

Evaluate with caution

The impact of your evaluation

It is not always the case that your client will have the same understanding of evaluation as you. We use the term 'client' here to stress that this will sometimes be the arrangement, that you are contracted as an external advisor to rigorously and fairly comment on the project. Nonetheless, the perception can be that you are 'brought in' at the end to validate and just check everything went smoothly. As we have stressed in other resources, the researcher's approach should really be more open and aim to evaluate against the project's objectives.

The client should be made aware of this at the start of the relationship - however, you may still unearth some hard truths that are not particularly welcome. The burden of this for the evaluator of course, is that delivering a mostly negative report risks that client not being able to secure funding in the future for the groups or communities they are working with - something to take into consideration.

Risk to your relationship with the client

Setting out these expectations of the evaluation are important. As a researcher and evaluator, you should remain true to your commitment towards rigour. If you are evaluating as a third party, the sense that you are not connected to the project and can be openly critical is very important. Your distance from the work allows you to see the broad picture and the detail from an outsider's perspective, and this is key to understanding the project for any stakeholder (such as a funder) reading your report. However, there are constructive ways of doing this which focus on recommendations and actions, rather than dwelling unnecessarily on the negative.

Report new findings

Sometimes it can be useful to give the client a sense of interim or early findings. This will help give them confidence that the evaluation is moving in the right direction (money and time well spent!) but also allows them opportunity to point out that these were things they already knew. On one hand, it is useful for a third-party evaluator to objectively research and support concerns that they are already aware of and dealing with. But if this is the case, you might not require so much detail in some areas of the report, but would instead focus on any new and unexpected findings that have arisen.

Be critical, but constructive

Critique does not necessarily assume negativity. However, your interviews and evaluation activities with participants might be the first time they feel they've been allowed to speak openly. As a result, they may demonstrate anger, disappointment or resentment towards the project and its participants. Your job as a researcher is to interpret these accounts. How do they stand up against other interviews - do they feel like isolated cases? If your interviewees have been shown their transcripts afterwards, have they sometimes taken back what they've said 'in the heat of the moment' i.e. realising that their wording may have been stronger than they wanted to convey? How long ago are they recalling, and what effect has time had on their re-telling? These should all be considered. Then in your recommendations, suggest positive ways forward, perhaps setting up networks or communication paths for participants to voice their concerns during the project rather than afterwards, for example. Evaluation is a learning experience for all involved.