

Being an insider and/or outsider

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The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) was funded under the first round of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) to provide action research and evaluation support to the Stronger Family Fund projects. Over the course of our work, questions in relation to being an insider versus an outsider whilst evaluating projects have constantly arisen.

What are the strengths of being an insider or an outsider?

What are the implications of being an insider/outsider for working with projects?

What does the position of insider/outsider mean for workers and participants?

We attempt to address these questions using case studies from our own experience as Stronger Families Learning Exchange workers as well as from people involved in the Stronger Families Fund projects. These stories were chosen because they represent different configurations of being an insider or outsider.

Background

There has been a transition from historical privileging of the outsider to the articulation and valuing of insider voices. There can however, be tensions in being an insider. An example of this tension was when one of us that is, the former SFLEX Training and Support workers was discussing SFLEX's possible involvement in the evaluation of a project working with Indigenous people. We proposed an action research approach, which would involve par-

ticipants in its design and implementation. People in the project were very responsive. However, they expressed grave doubts about their organisation's acceptance of doing an evaluation in this way. In summary they commented:

"The Board really wants an outside evaluator. They've fought hard for professionalism and they want the status of an outside person. And it's more objective. The Board can't really understand how we can evaluate ourselves. There are issues of accountability for the money."

This comment raises a number of questions about the relative strengths and tensions involved in being an outsider or an insider when working with projects. It also illustrates the way in which evaluators, researchers and community development workers have been positioned in the past. Funding bodies have preferred "outsider" knowledge for its perceived "objectivity" and "scientific rigour". In the past, evaluation and research literature have emphasised the importance of being outside the community in which one is working. Underlying this approach, is an assumption that only knowledge obtained objectively and systematically by external experts can offer valid and reliable evidence that can be used by policy makers and social scientists.

The perceived importance of the outsider view has not been restricted to research and evaluation but is also present in community development work. Yet, professional outsiders may in fact dis-empower communities or leave a trail of bad decisions, which the community has to live with:

"If outsiders make the decisions, outsiders' agendas prevail...when outsiders make the decisions, they seldom pay the full consequences of their mistakes and thereby escape the discipline that yields improved decisions over time (Cornell 2002: 9).

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was in part based on the view that:

"Pre-packaged program responses are often inappropriate to meet the diverse range of family and community needs. Effective initiatives need a strong element of community engagement and require 'bottom-up' community-led development and delivery" (Stern 2002: 7).

There has been a gradual shift in emphasis towards including insiders in research and evaluation in community development. In part this has been due to a critique of the effects of outside professional involvement and the power they can hold in the communities in which they work. In addition, groups who have been the objects of research and evaluation and who have had interventions imposed upon them, have criticised the "outsider" view of research and community development. For example, Indigenous groups and organisations have identified some of the problems of outsider directed research (Vichealth Koori Research and Community Development Unit, 2000). Anderson (2000: 10) states:

“Over the years that was kind of what people would talk about as the usual experience of research – of having someone come into the Community, pinch all this information and run away, and people never hearing again about it. A lot of people were feeling quite exploited.”

As a result, the importance of insider knowledge expertise and power in research and evaluation has gradually been recognised (National Health and Medical Research Council 1991; AIATSIS 2000; Walmsley and Johnson 2003).

Insider/outsider stories

Insider and outsider are not clear cut categories, but rather they involve complex and often shifting positions. In the Stronger Families Fund projects we have observed that there is a variety of insider and outsider positions in which the project workers find themselves. In this article we want to provide a selection of different real life experiences to illustrate some of the issues and strengths of different positions as they emerge from community practice.

We have selected three stories. The first is Maya's story, a researcher working for the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the Stronger Families

Learning Exchange team. The next two stories come from Vince and Dorothy, two workers from Families NOW, a family information centre co-located with Centrelink. Families NOW works with the local community to develop innovative and sustainable ways of strengthening families in Beenleigh and surrounding districts, and between Brisbane and the Gold Coast – with a particular emphasis on early childhood and parenting. Each of the stories provides an opportunity to reflect on the individual's standpoint in relation to the work and the strengths and tensions that emerge from their often multiple positions.

Maya's story: Professional outsider

I live in inner city Melbourne. I am a white woman, 26 years old, with an honours degree in Social Ecology. In September 2002 I began work with a project in Wadeye, a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. The Stronger Families Fund project there is a women's centre, known as the Ngepan Patha or Strong Women's Centre. It is a service to empower local women through skills development, including parenting and relationship skills, and family support.

On my first trip there, before going to the community, I spent an afternoon in Darwin. Taxi drivers and hotel staff all looked a little horrified when they heard I was going, for the first time to Wadeye - news of the community's "bad reputation" was quick to come my way.

Before my visit I had a fleeting conversation by phone with the project worker and had sent a letter to the women's centre management committee describing myself, and the SFLEX role. Although I had sent all that information up, we spent a lot of time talking about what I was there to do. I quickly realised that from the women's point of view I

had been sent in by the government, another white worker with their own agenda. Just the day before in Darwin, my Institute business card had paved my way into a variety of meetings, whereas here my role as a professional, as a researcher, and as someone paid to work with projects by the government, was a source of suspicion and a barrier to building a good working relationship. In fact it was not just being a government-funded outsider, it was also being a young woman in a women's centre run by the senior women of the community. I could sense disappointment when I said I didn't have any kids. I began to realise I was seen in this community as someone without the expertise to help build community or family.

What use I was, to this community, was increasingly confusing to me and I think to the women as well. All the things that we at the Stronger Families Learning Exchange planned to do with projects - help with evaluation, documentation, networking, ethics, action research - many of these words were not known here. My written documents were of little use in a community where English was the fourth or

fifth language of the women I was working with. I was told I talked too fast, said too much, too quickly. I found myself de-skilled, dis-abled, unfamiliar with the assumed knowledge of the women who I was with, and not useful to the project or individuals.

After the first days in the community with the Department of Family and Community Services worker, who clearly thought it was good that I was there, I got the feeling that I was being tolerated, but not really understood. On my first morning alone I asked the women if they wanted me to leave the centre so they could talk about what work I could do that would be useful to them. I went away for a few hours, and returned quietly, waiting for an invitation to talk. Things moved after that. We found a common language, using pictures and diagrams to explain where I fitted in. We talked about previous bad experiences of white people taking knowledge away and ways to check in with them about how information was used between us. I began to hear stories about the women and their centre, and wrote these down.



Even after that day, of listening to stories and writing them down together, I felt confused, out of my depth and uncomfortable. I couldn't see how this all fitted in with what I was expected to do by those back in the office. I felt tensions inside me, wanting to listen, to sit and be as invisible as possible, but also a time pressure to *do* something, get out of this space of everyone not knowing. I found myself questioning why I was

there, what good was this role to these people, to this project?

The outcome of that first trip was two storybooks with photos about the history of the women and their centre and about one of their new initiatives. These were put together from the stories the women told and with photos they asked to have taken. The storybooks have been used by the women to show other outsiders, including Commonwealth gov-

ernment ministers, stories of the project. Putting these stories together showed the women another way to communicate about their work and helped to show the importance of communicating about who they are and what they do. The use of stories and pictures from Wadey has helped SFLEX work in other communities, providing a model of creative methods of documenting and sharing project work.

Vince's story: Local (insider) community worker

Hi I'm Vince. I am the co-founder of Families NOW with Dorothy. I am a community development worker. I live here in the community, so I have met customers from the service in shopping centres and other local places. There's a sense of knowing it's truly something that is part of the community in which I live and work, and if I had to, I would want to access it.

When I think about the work of the project I get a range of different feelings: excitement, positiveness and accomplishment. Doing early intervention and prevention work leads to good outcomes because we are helping people to achieve their aims and goals. Families are becoming more empowered and getting control of their lives. If they are lost or frustrated at the start, they come back to Families NOW and say they are more confident and able to negotiate the maze better. Knowing people have been able to achieve things feels good and reflects well on me. I feel for them in trouble. Empathy, helping and making them aware of other avenues they can follow, feels good.

Families NOW is an agency males traditionally wouldn't go to. It's like women frequent many neighbourhood community houses. I don't think that my gender and

age are important in the work I do but with Families NOW I try to use a bit of empathy. We do have programs for men. We also have tip sheets about men getting involved – grandparents as well. I saw myself there once – I tried to put myself in the position of a man I saw once overwhelmed by information. He had no problems going to Families NOW and I don't think I would either. I don't go out of my way, by putting the men's brochures at the front, but I try to make the service look like it's for men as well. It is a conscious thing. I try to be inclusive of gender. I feel as a man I can help promote and get more males involved in participation in families. Not just women do this, men do have responsibilities. I can be an advocate for men, who because of their economic or educational situation don't know there are things out there that can help them.

More and more males are being engaged at Families NOW. We seem to create something that men are interested in too, like our communication camp. In 90 per cent of families the male partner attended. Our volunteer James, went on the camp too. That was important; it made the men feel more comfortable. I hope it will encourage those men to come to other things like the parenting course with their partners.

I live in the area. I form relationships in a non-judgmental manner. I make myself feel at ease with the customers. Like my casualness, most of them are casual themselves. The way I talk, dress, react to what they say, means I can relate to them. When I think about things that might separate me from the people using the services I can't think of anything. Even having a job doesn't make them view me differently, because of my efforts to talk and dress casually. I don't wear a suit and tie and walk in with a copy of the Financial Review under my arm.

Because I live in the community I'm more accepted by clients. I ran into one in the supermarket the other day; I got bailed up. I do have that recognition in the community. They come up and have a chat. I enjoy that. I think that's a compliment to me. I feel privileged, I value that. I have seen dangers with others getting too close: clients call them up every day, or others get bailed up when off duty and asked for assistance.

I have a concern about Families NOW not getting ongoing funding. Where will these people go? My concern is greater because I live in the community and have to deal with the social problems. If it wasn't for Families NOW, the problems would be five to ten times worse.

Dorothy's story: Professional outsider

I was a joint initiator of the Families NOW project with Vince, a local resident whose local contacts have been very beneficial (for example, school principals and the local MP). Vince's role in the Lutheran Community Care was also good for establishing Families NOW. We were frustrated at doing crisis band aid work all the time, not seeing any differences, wanting to do something with a preventative and early intervention focus. Working with Families NOW increased my job satisfaction and interest outside of my regular work as a senior social worker with Centrelink where I do casework and have management responsibilities. It's rewarding to see something that can make a difference other than just band aiding.

Living outside the community, I can be a little more critical, in a way that you can't be if it's your own community, or your own family.

Being a female and a mother, I've also got that in common with the female clients at Families NOW. Race is not an issue here

because I am a white Anglo-Australian like most Families NOW clients. I'm a lot older though and looking back, hindsight and experience is a factor. I think about what sort of help I would have liked if I was them. I was isolated as a young mother like many of them are too. This both brings me closer to and separates me from the people using the program.

I've got a partner with a job – that's different. Most of the women are single parents or their partners are unemployed or in jail so they lack the choices I had because of their lack of money, child care or educational opportunities. I suppose I'm more privileged. I've got a good paying job. I had the opportunity to go to uni and get a degree. I've had years of experience working with disadvantaged people. My adult kids got through those horrible adolescent years and are now successfully working. I have a good husband and good home. I don't know if clients see that as making me different or if it makes me more sympathetic or empathetic.

I'm in a position to speak objectively about suggesting programs to benefit people because of my job status, experience as a woman and as a mother. I've got some understanding of the issues they face. However, there may be tensions with groups of parents feeling "it's all very well for you - you have choices and opportunities". It's therefore important for me to focus on empathy and where they are. I also have to manage the frustration I feel with people not moving on as quickly as I'd like them to.

The project worker, Marita is very good at listening to clients and working at their pace. I want results and outcomes now. The government pressure for outcomes contributes to feeling frustrated but the reality is we are still working with people, and that takes time.

Working with Families NOW has meant a culmination, or bringing together, of all of my individual characteristics for something worthwhile. It's great to work with Vince on something, that has had recognition and good outcomes for clients.

An outsider response

There is a greater recognition of the value of insiders' perspective and voice in community work, research and evaluation. The position of insider/outsider is complex and multi dimensional. Each of us can be insiders and outsiders in a particular community because we can occupy multiple positions simultaneously. Themes of ethnicity, gender, class, cultural knowledge and experience all impact on the experience of different workers and project participants. Maya is an outsider; Vince an insider; and Dorothy holds multiple positions, moving in and out of identification and distance. The stories we have provided here highlight a number of issues related to insider and

outsider roles. In particular, insider and outsider perspectives can have both advantages and disadvantages in the evaluation of community projects. Table 1 (see p.14) summarises some of the pros and cons of the insider and outsider perspectives for evaluation.

Conclusion

Our stories demonstrate that being an insider can offer numerous advantages to early intervention and community projects. For example, the insiders' perspectives can illuminate what is going on at the community level, they can clarify the needs of the community as well as harness the capacity of the community to more

effectively implement projects. Relationships based on trust and empathy are crucial to being an insider. Connectedness and relatedness between people, and being accepted within a community are crucial components of community development. An outsider's perspective can equally have its advantages and make a contribution. For example, Maya, despite her self doubt, and through her outside perspective and experience, facilitated the project to showcase its work. Through this she, and the SFLEX team, learnt new ways of working with communities. It also showed that, with time, an outsider can make steps towards working more closely within a community.



Table 1 Pros and cons of external and internal evaluation (taken from Wadsworth 1998: 20)		
	Insiders	Outsiders
Pros	Insiders may have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • long-held deep understandings of the world they work in; • deep tacit knowledge of what works and what doesn't; • considerable accrued "practice wisdom" based on sometimes documented but often extensive undocumented "evidence"; • already been practising more or less successful evaluation of their work over many years without ever formalising it. 	Some outsiders may have been able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ask questions that hadn't been asked before; • notice and "hear" things in the fieldwork phase that insiders hadn't noticed or heard as clearly; • come up with novel ways of explaining things, or show things in a new light; • break new ground with solutions; • act as a catalyst for change, for example loosen established patterns.
Cons	Outsiders may have been brought in because it was feared insiders were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • too biased to recognise the truth of matters; • too stuck to see ways of getting out of ruts; • too invested to give up favoured ways of seeing things; • so caught up in busy daily practice and therefore unable to get reflective distance in order to see new discrepancies, or the contexts generating them. 	Some outsiders may be reported as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asking questions that were considered way off the mark; • reporting on things that insiders had long known, or that were not central to the practical task or critical question at hand; • explaining things in ways that annoyed insiders or made them feel misunderstood, under-represented or wronged; • recommending precisely what insiders had been unsuccessfully suggesting for ages or missed recommending what insiders had been unsuccessfully suggesting for ages; • not being listened to!

Despite the many advantages of being an insider, the insider's role can also present some challenges. For example, the stories illustrate that the closeness of the insider's perspective to the community can result in a lack of separation, which can compromise judgement and reduce objectivity. For example, Vince describes the emotional impact and good feelings about successful service delivery. His enthusiasm for the service and its benefit to the community may affect his ability to recognise problems. For example, service users may not raise complaints directly to a paid employee. However, it is not just the community projects that suffer from too much closeness. The SFLEX Training and Support workers, as researchers focused on action, were closely involved in the support and development of the Stronger Families Fund projects. As Maya's story illustrates, the work had a significant personal effect on her. Being an insider and/or outsider impacts not only upon how we do research and community development, but also upon the worker's personal life experience. A crucial

component of action research is cycles of reflection. It is very important for workers when working closely on the inside to "step back" and reflect upon their work, themselves and the processes in a critical way so as to develop a more "outside" perspective.

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Our stories demonstrate that being an insider can offer numerous advantages to early intervention and community projects.

