**Ngaripirliga’ajirri: Cross-Cultural Issues in Evaluating an Indigenous Early Intervention Program**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the social, methodological and operational dimensions of an adaptation of the Exploring Together program for primary school age children in three remote communities of Northern Australia. This program, whose goal is to identify, address and reduce the incidence of conduct disorders in schools and families of Indigenous children, raises a host of cross-cultural issues of both programmatic and theoretical interest. The cross-cultural implementation of the program is seen to expose to critical scrutiny many of the assumptions of social-psychological interventions, such as the spatial and temporal separation, between the institutional forms of family, school and community, between formal and informal relationships between parents, teachers and health professionals. Above all, this intervention problematises the nature of the boundaries between the format of mainstream programs and their cross-cultural realisations. These conflicting currents are examined in the terms of a social realist perspective (Pawson and Tilley 2000), from which a typology of evaluative methodologies of intervention strategies is derived.

**Introduction**

*Ngaripirliga’ajirri* is the Tiwi word meaning “helping each other to clear a path”, chosen by the Tiwi Health Board to refer to the Tiwi adaptation of the Exploring Together program, delivered in the primary schools of three island communities between 2001 and 2004. This program emerged from a series of workshops on suicide prevention, convened by the Tiwi Health Board in response to a perceived crisis among young Tiwi people after the Northern Territory Coroner’s report on four suicides in the largest community, Nguiu, in 1998. The program is a highly structured, multi-group...
intervention, based on group-therapeutic principles which combines training in social and parenting skills and problem solving for children, developed originally for the Victorian Parenting Centre (Littlefield et al. 2000). The program was funded initially for two years through the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health as part of the Tiwi Life Promotion project. Funding was extended to 2003/2004 by beyondblue inc and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. A team consisting of a non-Tiwi Program Manager and four to six Tiwi team members was employed by the Tiwi Health Board to deliver the Program. The Tiwi Life Promotion Evaluation Team was located at the Charles Darwin University; it collaborated with the Tiwi team to adapt and deliver the program and evaluated the program’s outcomes. The evaluation team was supported by funding provided by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health (CRCATH) and the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services (NT DHCS).

Since the Exploring Together program had never been adapted for use in comparable cross-cultural settings, the challenges in the implementation, delivery and evaluation in a traditionally-oriented remote community in the Tiwi Islands, situated to the north of Darwin, were considerable. However, these challenges were met, with the strong support of the Tiwi schools, parents and community bodies with the result that a version of the program for Indigenous preschool and early primary school children has been funded for four years (2005-8) by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The Tiwi Community Context

Traditional Tiwi society, the subject of a number of ethnographies (Goodale 1971; Hart and Pilling 1960; Robinson 1995, 1997) rests on a concurrent system of exogamous matrilineal clans, while patrilineal identifications permeate ritual life and conceptions of landownership, or “country”. Although some marriages still occur as a result of semi-traditional bestowal-like arrangements, since the middle of the twentieth century, the traditional system has been substantially replaced by one based on
monogamy, leading to a situation in which children are increasingly born to partnerships between young persons, or persons not in any stable conjugal partnership (Robinson 1997; cf Burbank and Chisholm 1989).

Though formal or “classificatory” kinship terminology does not always provide a clear guide to family ties, in general terms, it defines the idioms of respect within which people interact in the program, as in everyday life. In addition to the persistence of traditional and semi-traditional patterns of kinship, there are many mixed parenting relationships based on marriage or cohabitation between Tiwi and non-Tiwi Aboriginal persons, or between Tiwi and non-Aboriginal persons, as well as many families in which one or both persons identify as either a member of, or as descendants of, the ‘Stolen Generations’ who were raised in the mission stations on the Islands. This amounts to considerable diversity and instability in family structures, cultural orientation and degrees of nucleation in patterns of affiliation and residence.

The immediate challenges were as follows:

- Tiwi parenting and family process varies significantly from the patterns of parental authority and responsibility based around a stable parent-child dyad in small families presupposed by Exploring Together.

- Problem behaviours may not be perceived as such by Tiwi people and may not be amenable to expected or desired patterns of communication; notions of child development implying causal links between family processes, parenting and child conduct and "disorder" may be foreign to Tiwi thinking, so that the capacity to speak about child behaviours in specific terms would need to be developed.

- The revised program theory and methodology would need to be taken up by a team to varying degrees unfamiliar with the Tiwi cultural context and idioms of communication and interaction, patterns of problem-recognition, and lacking
This paper attempts to identify the tensions between the assumptions underlying the evaluative framework of the Exploring Together Program and the social and cultural context of the Tiwi Islands communities and explores the implications of this account for developing sociological insights into the problematic and logic of cross-cultural evaluation design.

Program and Context: the Background to an Evaluative Design

The Exploring Together program is a school-based, eight to ten week multi-group program (parents, children and parents plus children) that treats conduct disorder or behavioural difficulties of teacher-referred children, aged 7 to 12 yrs (Littlefield et al., 2000: 1-3; Robinson and Tyler, 2004: 29). Based on accepted principles of developmental psychology, primarily its aim is to reduce overt or “acting out” problem behaviours, as well as the other disorders associated with anxiety or depression by improving parent-child communication and parenting strategies, focusing on anger management and social skills training in a group environment. The rationale of the program is that early intervention depends on treating parenting strategies and children’s social and emotional difficulties together, utilizing cognitive-behavioural content as a vehicle for a group-therapeutic process. The program has been evaluated both in Victoria and nationally and has been shown to result in statistically significant reductions in problem behaviours and emotional conditions, improvements in social skills and self-concept (Robinson and Tyler 2004: 29; Hemphill and Littlefield 2001), and in improved parent-child interaction.

Tiwi Adaptation of Process

In the Tiwi adaptation (See Fig. 1), children were referred by teachers in groups of 5-7 in the school term preceding the one in which the program was to be run. The program was implemented for an eight week period for two hours per week in school time.
Parents were approached for consent and the confidentiality provisions were explained and strictly enforced. At the commencement of the program, questionnaires were administered to parents and teachers. Children met as a group with two facilitators including Tiwi assistants, for one hour per week, while a group of one parent of each child met during the same hour. At the end of the hour, children, parents and facilitators met as a combined group for one hour. The children’s program consisted of social skills training, often relying on the “Stop, Think, Do” program (Peterson and Gannoni 2000), while the parents’ content drew on topics relating to emotional management, exploration of family issues and development of strategies for response to individual children (Robinson and Tyler 2004: 30). The combined program consisted of direct dialogue and role play between parents, children and group leaders.

Community or Society of Strangers: intervention logic and ongoing relationships

In general, both the Project and the Evaluation Teams attempted as much as possible to maintain the integrity of the original program. However, this intervention could not be delivered to individuals without regard for the context of their ongoing relationships in a distinct socio-cultural setting. This is reflected in the process of engagement in the communities, the building of a team consisting of Tiwi persons able to actively participate in the process of delivery and the process of referral and inclusion of children and parents as participants in the program. These themes were evident in the processes put in place for regulating boundaries in a community where, unlike urban settings, all participants have some form of long-term acquaintance, traditional kinship relationship, or connectedness through family and peer networks. In a program which focuses on family relationships, the management of tensions between professional purpose and participants’ relationships was central to the successful implementation of the program (Robinson and Tyler 2004: 32-36).

As the program became established, the procedures of initial referral and group selection were widened; parents began to refer their children and step-children, with these referrals treated in the same way as those from teachers. Principles of selection
were widened to consider kinship and peer group connections as well as the specific circumstances of each child. At times, the referral process could not avoid almost direct importation of schoolyard and/or kin or family-based antagonisms or alliances. Selection depended on a knowledge of these background relationships, though sometimes these were not detectable at the beginning of the program. Other considerations for inclusion were based on traditional “avoidance relationships”, as between male and female siblings (either actual or classificatory), aunts and nephews, as well as other pairs which traditionally avoid direct contact. Since spouses are often important intermediaries across kinship lines, attendance of both spouses sometimes resolved anxieties generated by avoidance relationships, however, at the cost of directly introducing marriage dynamics into the group situation. Group selection depended heavily on the assistance of Tiwi team members to assess these issues. Screening of children on the grounds of some medical or disabling condition also was part of the selection process, often resulting in referral for specialist treatment (such as for severe speech or hearing impediments), while factors within internal family relationships such as their experience of stress due to violence, suicide or alcohol or substance abuse, were considered during selection, these were never by themselves criteria for exclusion. In summary, apart from those with an assessable disability, it was children with severely disorganised or dysfunctional family backgrounds and without ‘serious adult interest’ in their behaviour who were not likely to be included in the program (Robinson and Tyler, 2004: 35). In all the instances described, the advice of the Indigenous team members was crucial.

Considerations of relationship and context did not merely affect the selection process: they also represented both constraint and potential in the development of the group work methodology. It was only possible to work with Tiwi families through the development of strategies for talking about ongoing relationships with reference to their cultural, normative meanings, as well as to their personal, developmentally relevant meanings. The result was a reorientation of elements of the cognitive-behavioural focus of the program to a focus on family systems and networks, as a basis for group work discussion of child behaviour and parenting (Robinson 2005).
Towards a Logic of Cross-cultural Evaluation

Issues derived from a consideration of ongoing relationships in the context of intervention have been repressed or marginalised in a discursive framework which focuses on individual outcomes, even if these should show a significant decline in perceived conduct or behavioural “disorders”. There is a vast literature reporting the outcomes of parent- and child-focused interventions associated with early intervention strategies such as Headstart in the US, Surestart in the UK and Positive Parenting Programs in Australia (Saunders 2003). The many randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental intervention studies report minimally on context and process. Cultural context is operationalised in correlational analyses – for example, in outcomes of an intervention with Hispanic- or African-American populations - but rarely understood as part of the intervention itself, in the sense that it interacts in complex ways with the operation of the intervention processes and mechanisms and contributes to outcomes in its own right.

These problems are identified by Pawson and Tilley (2000: 12-13) in their formulation of a social realist basis for evaluation research. In this conception of the causal logic of intervention, intervention is a social experiment, and as such must be distinguished from the natural scientific experiment upon which intervention science is modelled.

\[ \text{mechanism} + \text{context} = \text{outcome} \]

The total social experiment is the interaction between intervention mechanisms and context – not an intervention in which context is excluded as a series of controlled-for variables. What, in the context of the *Ngaripirli ga’ajirri*, is intervention, and what, context? It is helpful to overview the core components of the intervention and the evaluation strategy adopted.

1. The developers of *Ngaripirli ga’ajirri* were simultaneously immersed in differentiated activities at multiple levels:
2. a general process of community engagement and engagement with service providers as the context of team-building
3. a process of approach to individual parents to enlist them in the process
4. a series of repeated, quasi-clinical encounters with groups of parents and children over ten weeks
5. ongoing consolidation of a process, adaptation of cognitive-behavioural content and therapeutic approach in response to meanings generated in the closed “treatment” setting
6. development of an evaluative framework based on a combination of interpretive case analysis and ethnographic observation with an embedded time series research design which simultaneously took on the challenge of adapting, creating and validating psychometric instruments to measure outcomes as observed/reported by teachers and parents.

The creation of an embedded time series research design relying on psychometric measurement, combined with an orientation to the adapted program manual, provided the core mechanisms of the intervention procedure, around which its professional disciplines, time management, inclusion criteria, etc. was integral to the framework. At the same time, this was a pragmatic process in which there was feedback between the ongoing development and validation of the instruments and manuals and the team’s efforts to operate within this structure in the relationship contexts outlined.
Figure 1  The Program Logic of *Ngaripirliga'ajirri*

Current school and community services environment: patchy access to special services, limited community involvement and little focus on prevention, cultural competence, etc.

**Cultural and social context:**
demography; traditions and cultures; peer groups; family and household function; suicide, violence, alcohol etc

**Child conduct and development:**
attachment and early developmental experience; parenting; family functioning; parent functioning in the Tiwi setting.

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**Adaptation of intervention model and Aboriginal participation**

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**Referral**
Interviews, consents etc

**Waiting list**

**Startup:**
behaviour measures

**Program:**
eight – ten weeks multi-group program: parents’ group, children’s group and combined

**Program conclusion**
behaviour measures

**Six month follow-up**

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**Change mechanisms**

Intermediate: formation of supportive relationships: community acceptance
Intermediate: improved service access and follow-up targeting parent involvement

Direct: group work targeting children’s anxieties, social competences, behaviours
Direct: group work targeting parenting, partner involvement, parent responsiveness
Direct: group work targeting parent-child interaction

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**Outcomes**

**Improved parental confidence and assertiveness; reduced parental stress; improved parent-child interaction**

**Improved child behaviour, reduced anxiety, aggression and impulsivity; improved social competence.**

**At follow-up**

School involvement, educational and social outcomes for children and parents

Cost-effective, sustainable program model embedded in schools and services; improved service configuration; better identification of needs; culturally responsive; community involvement.
Pawson and Tilley (2000) apply scientific realist theory to redefine the experimentalists task as entailing manipulation of the entire experimental system, rather than, as postulated in the classical experimental design, “simply activating an independent variable and watching for its effect (2000:60)”. This model seems to be particularly appropriate in the case of *Ngaripirliga’ajirri*, which could be seen as an active, multi-level “conjectured configuration” (2000:77) of the relationships underpinning the intervention process at some levels, and the capacity of that process at other levels to generate valid meanings relating to process and outcomes. It was important to understand that this collaborative effort could not have been achieved within the fictions of a separately funded external evaluation, cherished by governments today. While these may be conducted with a great deal of technical competence, they almost always fail to generate any credible, evidence-backed understanding of the relationship between context and intervention, or to contribute to the reflexive embedding of an intervention in its intended context. It was our belief that “culturally appropriate” adaptations of intervention strategies often throw out the baby – the professionally disciplined, theoretically founded program - with the bathwater of culturally inappropriate content. For these reasons the task ahead is to identify and position the “conjectured configuration” of the interplay between “mechanism” and “context” (or, in this case, program and community), in scientific realist terms, the set of regulative principles or underlying rules by which the program has been conceived and implemented. The character of this configuration of regulative principles of an evaluative design may be defined as its “modality”.

The developmental and evaluative design modality for this intervention might therefore be positioned as a “strategic embedding”, rather than culturally-specific revisionism. This experience exposes the general problematic of evaluating such interventions as these, which are essentially replicative studies, concerned primarily with the delocation and recontextualisation of an established set of mechanisms which usually come in a closely programmed, or even “packaged” format (Bauman et al., 1991). In this case, although the evaluative modality retained a modified psychometric component based on a time series design, it also employed a range of in-depth case studies, participant
observations and community-based consultations and interviews. The benefits of this modality are reaped, therefore, not by denying context (or assuming that it can be neutralized by randomized experimental designs), but rather by incorporating it flexibly within a culturally and professionally competent intervention program.

When the realist formula is applied to the boundary management strategies employed by cross-cultural intervention, a more comprehensive range of evaluation possibilities emerges. The matrix below (Figure 2) proposes a typology of modalities of evaluation designs specific to replicative interventions. This typology is generated by an interplay between two dimensions: (a) one which represents the differential weight placed on “mechanism” or treatment, versus “context” as the determinant of outcome within the design of the original program, and (b) another which represents the varying strength of the boundary-management rules (openness/closure, rigidity/flexibility) which underpin the way a program is recontextualised. Each of these can be seen to be congruent with a particular methodology, ranging from classical experimental designs to the constructivist and relativist approaches.

**Figure 2 Modalities of Evaluation Design in Replicative Interventions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Boundary Rules</th>
<th>Weak Boundary Rules</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism Dominant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Context Dominant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmodified Replication</td>
<td>“Contextualised” Replication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Classical OXO designs)</td>
<td>(Quasi-experimental designs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Cultural Relocation (Multiple Research Methods)</td>
<td>“Culturally-Appropriate” Revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(constructivist approaches)</td>
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This emphasis on *modality*, which represents a “conjectured configuration” of underlying regulative principles of the relationships between mechanism and context, captures the unique logic of the evaluative process more faithfully than one based on the effects of historical, social and political condition which are usually privileged by sociological critique (though is does not by any means exclude these exogenous influences). The four modalities of this schema also differ from Tilley’s (1993) three-fold typology of replicative evaluation methodologies (“strict”, “relativist”, “scientific
realist”), in that each modality is based on the internal logic of the realist formula: i.e. “mechanism + context = outcomes”, and of the generative possibilities of interplay between the characteristics of these constitutive elements.

Conclusion

According to Pawson and Tilley, the first admission of an evaluator is “to acknowledge that the very act of engaging in evaluation constitutes a political statement” (2000: 12), since the reformist goal is to address events or processes that have already been defined as “social problems”. Within this context, they see evaluations as “petty political”, involving themselves with the efficacy of localised “treatments” that ensure the better functioning of “systems”, while failing to challenge the structural inadequacies of service provision and the accompanying professional constructions of need in a given socio-cultural and political-bureaucratic context. Researchers have too often accepted the political reality of their efforts to the extent that “a utilization-focused approach became canonised (their italics) as a fully-fledged alternative to the ‘traditional paradigm’ (2000:13). The latter alternative refers to the experimental and quasi-experimental method which has been the foundational standard of mainstream research as expounded by writers such as Campbell and colleagues (1963) and which has dominated evaluation research in post-World War II social science. Unfortunately, social scientists are often constrained by funding priorities to engage more deeply in policy-making research, to remain methodologically “professional” in a purely utilitarian sense, and to bury social-scientific training in marketing their analytical skills to government and industry as craft. The pressures on research activity that valorise relevance over meaning and utility over reflection are immense, and are often accepted without demur in the mercerized environment of knowledge production of today’s universities and research institutes.

In terms of the political process, the developers and evaluators of Ngaripirliga’ajirri have had to undertake a complex series of balancing acts between stakeholder interests to continue an open-ended, exploratory process of research and community engagement. Governments are interested in a cost-effective and sustainable intervention, to which
they can recruit and train staff, and which optimally adds to their credentials in responding to the social emergency of Aboriginal outcomes. Aboriginal community organizations want to deal with serious social problems and need access to professionally competent strategies to do so. They too need to be credible performers in the legitimation game, to demonstrate that they deserve government support. However, they also want to enhance the capacity of the communities to participate in their own development; they want jobs and opportunities for community members, as well as the intended program outcomes. In this case, the intervention team has to “sell” its product credibly to all of these potential interests: equally importantly, it has to sell its questions, render its “conjecture” plausible, rather than sell the specific intervention products, (the reports against key performance indicators, analyses of impact and outcomes, written up program manuals and instruments, etc.). There are many potential diversions and distractions in these processes, and it takes a great deal of conviction, a great deal of tolerance of uncertainty to persist with an open-ended but still evidence-guided strategy as a basis for engagement within a given community or population.

Footnotes

1 In purely administrative terms, it was found necessary to make the following adaptation: (1) language – because English is a second language to many of the parents, much of the discussion between the parents and the facilitators was conducted in the Tiwi language; (2) the program was reduced from ten to eight weeks, with the ninth week being mainly devoted to post-treatment behaviour rating questionnaires for parents, teachers and children, with six month follow-up rating and interviews; (3) considerable informal work was undertaken to negotiate and establish the willingness of parents or other kin to participate in the program, which often involved approaches to employers to secure time off with pay for parents who wished to participate; (4) the addition of individual prizes for children, as well as other incentives for participation such as barbeque lunches and raffles which included a donated air ticket from a local airline.

References


