(Re)Shaping Trauma-Informed and Equity-Driven Evaluation in Virtual Environments

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Context

COVID-19 not only underscored the necessity of applying trauma-informed and equity-driven approaches in our evaluation work, but also forced us to incorporate these practices online. Drawing on two projects that work with community organizations to address violence, we highlight what our evaluation team has learned about navigating complex power dynamics, building trust, and creating meaningful and accessible virtual spaces for partnership and engagement.

Project 1

- **What:** 5-year evaluation of a trauma recovery program for women in conflict with the law and/or experiencing gender-based violence
- **Who:** Delivered by local branch of a national advocacy and social services organization, with funding from federal government
- **Evaluation approach:** We co-designed and piloted a participatory evaluation with the first cohort prior to the pandemic, and then pivoted to conducting all evaluation activities online

Project 2

- **What:** Co-design and evaluation of a community-based gun violence interruption pilot
- **Who:** Designed and delivered by grassroots organizations and community health centres, with funding and oversight from municipal government
- **Evaluation approach:** Working mostly online, we provided research support and evaluated the pilot co-design process and collaborated with project partners to evaluate the program's implementation

1 — Cultivate trusting and transparent relationships

Why it Matters

Our evaluation work moves at the speed of trust, especially when we're engaging with partners and participants who've experienced research as harmful or extractive.

What We Tried

Casual one-on-ones: Recognizing that power dynamics among partners can create barriers, these smaller, closed settings helped build a sense of connection that typically comes from casual conversation offline

Using innovative software such as Miro for live notetaking to promote accuracy and accountability during co-design sessions

What We Learned

Building trusting relationships across complex power dynamics requires even more dedicated time and space online than in-person

Understanding the culture and values that inform how partners typically build relationships, such as sharing a meal together, and creatively replicating these dynamics online is critical

Interactive team building activities can be helpful, but equity in resources, such as reliable internet connection, needs to be considered for all stakeholders

The virtual environment can create a disconnect from a sense of place. Beginning calls with land and Black ancestral acknowledgements grounded the conversation, as did intentional discussion of broader events happening in community

2 — Prioritize accessibility

Why it Matters

Meaningful and equitable engagement online necessitates addressing specific barriers and accessibility challenges that emerge in the virtual environment

What We Tried

Ensuring there are multiple ways to participate, including using the chat and audio/video functions during Zoom calls

Employing assistive technology, such as live transcription software

Allowing for asynchronous engagement, such as sharing Miro links ahead of meetings and encouraging partners to add their ideas before, during, and after

Including our pronouns in our Zoom names and inviting participants to add theirs and display their preferred names

Identifying those who may require additional training or support to access virtual platforms and designating someone to troubleshoot any tech challenges

What We Learned

Low-tech solutions and call-in options can be more accessible and increase participation

Typing discussion prompts in the chat improves accessibility for those who are hard of hearing or connecting from a noisy environment

Some found the virtual environment to be more accessible because it didn't require them to travel to a program site or secure childcare, for example

Some also appreciated the ability to turn off their cameras when they were feeling overwhelmed or activated

3 — Promote safety and confidentiality

Why it Matters

Ensuring that virtual evaluation activities are confidential and secure is paramount. Both projects address sensitive subjects and engage partners and participants who are experiencing safety concerns, including the threat of police violence and criminalization, gender-based violence, and housing instability.

What We Tried

Using video to demonstrate that we're connecting from a closed, private space

Using an external recorder for sensitive interviews and focus groups, rather than Zoom

Giving participants the option to keep their cameras off and use pseudonyms or initials rather than names

Ensuring there are resources to support participants who become activated; this is especially important in a virtual environment as they may feel isolated once they disconnect

What We Learned

Frequent pulse checks during sensitive focus groups can mitigate the challenge of gauging participant comfort without body language

Scheduling focus groups during the regular program time, using the same Zoom link, and being introduced by staff at the beginning can contribute to a sense of safety

Some don't have access to a private or safe space to engage in sensitive conversations. Providing headphones and allowing for non-verbal engagement can be important

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