



Utilization of internal evaluation results by community mental health organizations: Credibility in different forms



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ABSTRACT

Internal evaluations are numerous but the literature is largely focused on external evaluations. There have been few explorations of the factors affecting the use of findings from internal evaluations that are carried out by program staff in community organizations. This study examined the instrumental use of internal evaluation findings within 19 community mental health organizations in Ontario, Canada. All but one respondent reported instrumental use in their organization, using the evaluation findings to make program-related decisions. For these non-controversial programs, qualities such as the ability of internal evaluators to identify relevant information, their role/expertise within the organization and the consistency of evaluation findings with current understanding appeared to influence use more strongly than evaluator objectivity.

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1. Introduction

Over the past forty years, there has been an abundance of research interest in the utilization of evaluation findings (Amo & Cousins, 2009). Evaluation and evaluation utilization continues to be a matter of interest as community organizations are increasingly required to conduct program evaluations to demonstrate effectiveness for funding (York Institute for Health Research, 2009). Meanwhile, there are few explorations of the factors affecting the use of findings from internal evaluations that are carried out by program staff in community organizations. This study examined the use of internal evaluation findings within community mental health organizations in Ontario, Canada to better understand their impact and identify opportunities to make evaluation more relevant within this context.

1.1. Defining use

Owen (2006) highlights the main types of use prevalent in the literature as instrumental use, conceptual use, legitimitative use, symbolic use and process use. Instrumental use relates to the

direct use of evaluation findings in decision-making or problem solving, including changes to programs (Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Owen, 2006). Although the definition of use has broadened to encompass the psychological processing of evaluation results and influence, the focus here will be on instrumental use since this is tied to the most direct notion of the use of findings for decision-making (and for informing decision-makers) (Alkin, 1982; Cousins & Leithwood, 1986). The terms utilization and use were used interchangeably during the course of the study.

1.2. Factors affecting evaluation utilization

The literature spanning decades suggests that the factors affecting evaluation utilization in general can be characterized as falling within the three categories (Alkin & Taut, 2003): (1) human factors, (2) evaluation factors, and (3) context factors. Examples of human factors include competence or credibility of the evaluator; evaluation factors may include the quality of the report and its recommendations; while context factors could refer to characteristics of the management, organization or political climate (Alkin, Dailak, & White, 1979; Alkin & Law, 1980; Chelimsky, 1987; Cousins & Leithwood, 1986).

1.3. Internal evaluation and utilization

This study focussed on internal evaluation and, consequently, on the differences between internal and external evaluation.

Abbreviations: CMHA, Canadian Mental Health Association; MOB, Minding Our Bodies; YIHR, York Institute for Health Research.

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Internal evaluation is differentiated from external evaluation in that the evaluation is carried out by an organization's staff to provide their management with relevant information (Love, 1993). The number of internal evaluations has increased in North America, exceeding the number of external evaluations (Love, 1993) and there is some support for the notion that utilization is greater for internal rather than external evaluation. However the evaluation literature appears focused on external evaluation (Conley-Tyler, 2005). Some studies have discussed the merits of participatory evaluation, where internal staff play a role in the evaluation and may even carry out parts but under the direction of an external evaluator (Dawson & D'Amico, 1985; Greene, 1988; Turnbull, 1999). In other cases, internal evaluations discussed in the literature come from organizations where staff with expertise and knowledge in the area of evaluation form a separate evaluation unit whose primary function is to carry out internal evaluations (Goering & Wasylenki, 1993; Lyon, 1989; Minnet, 1999; Lambur, 2008; Reavy, Littell, Gonda, & O'Neill, 1993; Sonnichsen, 1988; Theodor & Dominic, 1993; Volkov, 2011). In contrast, this study aims to provide insights into the instrumental use of internal evaluation findings generated by program staff and/or managers in community organizations and the impact of factors thought to impact utilization in the literature.

High quality – the ability for evaluators to be objective, not biased by their personal opinions, and possessing knowledge of evaluation – was considered important for internal evaluation use (El-Husseiny & Earl, 1996). However, the literature suggests that establishing credibility and objectivity can be a challenge for internal evaluators, especially where multiple roles are involved, with a negative impact on use (Bourgeois, Hart, Townsend, & Gagné, 2011; Dawson & D'Amico, 1985; Goering & Wasylenki, 1993; Lyon, 1989). While external evaluators are assumed to be objective and accountable, internal evaluators need to establish these qualities through their work within the organization over time (Bourgeois et al., 2011; Conley-Tyler, 2005). Moreover, there are risks to credibility and evaluation quality for evaluators taking on multiple roles, which can ultimately affect the use of findings (Dawson & D'Amico, 1985; Goering & Wasylenki, 1993; Lyon, 1989). For example, the challenge of navigating political considerations and values are amplified for evaluators taking on multiple roles (Goering & Wasylenki, 1993). Evaluators in multiple roles may have difficulty finding acceptance by each “community” (Goering & Wasylenki, 1993). Relationships between evaluators and staff might also influence the evaluation process in a way that portrays staff favourably (Dawson & D'Amico, 1985). Similarly, participating staff might give greater weight to data or findings they have contributed to, regardless of the critical analysis (Dawson & D'Amico, 1985). These impacts should be considered, given the importance of evaluation quality in the general utilization literature above and the emphasis on evaluation quality in the context of internal evaluation by Torres (1990). Different types of credibility that can be claimed by internal and external evaluators are summarized in Table 1 and are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Despite the risks associated with the roles of the internal evaluator, the integration of the internal evaluator within the organization is thought to positively affect utilization (Bourgeois et al., 2011; Love, 1991). Internal evaluators can arrange findings for use according to their role/position in the organization and understanding of the organizational context (Cohen, 1977; Goering & Wasylenki, 1993; Love, 1991; Minnet, 1999; Preskill, 1994; Volkov, 2011). Because they may take on a number of roles within the organization, they can promote or influence utilization when they are also seen to be acting as program consultants, administrators or leaders (Cohen, 1977; Goering & Wasylenki, 1993; Minnet, 1999; Preskill, 1994). The ability of internal evaluators to inform different levels within an organization is thought to increase the utilization of evaluation findings (Love, 1991).

Sonnichsen (1998) argues that internal evaluators should advocate for the use of evaluation recommendations. Evaluators must then be integrated into the organization and preferably positioned to provide support to upper management in order to advocate for use (Cohen, 1977; Lambur, 2008; Sonnichsen, 1998) or even possess power and status themselves (Patton, 1997). This is supported by findings from Cox (1977) and El-Husseiny and Earl (1996) that management can strongly impact evaluation utilization. El-Husseiny and Earl (1996) found that management support, interest and involvement were key indicators of evaluation utilization among the 22 international and national development agencies they interviewed. Internal evaluators are advised to “take a management perspective” and to adapt to their organizations (Cox, 1977; Kennedy, 1983; Reavy et al., 1993; Winberg, 1991). It appears that striking a balance between independence and objectivity and connections to senior management can affect utilization for internal evaluators (Reavy et al., 1993).

The literature also suggests that a similar approach, participatory evaluation, whereby stakeholders participate in but do not wholly conduct the evaluation process, increases evaluation use (Cousins & Earl, 1992, 1995; Greene, 1988; Turnbull, 1999). Specifically, participatory approaches make findings more useful for end-users, provided that participants have adequate time to be involved (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Greene, 1988; Smith, 1980). Greene (1988) found that participation primed the perceptions and attitudes of users for utilization. Further, consistent with the overall discussion of human factors above, the commitment of individual users was also flagged as a major factor contributing to evaluation utilization in the small, local human service organizations studied by Greene (1988).

Two empirical studies of internal evaluation in service organizations suggest that evaluation utilization in organizations is also impacted by resource limitations (DiNitto, McNeece, & Johnson, 1984; El-Husseiny & Earl, 1996). El-Husseiny and Earl (1996) found that evaluations and recommendations for development organizations should be practical and keep in mind the availability of resources. In a study of decision-making in community health agencies, DiNitto et al. (1984) found that the

Table 1
Characteristics of internal and external evaluators and their associated forms of credibility.

| Evaluation type | Characteristics | Credibility as |
|---------------------|---|--|
| External evaluators | Independence (separate from evaluand) Evaluation expertise | Objectivity Evaluation quality |
| Internal evaluators | Role/position in organization; subject-matter/program expertise Knowledge of and involvement in program; ability to draw on many sources of information Program involvement; ability to see impact of program outside scope of evaluation | Trust of colleagues Provision of information relevant (to organization) Confirmation of organizational beliefs |

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