

De-colonising health program evaluation mindsets and methods

Aboriginal health organisations need evidence of what works, who it works for and how it needs is best delivered. Research falls short because studies are done under ideal conditions, ignoring Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. We used de-colonising methods to evaluate programs to see if they were strong enough to be effective and identify opportunities for improvement. I will reflect on what was different about our 'decolonising' evaluation approach, sharing tools and processes I found useful.

Abstract

CDU's Molly Wardaguga Research Centre was invited by Waminda, a First Nations community-controlled health service, to partner in the evaluation of their women's health programs. The researchers, Waminda staff and community women formed an evaluation leadership group to guide and take shared responsibility for the evaluation projects. The aim of this study was to develop and apply decolonising research approaches, practices, tools, methods and mindsets to a study of program effectiveness. Initially the evaluation leadership group identified potential benefits and research impacts at an individual, organisation and community level. The group collectively reviewed various methods and discussed Yuin Nation and Western approaches to collaboratively determine their appropriateness. Yuin Nation women's ways of knowing, being, and doing, and Indigenous leadership were privileged to co-create evaluation plans, findings and recommendations.

The project produced context-specific tools to decolonise evaluation mindsets and methods. The project invested in reciprocity and developed a system to exchange (as opposed to simply build) capacity for research and evaluative thinking. The project implemented regular 'benefit check-ins' and found they were an effective practice for collectively reflecting on what was working, sharing feedback and maintaining a strengths-based approach to the evaluations. The study provides evidence of how program evaluation can be re-conceptualised, and mindsets and methods shifted to dismantle oppressive practices in academia, support self-determination and produce robust findings, actionable recommendations and contextualised evidence of program value.