What counts? Who counts? Ethical evaluation in access and participation

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Abstract

In England, evaluation of access and participation work has become a regulatory expectation in higher education (HE), with the goal of producing 'learning' to influence practice. As demand for the product of evaluation has grown, guidance for evaluators has focused on methods, with limited reference to evaluation ethics. This is despite research pointing to the importance for who is included in evaluation and for how evidence, knowledge and different values are distributed. Where ethics guidance exists, it focuses on defining ethical evaluation practices and securing ethical approval in an HE context. There is little space for the everyday ethics in navigating the power structures of institutions, the pressures of marketized HE, or the sense of responsibility that can come from inviting people's stories.

This paper explores the co-researched experiences of thirteen evaluators working in this context and how they navigate ethical challenges, looking beyond individuals determining ethical conduct to considering the powers that enable or constrain it. We argue for evaluation ethics that considers evaluation as a process, not product, and situates the evaluator in a network of responsible parties. We also point to the value of relationships in creating space for ethical considerations that can support evaluation for social justice.

Keywords: ethical dilemmas and conflicts; widening participation; evaluation practice

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Introduction

Evaluation is not a neutral endeavour. The work of evaluators can exert influence over policy, social programming, and learning, and the conduct of evaluations can shape how the activities subject to evaluation are valued (Onyura et al. 2023). Unsurprisingly, the ethics of evaluation, including norms of ethical conduct and the weight given to different ethical concerns, has therefore been of interest to evaluators and evaluation scholars for several decades (e.g. Schwandt, 2017; Picciotto, 2021). Despite this, there are not consistent frameworks or agreed norms for ethical evaluation, nor consistent training or resources for evaluators to draw on. Instead, where they exist, there are multiple organisational and professional guidelines with limited formal training or familiarisation to support these. These guidelines can also be ill-equipped to tackle the ethical issues currently facing evaluation as a profession, as they make little reference to context, focusing primarily on the ethical practice of the evaluator (Picciotto 2021).

Evaluation as a professional practice has a widely agreed intent to contribute to public good and social change (Greene 2005). However, it has faced challenge to and critique of its effectiveness in this role, particularly in a context where evaluation has become highly politicised and a market good (Picciotto 2021). In access and participation work, evaluation has been situated by state regulators and commissioners as a techno-rational approach to identify the economic and social value of higher education participation, often within narrow parameters. Even where individual evaluators or institutions may hold different values, they frequently operate in environments where a new public management approach to evaluation is entrenched, impacting on methodological choices, resources, and who evaluation is permitted to serve (Gordon, Lumb, Bunn & Burke 2022). In this environment, discussion of evaluation ethics becomes ever more important as part of the professional practice of evaluation, and for establishing the value(s) of evaluation for equity. As noted by Thomas Schwandt, ‘The field cannot simply posit that evaluation serves a social good without making it clear what it understands that to be.’ (2018 p. 234).

Access and Participation Evaluation in England

As in many other countries, access and participation (AP), or action to widen participation and success in higher education, has been a policy of successive governments in England for over 20 years as part of a range of policies to increase social mobility. Participation in higher education (HE) has both individual benefits in terms of a graduate premium on salary (Anderson & Nelson 2021) and broader societal benefits through increasing human capital and contributing to economic growth (Bowl et al. 2018). However, these benefits are unevenly distributed, with persistent differences in terms of applications, enrolment, completion and degree outcomes from HE between social groups (Social Mobility Commission 2024). As part of addressing this inequality, the HE regulator for England, the Office for Students (OfS) requires HE institutions to produce and have approved an ‘access and participation plan’ (APP) that sets out ‘interventions’ to reduce gaps in outcomes between different social groups e.g. closing gaps in rates of HE completion between mature and young student groups. In addition to setting out specific actions for activity, higher education institutions (HEIs) are also required to make commitments to evaluate their activities and to publish evaluation findings in some form (Moores et al. 2023). This forms part of an

ambition by the regulator to create a 'higher education evaluation library', where evaluations can be shared to 'support the sector to improve the impact of its equality of opportunity activities by drawing on the best evidence' (Office for Students 2024).

This requirement to share evaluation, implemented from 2024, has placed greater internal and external scrutiny on evaluation practice, including ethical practice. Some HE institutions have responded by attempting to integrate or align AP evaluation into institutional research ethics structures, where these exist. Additionally, research ethics guidance targeted at AP evaluators was published in 2022 by TASO, the affiliate 'what works' centre for developing evidence on equality gaps in HE. However, the context of AP evaluation presents some specific practical and ethical challenges that set it apart from other evaluation contexts and from research, which have largely not yet been addressed by the sector or regulator (Moores et al. 2023). These include the professional identity of AP evaluators, their embedded positions within organisations, a limited understanding and resourcing of evaluation within the sector and varying organisational structures and governance.

In contrast with some other settings for research on evaluation practice, AP evaluation is still an emergent field, with limited consistency of roles, stakeholders, and organisation types that might support a coherent professional identity as 'evaluators'. AP evaluators can be based (and usually embedded) in a wide variety of settings, primarily higher and further education institutions and third sector organisations, as well as in private (including self-employed) providers of education and/or evaluation services (Kelly 2022; Squire 2022). These organisations can have different regulatory oversight, mostly (but not exclusively) split between the Office for Students (HE providers), the Charity Commission (registered charities), and the Department for Education (education providers). There are relatively few dedicated evaluation roles, with evaluation responsibilities sitting with evaluation specialists, data analysts, academic staff, senior leaders, outreach deliverers, and marketing professionals. Few of those carrying out evaluation in these contexts have formal training in evaluation or research. In the past two decades, several organisations supporting AP evaluation have emerged, ranging from membership organisations for AP professionals (e.g. NEON, FACE) to organisations focused specifically on AP evaluation (e.g. NERUPI, the Evaluation Collective). Since 2019 there has also been a regulator-funded body for AP evaluation, TASO, which provides training and guidance, as well as commissioning evaluation and literature reviews. TASO's focus is on developing 'robust, causal evidence' (TASO 2024) and their orientation towards positivist social science and a focus on methods reflects the Office for Student's concern with the 'quality' and volume of 'evidence'. Although these organisations have contributed to the development of a growing and networked community of evaluators in AP work, there is some distance to go in professionalisation or formalisation of an AP evaluator role (Moores et al. 2023).

Previous research on ethical evaluation practice has highlighted the importance of context for how evaluators identify and view ethical concerns and on the strategies that they use to navigate these (e.g. Onyura et al. 2023; Alexander & Richman 2017). The structures and cultures of organisations and stakeholders can play a crucial role in ethical practice, as can professional identities (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). As AP evaluation moves from limited evaluation practice to a widespread expectation of evaluation that will inform change, consideration of the contexts

that may inform ethical practice are essential if evaluation is to contribute to our understanding of not only whether we are 'doing it right' but also whether we are doing the right things and what makes it right (Schwandt & Gates 2016).

Our Research

This research took place between October 2024 and March 2025, during a period when many AP evaluators and their organisations were adapting to new regulations around evaluation and publication of evaluation findings noted above. Initiated and designed by myself, a researcher-evaluator in a medium-sized HE institution, it involved a further 12 participants from different HEIs and third sector organisations whose roles largely involved AP evaluation. The group of 12 was selected from a larger group of individuals who expressed interest to reflect a variety of role types, organisations, seniority, and experience in AP evaluation. The format of this research was designed to encourage sharing among peers facing similar professional challenges, in the spirit of solidarity and professional learning, while also allowing space for deeper personal reflection on challenges that related to our own values and professional identities. As an evaluator working in this shared context, I could not separate myself from this work or interpretation, so I tried to build in multiple opportunities for others to lead discussion and offer their own interpretations, as well as processes that supported reflexive analysis.

We came together initially to discuss the ethical challenges we faced and identified several areas we felt were most interesting and important to us as a group. I then formulated questions around our priorities, which were used as an interview guide for each of us to complete a 'self-interview' – a solo recorded interview, responding to prompt questions and anything else we wanted to discuss (Keightley, Pickering & Allett 2012). I carried out an initial analysis of all interviews, including my own, using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). We came back together for a full day to share and discuss initial themes and focused on identifying the factors that influenced ethical challenges arising and how we managed these in context. This led to identification of several domains that we felt influenced our ethical deliberations and practice. Using these domains and associated discussions, I conducted a secondary analysis to refine and reframe themes. It is this secondary analysis that is discussed here.

What is an 'Ethical Issue'?

As literature indicates that evaluators vary in how they identify and manage an issue as 'ethical' (e.g. Alexander & Richman 2017; Stame 2018), we kept our definition of ethical issues deliberately broad, to include any area of our work where we had considered how to apply ethical principles, or where we were concerned that these may be threatened. These included many common issues discussed in research ethics guidance, such as gaining informed consent, transparency, researcher independence, and confidentiality. However, rather than being about the deliberations in determining how the ethical principle should be applied, many of our discussions focused more on how to ensure our ethical decisions could be upheld in our professional contexts and our personal responsibilities for this. We were often improvising and drawing on the resources within our context to develop our own resolutions and, frequently, to manage a lack of resolution. Our dilemmas were familiar across our different work contexts, but we were finding different ways to manage these, both in terms of taking action and in terms of emotional work to respond to

scenarios where we were assessing our values and those of others. Through this research, we explored the practical experience of bringing ethical deliberations into our work and, although some of our discussions were very positive, many more focused on challenges and frustrations.

Literature on ethical practice in the context of professions, including psychology, evaluation and nursing, distinguishes between two types of ethical issues – true ethical dilemmas and 'mixed' dilemmas (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). In a 'true' ethical dilemma, there is a perceived conflict between two or more ethical principles, such as balancing the right for those impacted to feed into an evaluation with the additional burden this can place on marginalised individuals and communities who may be the focus of interventions. In a 'mixed' dilemma, the issue arises from circumstances that make it difficult to honour ethical principles, for example when a stakeholder wishes to selectively report on evaluation findings. In considering ethical evaluation as a practice, the distinction between true and mixed dilemmas can be particularly important, as evaluators may have guidelines or codes of practice that support consideration and even resolution of some of the first type but rarely have formal and consistent 'approved' practices to support them in resolving the second. Evaluation, particularly for evaluators who are concerned with equity, presents specific ethical challenges around beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Not everyone has resources to commission evaluation, meaning that what is evaluated and where decision making power is concentrated is frequently uneven, and the rights of stakeholders to participate or determine the terms of their participation are also uneven. In evaluation, it is also often the case that the outputs of evaluation can influence resources that have material consequences for the livelihood of staff (evaluators included), stakeholders, and intended beneficiaries of activities (Onyura et al. 2023). These areas particularly came up in our discussions, with questions raised about where our responsibilities as evaluators lay – to our organisations, our colleagues, to evaluation as an 'ideal', to participants, or to society or marginalised groups more broadly.

The principle of beneficence offers one example of how the ethical issues we identified relate to ethical principles, to types of 'dilemmas', and to our contexts. In our discussions and interviews, we spoke about beneficence in evaluation design, through using collaborative approaches that might encourage participants to be 'agents of their own development' (Rogers 2016 p. 203). We spoke about intent for evaluation to inform practice locally and on a national scale, benefitting participants and/or underrepresented groups in HE. We also discussed balancing the burden of evaluation with expected benefits and designing evaluation tools accordingly. These were largely true dilemmas, as we considered how to ensure application of the principle in evaluation design and considered what 'goods' could be generated, including more complex questions around *who* should benefit and *how much* good was sufficient. In these areas, we were often guided by our personal and professional values, as well as institutional and sector expectations, to identify what we considered to be a good outcome and whose outcomes we prioritised. Some of us prioritised the good of producing evidence that might benefit participants and disadvantaged groups through allocation of resources and enhanced intervention design. Others prioritised working with current marginalised students, seeing potential good in student empowerment and in including student values in assessment of interventions. These sorts of ethical dilemmas were seen as challenging but largely resolvable, although we questioned the appropriateness of our making ethical judgements independently of any sector-specific discussion.

For most of us, our persistent ethical issues were mixed dilemmas, where we found our intent to *do good* challenged by cultures, hierarchies and systems where other goods were prioritised or aims were ambiguous. We discussed being pushed by senior managers towards using methods that carried greater status with funders or regulators but delivered fewer benefits to participants. We identified challenges in cases where evaluations were delivered by non-evaluators, whose choices could lead to exclusion of participant populations, alteration of participant experience, and impact on validity and reliability of data collected, thereby affecting the benefits intended by evaluators in their design. We held a common concern about application of findings, with evaluation reports ignored, suppressed or disregarded in decision-making processes, thereby limiting influence of findings on practice. Our concerns about our capacity to 'do good' as evaluators then spilled into other ethical principles, such as autonomy, as we questioned whether we were being deceptive in informing participants that their contributions would be used to develop interventions, when we ourselves lacked confidence in the utilisation of evaluation within our organisations. In these cases, we felt that, despite being able to identify and assess the principle of beneficence, we were unable to apply it in practice.

The ethical issues we identified, both true and mixed, in relation to beneficence can be framed in practical terms with practical solutions. For example, considering strategies to ensure that evaluations are better engaged with in our organisations. In many cases, we and other evaluators are already applying strategies to meet these challenges. However, to consider these only as practical concerns ignores the need for discussion and transparency around our values, morality, and purpose(s) as individuals and as a sector. It also neglects the necessary recognition of the hierarchies and cultures we work within and their impact on social justice, including on evaluation as a potential mechanism for equitable development and for challenging inequity (Masvaure et al. 2024). The challenges we identified were not isolated issues but often systemic and predictable patterns without agreed principles for resolution. They were not issues addressed by any process of ethical review or by professional guidelines within our sector. Identifying and naming our issues as ethical is therefore not only about defining these issues but also about noting the absences of ethics in AP evaluation and their importance for the function of 'assessing value'. Considering these as ethical issues can lead us to ask crucial questions about whose interests and values are represented in evaluation (Stame 2018).

Shaping the Everyday Ethics of Access and Participation Evaluation

It became apparent through our interviews and conversations that ethics was a consistent, though largely unacknowledged, presence in our everyday practice. Like evaluators in other contexts, the cultures and structures of our organisations were critical influences in ethical behaviour, shaping the issues that we identified and the resources we had available to respond to these (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). However, while structure and culture helped to describe our contexts and identify similarities, the crucial factors that determined ethical conduct were power and influence, both our own and that of others. This paper focuses on two interrelated themes that we identified as shaping our everyday ethics: understanding of evaluation and authority. These themes highlight relationships of power within our contexts and lead us to consider how things might need to be different if we are to evaluate ethically for access and participation. Crucially, they also present an opportunity for us, as evaluators, to examine what it means to value and to take an ethical stand that aligns with the ambitions of evaluation to serve a social good.

What we understand evaluation and its purpose to be

> There is also stuff about power, yeah, the relationships that I have with colleagues and how they see evaluation in the institution and what they want it to do, and they want it to say the right thing – which is 'this works', or 'this doesn't work exactly as we planned, but it's still great'. And [#thinking noises] getting people just to understand what it even is, what evaluation even is.

Many of our ethical issues appeared related to how evaluation was understood within and outside our organisations, and what we, and others, felt its purpose to be. Evaluation could be variously interpreted as a regulatory or funding requirement; a learning opportunity; an appraisal; a piece of research; or business and market intelligence. Often all interpretations existed within an organisation, though there was usually a dominant narrative that influenced resourcing and governance. Mismatches between how evaluators, their organisations and/or other stakeholders understood evaluation, both in its overall purpose and as a process, raised ethical issues for evaluators. These issues included: concerns about use of participant data or reported outcomes for purposes not intended in evaluation design, such as appraisal of staff or for promotion of activities; lack of engagement with 'negative' outcomes or unintended consequences; alterations to evaluation methods and processes during delivery; not undergoing ethical review processes or ignoring agreed procedures; and not using outcomes of evaluation in financial or programme decision-making.

Mainstream understanding of evaluation, particularly as understood in public policy and education, has been built on precepts of "value-free" positivist social science, where credible judgements are those that do not take a values-based stance or, where they do, test outcomes against the values of the commissioner (Stame 2018 p. 440). This understanding appeared to be widespread within our organisations, with evaluations and evaluation activity frequently viewed as a means to achieve institutional goals around reputation, funding, or meeting regulatory requirements. This might be explicit in decisions by senior leaders but could also be seen in contexts where resources and professional expertise were concentrated in marketing, fundraising, or regulatory functions of an organisation. Evaluators were sometimes co-located with these functions, meaning that their roles were expected to contribute to recruitment, fundraising or student outcome targets and not challenge the validity or benefits of these.

Where the dominant view of evaluation was as a tool to 'prove' the positive value of an activity or organisation, sometimes as part of an accountability process like reporting to funders or other stakeholders, issues considered to be ethical by evaluators were viewed by others as pragmatic decisions that would enhance the benefit of evaluation. For example, the design of evaluation and use of evaluation outputs to tell 'good news' stories about an activity:

> I think in terms of the most immediate and consistent ethical dilemmas is the desire for positive or success stories. So, I feel that the kind of learning or insights sometimes takes a backseat in terms of the kind of gathering of information.

In some cases, we attributed this prevailing attitude to the pressure of markets, where universities and third sector organisations can assume that a 'negative' evaluation will damage their reputation

and ability to attract students or funding. This then shaped institutional priorities and the interests of those commissioning or reviewing evaluation, as they were seeking information and outcomes that would support a positive reputation or secure other market advantages.

Whatever the perceived purpose of evaluation, the focus of non-evaluators within our organisations appeared to be the output of the evaluation and hence little attention was paid either to process of evaluation or to the underlying ethics of the intervention being evaluated. This position, of evaluation as product or auditing tool, was vastly different from our perspectives as evaluators who were more concerned with the potential of evaluation to support learning and accountability. These two facets of evaluation, although debated in terms of the balance between them and the scope for these being transformational (Picciotto 2018), are core to many evaluator's conceptions of the purpose and values of evaluation. They are also core to how we, as a group, tended to describe the potential for evaluation to do good. Maintaining and enhancing these aspects of evaluation was often core to what we considered our ethical practice, as we tried to ensure our evaluations were used to hold our institutions accountable for delivering on their commitments to more equitable student outcomes and that learning about the experiences of interventions informed more equitable design and delivery. This was particularly highlighted by our reflections on things that supported ethical evaluation in our context, which included governance processes, evaluation training, and relationships with colleagues that supported learning conversations.

> I think I've been able to sell evaluation to quite a few teams as a constant learning process, and particularly teams that have young staff members who are still learning about their roles…they want to make what they do better and so they see the benefit of evaluation as being this learning process, this engagement process, and that – when people have expectations like that, you can do so much more.

For those of us in HE institutions, part of the drive towards a focus on compliance and evaluation products was felt to originate in the requirement to produce evaluation to meet regulatory requirements. This was not necessarily considered an issue in terms of the requirement itself, but on organisational interpretations of what it meant to meet the requirement:

> I think that there is a regulatory tension in the sense of box ticking. There are, with certain requirements and expectations, things that have to be done from that external stakeholder, and sometimes there is, certainly within the university, there is a 'Do we have to do this?' or 'How can we present the façade to say that we have complied with this when we do it with as little money and as little commitment as possible'.

This was similar in third sector organisations, with the expectation of evaluation leading to reports for funders that would support continued funding. Learning was not seen as a necessary or even desirable outcome and accountability was primarily seen as providing positive confirmation.

Where the purpose was to produce 'an evaluation', rather than 'to evaluate', this could also skew resources towards evaluating projects where it was felt that positive outcomes could be

demonstrated, or where there was internal or external scrutiny on outcomes. This did not always align with the activities themselves felt would be most beneficial for organisations to evaluate.

> We are kind of gathering, we are evaluating individual's experiences rather than looking at systemic issues.

Some evaluators felt that the approach to evaluation taken by their organisations, and within AP evaluation more broadly, confined evaluation to an activity aligned to specific projects which do or do not 'work'. In doing so, this limited the potential for evaluation to explore the complex contexts in which activities took place or the systemic issues that underlay the need for those activities.

Picciotto (2017) identifies three ethical foundations for evaluation that concerns itself not only with *doing things right* but also *doing good:*

1. 'Merit' or the verification of compliance with pre-determined standards and norms and the efficacy of the intervention;
2. 'Worth' or assessing how well the intervention design meets stakeholder preferences and concerns, including the consequences of activity and for whom;
3. 'Value', which integrates merit and worth in a meta-evaluation through integration of stakeholder perspectives and a public-interest lens.

In AP evaluation, evaluators find themselves confronting systems and cultures which are interested primarily in merit and see evaluation as similar to an audit function. Where evaluations were designed and delivered with consideration for worth and value, which was still often the case, these were not always recognised by internal stakeholders, who might disregard elements of the evaluation that were not merit focused due to their value going unrecognised. This merit focused approach takes for granted that the goals of an intervention and means of achieving these are sound and ethically valid and only tests or confirms links between inputs and outputs without consideration for ultimate results. For evaluators seeking to evaluate more equitably, considering what we evaluate, how, and considering whose interests are valued, the prevailing understanding of evaluation within our institutions presents a significant challenge. Particularly concerning for us is how that understanding then combines with sources of authority to validate a merit focused approach to evaluation ethics.

Authority

The question of who has authority to make decisions and enforce control over AP evaluation is a complex one, as there are often multiple decision-making parties and power structures that legitimate the authority to determine what is evaluated, in what way, and for what purpose. There are also different forms of authority, with evaluators holding some authority through their roles as experts and hierarchical authority enacted over evaluators by organisations and individuals within them. In HE particularly, there is a complex relationship between autonomous HE institutions with authority over recruitment, curriculum, staffing, and mission, and an external regulator with authority to enforce standards in the interests of the state and, as per the OfS mandate, students. This complication also extends to TASO, as the sector body for AP evaluation, which is both an independent charity and primarily funded by the OfS. This mass of authorities was experienced by evaluators as direct instruction or more implicit pressure within organisations, which was then

justified in reference to external authorities. Evaluators themselves rarely had authority beyond their expertise or, on occasion, delegated authority through their involvement in mandatory organisation processes or regulatory requirements.

A common, though not universal, challenge was senior colleagues and peers using their authority to make decisions about the design, implementation, dissemination or application of evaluations. This could happen at any stage, from attempts by delivery or senior management teams to 'cherry pick' evaluation participants or data, to evaluators feeling pressure or receiving specific instruction to only report on positive outcomes. This could leave evaluators frustrated and uncertain about the ethics of the evaluation overall:

> And that is not to say that having steerage from senior colleagues is unethical or a particular negative. I do think it provides particular lenses that maybe mean findings aren't disseminated as widely across an institution as possible. So, they only go to key principal stakeholders, which again I think is not unethical, but I think is deliberately opaque.

At earlier stages of evaluation, some of us faced challenges in feeling pressured or even required to pursue specific evaluation methodologies because these were favoured by senior leaders or felt to carry more weight with funders and regulators. In general, this was not rooted in the guidance published by the OfS or TASO, which states the importance of multiple evaluation approaches, but based in a broader understanding of 'good' evaluation as aligning with a positivist social science and causal approaches. The level of interest and status shown to these methods was felt by many institutions and even evaluators as a requirement or responsibility with ethical dimensions:

> …like my responsibility as an evaluator is to generate this evidence. And if the evidence that we're being told that we need to get is causal evidence I then have to push for…comparison groups and things like that, knowing that is at the detriment, potentially, to current students at the moment.

This idea of evaluation as generating (mostly quantitative) evidence has acquired status and authority in AP work, in part through its adoption by bodies holding legal and moral authority within the sector, including third sector organisations and the Office for Students. Many of the organisations that have promoted the importance of evaluation in access and participation are those aligned to 'what works' approaches, seen as politically neutral and therefore appropriate for evaluation in the public sphere (Squire 2022). Despite several evaluators and evaluation-based organisations advocating for different approaches (e.g. The Evaluation Collective), this perception appears to remain dominant amongst senior leaders in third sector organisations and universities, with limited consideration for the ethical implications of applying 'what works' approaches.

Within our organisations, this external validation of 'value-free' quantitative social science approaches, combined with structures of accountability that focus on compliance, has created environments where evaluators feel unable to fully consider or apply ethical principles to their evaluation work. This can be ambiguous, where evaluators feel uncertainty or unease about whether they are applying ethical principles appropriately, such as being able to conduct processes of ethical review or be suitably competent in methodologies used:

> A major dilemma I have been facing in my work, it is just often not really feeling prepared or adequately trained to carry out some of the work that needs to happen. So, by this I mean that there has been a lot of pressure to start using new methodologies, new ways of working, do types of work that we've never done before - ethics applications being one of them but also just in terms of needing [to] produce these causal evaluations that we haven't necessarily been working on before. And definitely increase the output.

In other instances, evaluators found their ethical decisions overruled by colleagues, both senior and peer in other departments:

> Anyway, needless to say I lost the argument because I don't have the power to insist that we don't do that.

Despite frequently feeling that we did not have the authority to determine key decisions or actions in evaluation practice within our organisations, ethics guidance produced by TASO and many other practice standards contain explicit or implicit assumptions that 'the evaluator' is responsible for ensuring ethical conduct (TASO, 2022). Ethical conduct is framed both as a required standard within any evaluation but also a professional standard for being 'an evaluator'. Unsurprisingly, many of us felt that we were falling short and questioned whether there should be greater alignment between authority in AP evaluation and responsibility for ethical deliberation and conduct.

Opportunities for resistance?

The ethical issues that we identified are not unique to AP evaluation, nor is the absence of ethics within common conceptualisation and practice of evaluation. We are not alone in facing challenges in attempting to maintain worth and value as foundational in our own and wider evaluation practice, in contexts where these elements are not recognised or supported. Recognising this and beginning to articulate our challenges as both professional *and* ethical, has been an important part of this research on a personal level. In addition to identifying themes like those above, this research also highlighted the significant emotional and relational work involved in managing ethical issues, and the need for connections that support this work.

> I think trying to take the ethical responsibility on your own is quite a lonely place. So, there is a need for shared confidential forums, as it were, and support. Because you are leaving people on their own in institutions to do these things when they are surrounded by an awful lot of other pressures.

AP evaluation has both similarities and differences to other evaluation contexts in how evaluators identify and address ethical challenges. The still emergent context of AP evaluators, many of whom have limited training and experience in evaluation, means that we do not share agreed professional guidelines or professional identity as evaluators, which can act as a reference point when identifying and resolving ethical challenges (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). However, even where they exist these guidelines are not without challenges, and evaluation more broadly is not yet fully established as a profession in most contexts (Picciotto 2017). This means that we are also not alone in needing to undertake an 'extensive reconstruction of professional ethical behaviour' (Schwandt, 2018b). The challenge, as outlined by the examples of issues above, is considerable,

but AP evaluation has some notable prior research and practice to add to the considerable practical and theoretical work of evaluators and researchers. Although we work in an environment where evaluation is orientated towards positivist social science and the expectation that evaluators should only be concerned with "what is" and not "what ought to be" (Stame 2018), there is scope for 'transgressive' approaches. Rainford (2019), outlines how practitioners within HE institutions in England enact AP policy with reference to their personal values and histories, navigating power structures and constraints to meet the needs of students. Although agency may be limited in some cases, engagement with external networks and supported reflexive practice appear to be important factors in enabling practitioners to take positions that challenge institutional norms and consider the ethics of practice. In AP evaluation, these professional networks already exist, as does the appetite from evaluators to consider the purpose and practice of evaluation.

> I think that it is important to remember the root of the purpose of the work that is being done, and yeah, advocate and promote for the student experience being at the heart of it, and seeing evaluation through that lens, rather than does this meet the criteria for us putting it in our APP submission

Addressing what we individually and collectively see as the purpose of evaluation and questioning how power shapes these purposes can provide one of many starting points for a much-needed reflective conversation. Conversations about and with ethics need to become part of our ongoing professional practice if we are to create spaces for transgression in a context that resists the learning and accountability that are core to evaluation. The inconsistency of ethical processes and the neglect of interest in ethical concerns within our organisations raises serious concerns for evaluation as a project for equity. At worst, makes it subordinate to political interests that work against social justice. More than one of our small group remarked that the evaluation work they were doing 'wasn't what they signed up for'. We cannot put off considering 'what ought to be'.

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