

# A Brief Introduction to Responsive Evaluation

Trudy Norman & Dan Reist

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# A brief introduction to responsive evaluation

just their opinions but also their experiences (perceptions, feelings, learnings). The evaluator approaches the task of evaluation with as few preconceptions as possible. Stakeholders are engaged in forming questions, identifying participants and interpreting findings (Abma, 2006).

Responsive evaluation is a holistic approach to evaluation. The program being evaluated is not regarded as a means to a specific end but as a practice. People are not seen as independent individuals but as social beings who depend on one another (Abma, 2006). Within the social ecological context of the shared practice, stakeholders may have different (even conflicting) values, and the program may have different meanings for various participants. Responsive evaluation seeks to capture the diversity of stakeholder values, perceptions, interpretations, insights and meanings, not just the commonalities. To use an analogy of a mountain: a responsive evaluator seeks more than a single photo and tries to construct a richer representation, more like a hologram. This incorporates the views and experiences of all program stakeholders. From this vantage point, viewing the program as a whole, what is useful and going well may be clearly seen, and issues, concerns and needed changes may more easily emerge.

Dialogue is central to the process of responsive evaluation. Dialogue involves listening and questioning as well as a desire to learn and a willingness to suspend judgement. These dialogues occur between the evaluator and the various stakeholders, but also among stakeholders. The evaluator must set the conditions and construct the contexts for meaningful dialogue. Through dialogue, stakeholders learn about the experiences and frustrations of others. They gain insight, and mutual understandings may emerge and change may result as people add new, vicarious experiences to their existing repertoires. Dialogue is not primarily a means to make decisions or develop strategic plans. It is about developing relationships and understanding that may make these strategic elements possible, and more effective. The goal of responsive evaluation is to enhance understanding by valuing difference and embracing diversity rather than by seeking a shallow unity or superficial agreement (Schw( T)-1 (r)-3 (f)-3 (i -1.135b)-1.5T1 ( -1.1ma(d)-1 ((l)-2 (i)-2 (i)-1 (.00t)1 (t(i)-2 )-1 (an)-1 ( b)-1 b)-1 b

1. The first step is negotiating the scope, purpose and process of the evaluation and identifying initial lists of stakeholders to engage and questions to address. Articulating the scope and purpose of the evaluation includes developing a preliminary understanding of the purpose and theoretical

## References

Abma, T. A. (2005). Responsive evaluation: Its meaning and special contribution to health promotion. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 28, 279–289.