (2006) have called *policy-based evidence making* as opposed to evidence-based policy-making.

On the other hand, we have seen in Healy and Healy's chapter that research and evaluations supported by Atlantic Philanthropies in Northern Ireland served as an important conduit for controlled communication between the divided communities of Suffolk and Lenadoon. In this case, the conduct and dissemination of research served as a bridge between violently divided communities. The evaluation of this research helped to depoliticise a politically fraught and volatile environment, and to increase the transparency—and ultimately, the legitimacy—of an innovative programme. As importantly, regular reports were produced in order to influence policy and practice in other similarly divided communities across the Northern Ireland. In other words, we see the strategic use of research, and its evaluation, to advocate for certain approaches to community relationship-building by disseminating concrete examples of real-time, good practice. In a similar way, we see that the accountability function of evaluation, if done *right*, will help to ensure that research benefits VDS while still meeting the reporting needs of funders (Whitty, Chapter 3). And finally, in Chapter 7, Zaveri illustrates how evaluation itself may constitute a form of research that challenges inequitable social structures.

In effect then, we have a number of very different examples of how research, power and politics may interact in VDS. We learn that political, economic and social interests may trump or dump research even when it has been evaluated as methodologically sound and necessary. We learn that evaluation and research may facilitate difficult conversations *and build incremental trust* in ways that bridge divided communities. We learn that evaluation may serve to challenge inequitable power structures, by shining a light on practices that sustain such imbalances implicitly or explicitly.

Thus, we find ourselves in an interesting position. To paraphrase the sociologist James Rule: We know a lot of things to be true about the inter-play of research, power and politics, but we do not know when they are going to be true. It is the second lesson to be learned from this book that helps us to better understand (and anticipate) when, why and how these phenomena interact.

The Importance of Context[1]

The second lesson of this book is the importance of integrating *context* into our understandings of, and approaches to, the evaluation of research in VDS. The risks of ignoring this fact are enormous. As Zaveri writes:

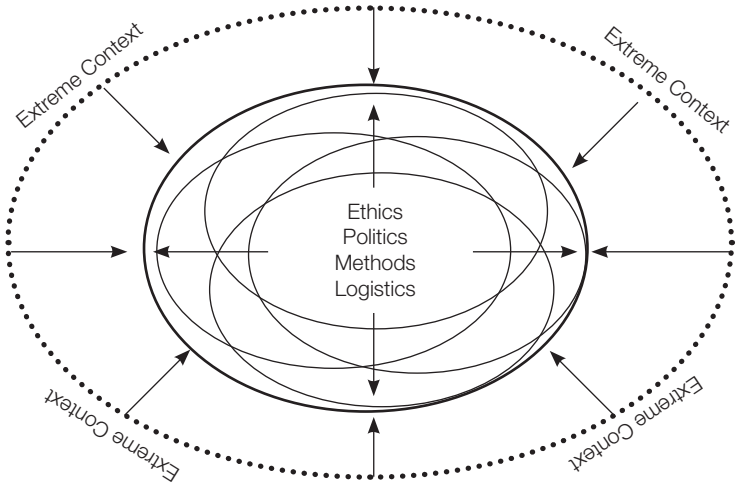
> In the dynamic world of VDS, ignoring context, especially in the presence of deep seated inequities, may erroneously promote strategies, policies, programmes that in the long run reinforce such inequities. The role of the evaluator becomes critical in such situations—using approaches and formulating questions that tease out these contextual changes can clearly contribute to more equitable, sensitive research in evaluation.

If, however, we are to put context into context, and if we are to understand the difference diverse contexts make, then we need to begin to tease out the thick details from context-specific studies—as we are attempting to do in this book.

In the introduction to this book, we identified four core domains of evaluation, namely the ethical, methodological, logistical and political (see Figure 1.2). The chapters in this book have offered a broad range of case studies and examples of how these dimensions are affected by the VDS context. What we have learned is that the relationships between the domains of evaluation and VDS context are fluid as well as interdependent**.** They may shift over time, particularly if conflict intensifies, which may serve to further constrain an evaluator's latitude of action. As volatility, risk, uncertainty and levels of potential harm increase—the four domains of evaluation are forced *into each other* so that decisions and actions in one domain inevitably affect all domains (see Figure 10.1).

When this happens, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for logistical issues (for example) to be addressed independently of the ethics, politics and evaluation method. While this dynamic may also be evident in non-VDS contexts, the difference here is the acute levels of risk (and potential harm) and the speed with which relatively minor problems (or miscalculations) in one domain may trigger a catastrophic chain reaction in other domains. This begins to shed light on why the evaluation of research (or of any activity) is so much more difficult in VDS—and, as importantly, why there can be such variability in the ways in which research, power and politics interact and generate myriad impacts in VDS.

Figure 10.1
The Amalgamation of Evaluation Domains in VDS as Intensity Increases



Source: Bush and Duggan (2013, p. 9).

Evaluation as a Fundamentally Political Activity

The evaluation of research in VDS is embedded in the political dynamics of the particular environment within which it is nested. This contextual fact unavoidably casts evaluation as a fundamentally political activity. Not because it possesses political intent or objectives (though it may), but because it will inevitably have political consequences within such an environment. Evaluators are confronted by multiple pressures emanating from diverse, intersecting, conflicts, as well as power imbalances, competing interests and their own value-systems. In this context, evaluators should be prepared for political complications and challenges throughout the evaluation process. Evaluators must, therefore, be prepared to undertake considerable (and constant) efforts to identify and understand how these various linkages are entangled with political and economic interests that interact with the conceptual, methodological, ethical and practical or logistic challenges that define this area of inquiry. This, of course, begs the question of how, exactly, evaluators should be prepared to deal with this complex uncertainty and volatility. The answer to this question is addressed in the next section.

Towards a VDS-ready Evaluator

One of the strong themes running through the chapters in this book is the question of the particular qualities needed by evaluators of research in/on VDS. Some of these qualities may be innate and some may be learned or nurtured. The emphasis on cultural humility by Jayawickrama and Strecker is a particularly important attribute for evaluators and researchers working in/on VDS. As they note: 'While the failure to demonstrate cultural humility can corrupt any evaluation or research setting, it poses particular ethical challenges within VDS and can lead to severe implications on both the process and the product of the study or evaluation.' Both Whitty and Knox (Chapters 3 and 5, respectively) call for a complementary characteristic in evaluators in VDS: self-consciousness and reflexivity. And, at an institutional level, a similar argument is developed by Healy and Healy in Chapter 8 that funders also have their own epistemological and methodological predilections which, when made explicit, shed light on what they do, and how and why they do it. Most eloquently, Zaveri writes:

> [Making evaluation more sensitive to the vulnerabilities of stakeholders] … requires greater sensitivity from the evaluator, and a deeper understanding of the context in which the programme is taking place. This goes *beyond* the terms of reference of the evaluation and suggests the need for systematic ethical questioning, at the least, by the evaluator. In such contexts, the qualities of the evaluator must include a detailed, politically informed, anthropological understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political structures and processes within the project environment—in addition to the usual set of technical evaluation skills expected of a professional evaluator.

When distilled into a list, the skill-set required of evaluators of research in VDS would go beyond the usual social science approaches and tools at the disposal of evaluators. In addition to the usual technical competencies of evaluators, the authors of this book have argued that they (or their team) need to possess:

- Sector-specific expertise and experience
- A well-calibrated moral compass and an appreciation of VDS-specific ethical challenges
- Political sensitivities, diplomacy and conflict resolution skills
- Peace and conflict research skills

- Anthropological, historical, political sensibilities
- In militarised zones, a technical knowledge of the structures, strategies, weapons and *behavioural patterns* of armed actors
- Knowledge and appreciation of the intersection of the political and ethnographic at local levels
- Cultural competence and cultural humility

The Ambivalent Relationship of Evaluation to Conflict

Zaveri explores the ways in which evaluative research may unearth instances where development interventions in VDS may affect harm in the name of good. The specific cases in her chapter focus on the potential increased vulnerability of children involved in child protection programmes. In both her chapter, and that of Jayawickrama and Strecker, the phenomenon of iatrogenesis enters our analytical frame of reference as a result of the application of evaluative research lenses. Recognising and responding to this pathology is particularly, and self-evidently, important for research and evaluation in VDS as a sine qua non for halting such programmes.

However, there is another less conspicuous—but no less ethically fraught—question suggested by this finding: If we recognise that such interventions may generate or subsidise corrosive structures and processes, are there instances where our research or evaluations must *necessarily* create conflict in order to problematise and change an inequitable status quo? What about that project that succeeds in increasing migrant workers' awareness of their rights, and which thus leads to the assertion of those rights by workers? But this, in turn, triggers a repressive crack down by authorities who seek to sustain their benefits from the maintenance of a fundamentally unjust status quo (through cheap labour, non-regulation of the workplace and so on). How does/should one use the findings of an evaluation or research which reveals this dynamic? Does it lead to the termination of this workers' rights project (or any self-labelled empowerment project) in the interests of stability—albeit a stability sustained through the maintenance of an exploitive economic and social system? Or does it galvanise support for workers against such practices? The answer to these questions in this case, and more generally, is rooted in what we call the final section, 'Extreme Ethics'.

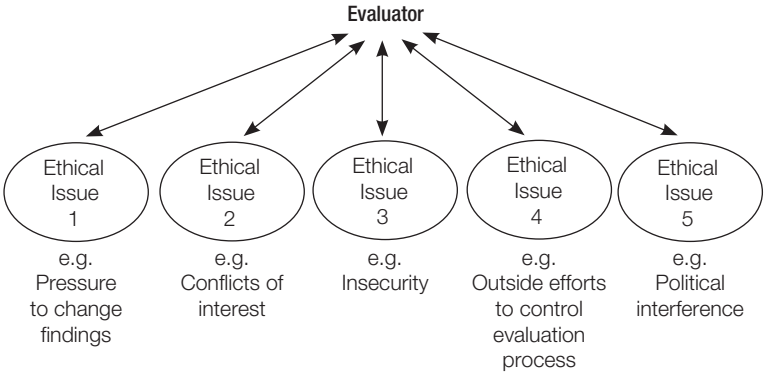
Extreme Ethics

The extreme context of VDS is infused with extreme ethical implications for evaluators and for researchers—more risks, greater risks and greater potential harm inherent in all decisions and actions. It is characterised by greater ethical fog. This is partly a result of the dynamic noted earlier (Figure 10.1). However, it is possible to identify an analogous process within the realm of evaluation ethics in VDS. Under normal conditions, evaluators tend to confront ethical challenges and dilemmas in a segmented or compartmentalised fashion, as illustrated in Figure 10.2.

However, the chapters in this book point to a different dynamic in VDS. The pressure cooker context of VDS *de-compartmentalises* ethics, as they meld into each other to become increasingly and inextricably dense, complex and interconnected, as illustrated in Figure 10.3.

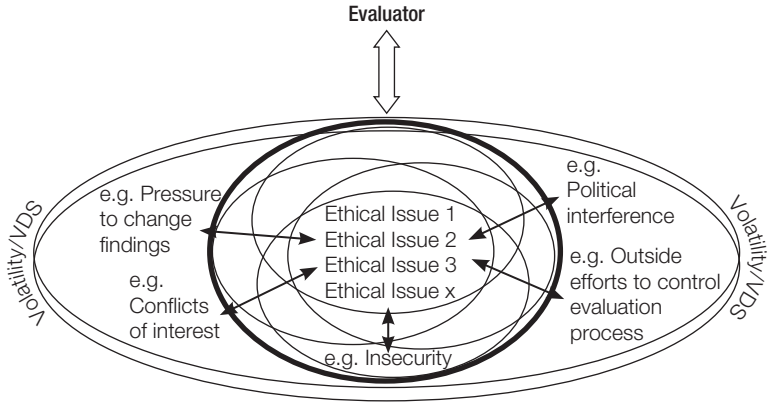
How do, or how should, evaluators and researchers address these particular challenges? Cultivating the personal and professional competencies listed earlier is a good place to start. However, a review of the 'ethical tipping points of evaluators in conflict zones' has highlighted the underdeveloped character of the ethical dimensions and training within the field of evaluation and, to a marginally less degree, of research (Duggan and Bush, 2014). Much work remains to be done in examining and understanding the ethical challenges confronting evaluators and researchers in VDS—and in finding strategies to anticipate and address them.

Figure 10.2
Ethical Issues in a Non-VDS Context: Segmented and Discrete



Source: Duggan and Bush (2014, p. 15).

Figure 10.3
Ethical Issues in a VDS: Conflated



Source: Duggan and Bush (2014, p. 16).

Final Thoughts

When we started this project, we worked very hard to ensure that it focused explicitly on the evaluation *of research* in VDS. Our belief was that, in the same way that a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun, we might be able to focus the analytical heat of the contributors to a point where their collective analysis might ignite greater understanding. In the course of this project, however, this metaphor shifted as we learned from each other. We realised that the project was actually about the application of multiple lenses to a common set of problems in much the same way that an optometrist drops a series of lenses in front of your eyes in a systematic process to reduce blurriness and increase clarity. Each of our chapters provided a slightly different lens with which to examine the ways in which research, power and politics combine to impact VDS:

- The evaluation of research (Kelly, Chapter 6)
- Evaluation as research (Zaveri, Chapter 7)
- Evaluation as accountability (Whitty, Chapter 3)
- Research on evaluation (McDermott et al., Chapter 2)
- Research in evaluations (Knox, Chapter 5)

- Research evaluation as ethical compass (Jayawickrama and Strecker, Chapter 4)
- Research evaluation as advocacy (Healy and Healy, Chapter 8)
- Research evaluation as institutional strengthening (Hay, Chapter 9)

Through the application of these lenses in this book, we have sought to better understand how research, power and politics interact in VDS. In so doing, we also seek to place this field of research and practice more centrally within the communities of researchers, evaluators, funders and practitioners. If there is one truth in this project—which is less contestable than others—it is this: Until there is a culture of systematic evaluation of research in and on VDS, we will limit our ability to understand the impact of research interventions—good, bad or indifferent. And, we will undermine our ability to harness research most effectively to address some of the most pressing problems confronting humankind today.

Note

1. This discussion of domains draws on our earlier work. See Bush and Duggan (2013).

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