# Chapter 15 - Ethical issues with social impact measurement

Claire Paterson-Young and Richard Hazenberg

*Social impact measurement has received increasing attention, with organisations under pressure to evidence outcomes and impact of activities (specifically, activities aligned with SDGs). Obtaining evidence requires interaction with beneficiaries and stakeholders to understand the impact of activities on their lives, as well as information gathered from big data. This chapter will identify how the processes for collecting data (to measure social impact) can result in ethical violations that directly impact individuals and society. It will explore the decision processes in obtaining data which is essential in promoting research that is underpinned by strong ethical principles. The chapter will end with the provision of an ethical framework for measuring social impact [Relevant SDGs: SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals]*.

## 15.1. Ethics in social impact measurement

Social impact measurement has received increasing attention, with organisations under pressure to produce reports that evidence the outcomes and impact of activities (specifically, activities aligned with SDGs). Social impact involves evaluating the scope of activities (*outputs);* the positive and negative outcomes experienced by beneficiaries (*outcomes*); long-term changes in beneficiaries and society (*impacts*); the role of other stakeholders/partners in this change (alternative attribution); and the changes that would have occurred anyway (deadweight/control group) (Paterson-Young and Hazenberg 2021). Measuring social impact relies on understanding, not only the financial impact of activities, but the softer outcomes (for example, wellbeing) and falls in the arena of evaluation research (Paterson-Young and

Hazenberg 2021). Simons (2006) outlines the differences in evaluation research and traditional research, noting that evaluation research intends to report on the value of activities and/or programmes rather than generate knowledge. Evaluation research has an ethical blind spot (Newman and Brown 1996; Morris 2015), with detailed ethical reviews rarely sought unless evaluations are conducted by universities and/or conducted in specific environments (for example, health services). This chapter identifies the fundamental ethical principles in evaluation research and the ethical challenges in conducting social impact evaluations. It will explore the decision processes guiding ethical research and current ethical frameworks in evaluation research. The chapter ends with the outlining of an ethical framework for social impact measurement.

## 15.2. Ethics: the fundamental principles for social impact measurement

Ethical dilemmas in evaluation research arise from conflicting values and principles (Newman and Brown, 1996), illustrating the need for understanding and addressing ethical issues. Ethics are a set of moral principles and rules that, in research, involves the promotion of fair and respectful principles that prevent harm (Sieber 1993). The Economic and Social Research Council Framework for Research Ethics (ESRC 2015), on the other hand, defines ethics as the guiding principles for research. Others associate ethics with behaviours that are right or wrong (Newman and Brown 1996) or behaviours that are fair and just (Simons 2009). Research conducted by Williams (2016) noted several issues in defining ethics from acknowledging the diversity of relationships and behaviours in the evaluation process to acknowledging the complexities in decisions and judgements based on individual circumstances.

Ethical theories, from deontology to consequentialism, provide different perspectives on research ethics. Deontological ethics is acknowledging the relationships duty and morality play in human behaviours and/or action (Darwall 2002; Rawls 1971). It places emphasis on the characteristics of actions rather than the consequences of the action (Darwall 2002; Biagetti et al. 2019). General examples of deontological ethics can be found in the ideas proposed by Thomas Aquinas (do good, avoid evil) and Immanuel Kant (universal law of nature) (Darwall 2002; Rawls 1971). Deontological ethics do, however, offer guidance on how to regulate behaviour from the perspective of doing no harm (Biagetti et al. 2019). Consequentialist ethics is founded on universal values, promoting the values associated with moral behaviour (Rawls 1971). Moral behaviour has no specific norms and values, however, operates under the assumptions that all actions should serve the common good – the greatest good for the greatest number (Biagetti et al. 2019).

Consequentialist ethics are founded under the principles of the common good, consequences, utility, hedonism and universality, which consider whether actions are good based on the consequences (Biagetti et al. 2019). While consequentialist ethics promote specific values, deontological ethics promote the honouring of values (Pettit 1991). Deontological and consequentialist ethics offer general ideas on ethics but have limited applicability in research evaluation if adopted independently (Biagetti et al. 2019). Biagetti et al. (2019) recommend a mixed-approach to managing ethics in research evaluation, combining deontological and consequentialist approaches. This mixed-approach balances the challenges presented by deontological and consequential ethics by acknowledging the ethical issues associated with actions and consequences (see Biagetti et al. 2019). It encompasses the norms and principles associated with the common good, notions of right and wrong (subject specific), and stakeholder involvement in considering the common good (Biagetti et al. 2019).

Ethical issues in evaluation research focus on the challenges of conducting said research (Morris 1999; 2015 and Williams 2016), offering insight on evaluation experience (de Montclos 2012; Hendricks and Bamberger 2010; Klerman 2010; Trimble, Trickett, Fisher, and Goodyear 2012; Buchanan and McDonald 2011; Morris and Clark 2013). Newman and Brown (1996) conducted research with evaluators, finding that evaluators consistently responded to queries on ethics with questions such as "What? Ethics? What does ethics have to do with evaluation?". Research conducted by Honea (1992) found that ethics were often overlooked in evaluation and policy analysis. Indeed, ethical issues in evaluation research exist at several points in the research process, from entry/contracting to utilisation of results (Morris 2008). This ethical blind spot may have reduced over time (Morris 2015), however, a survey conducted with members from the American Evaluation Association, the Australasian Evaluation Society and the Canadian Evaluation Society found that over 60% of respondents reported experiencing ethical challenges in evaluation research (Buchanan and McDonald 2011).

## 15.3. Ethical issues in evaluation research

Ethical issues in evaluation research are diverse, with research (Morris 2015; Mathison 2005; Williams 2016) identifying issues associated with conflict of interest, informed consent, and stakeholder expectations. Acknowledging the benefits and interests of beneficiaries, stakeholders and society is essential in evaluation research. No generic guidelines exist in accessing the benefits and/or risks associated with conflicts of interest, however, evaluators should consider conflicts of interest through the evaluation process. Conflicts of interest occur in the presence of personal or financial relationships that influence the purpose, design, conduct or reporting of evaluation research (Mathison 2005). Research evaluations are *often* described as independent, however, recognising *potential* conflicts of interest is imperative to ensuring

evaluations are reliable and valid (Mathison 2005). Morris (2015) acknowledged the issues associated with conflicts of interest in evaluation, stating that evaluators can approach this situation by acknowledging the existence of conflicts. Another fundamental issue associated with conflicts of interest relate to the evaluator's presentation of findings, especially in the presentation of findings that disagree with key stakeholder views (Greene and Lee 2006). This is evident in research conducted by Morris and Clark (2013) who found 40% of evaluators felt that stakeholders actively pressured them to misrepresent results. The American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles (2018) provide recommendation on dealing with conflict of interest, stating that all conflicts of interest should be disclosed to ensure the evaluation process and results are not compromised.

Stakeholder involvement is imperative in social impact measurement; however, the involvement of beneficiaries, stakeholders, and society creates unique ethical issues (Morris 2015). Stakeholders are defined by the American Evaluation Association (2018) as individuals, groups and organisations with legitimate interest in evaluations and/or research. This includes beneficiaries who are the direct recipients of activities and/or interventions (for example, young people engaged on employability programmes). Good practice guidance on stakeholder involvement exists (Cartland, Ruch-Ross and Mason 2012), however, stakeholder involvement is *often* tokenistic, which creates further ethical challenges (Kara 2018). Research conducted by Morris (2008) found common ethical challenges in navigating the expectation of stakeholders. This research found that stakeholders often have conflicting expectations on the purpose and direction of evaluation, which create challenges for evaluators (Morris 2008). Furthermore, evaluators reported receiving pressure from stakeholders to misrepresent findings and/or violate confidentiality which, if rejected, led to suppression or the burying of findings (Morris 2008; Morris and Clark 2013). Fleischer and Christie (2009) found that 29% of members' surveys from the American Evaluation Association

Evaluation Use Topical Interest Group stated that evaluation results were intentionally misrepresented or misused. Issues associated with misuse were noted in around one-third of respondents, however, over two-thirds noted that evaluation results were not actually published or disseminated. The tension in evaluation research was also explored by Azzam (2010), who surveyed a random sample of American Evaluation Association members, finding that stakeholder influence was the main factor in willingness to alter evaluation design. These tensions illustrate the challenges in balancing professional standards that acknowledge stakeholder concerns and the quality of the evaluation (Morris 2008).

Research outlining the ethical challenges associated with evaluation research *often* focused on issues associated with participants (Morris 2015). Participants require information on the purpose of research evaluations, the benefits and/or risk to participation, right to withdraw and limits of confidentiality to make an informed decision on participation in research valuations (Kara 2018). Informed consent is the process of obtaining permission for the involvement of individuals in research evaluations. Research conducted by Walker et al. (2008), on the implementation of informed consent in evaluation research, found that although informed consent was generally acknowledged, there was an overestimation of the extent beneficiaries understood services and support. Other research, conducted by Lakes et al. (2012), found that informed consent in evaluation research relies on ensuring participants received adequate information on the perceived risks and burden of participation. Specific questions, outlined by Morris (2015), in understanding informed consent include:

- Are standard informed consent procedures appropriate for evaluation research?
- Are participants able to weigh risks and burden of participation in evaluation research?
- Are participants provided with sufficient information to provide informed consent?

Active consent (opt-in) requires an investment of time and resources, which results in evaluators *often* opting for passive consent (opt-out) (Morris 2015). Researchers (Johnson et

al., 1999; Leakey, Lunde, Koga, and Glanz 2004) acknowledge the issues associated with obtaining active consent, specifically in employing effective strategies that promote active consent. Employing techniques that ensure active consent is imperative for ensuring the true wishes of participants are considered (Johnson et al., 1999).

### 15.4. Guidance for evaluation research

The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) Ethical Guidelines expand on the Ethical Code of Conduct for Evaluation, outlining the purpose of adopting an ethical code for evaluation research associated with: responsible use of power, ensuring credibility, and responsible use of resources (The United Nations Evaluation Group 2008). The guidance is applicable to United Nations staff, contractors and subcontractors. It defines the ethical principles in evaluation through The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008 pp.6-10), including:

1. Evaluation should enable organisations to address and serve the needs of beneficiaries and stakeholders;
2. Evaluation should minimise disruption, invasion of privacy and explore to risks;
3. Evaluation should provide comprehensive and balanced presentation of findings;
4. Evaluation should be free of bias, credible and reliable;
5. Evaluators should respect the rights of participants, ensuring participants are aware of the scope and purpose of research, the benefits and risks of participation and the limits of confidentiality;
6. Evaluators should respect cultural differences, local customs and practices;
7. Evaluators should minimise disruption to participants, organisations and other stakeholders;

8. Evaluators should ensure all reports and presentations provide accurate, reliable and valid information.

Professional standards and ethical principles should guide all individuals and organisations engaged in research evaluation, with The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) proposing a shared approach to research evaluation.

The Department for International Development (DFID) (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities sets out guidance for conducting research, evaluation and monitoring. The guidance acknowledges the ethical dilemmas associated with research, evaluation and monitoring and is applicable to DFID staff, contractors and subcontractors. The guidance outlines the ethical standards, principles and expectations for each cycle in the evaluation process (DFID 2019):

1. Commissioning, planning and design (Stage One);
2. Data collection and analysis (Stage Two);
3. Reporting, dissemination and use of evidence (Stage Three); and
4. Monitoring, follow-up and data use (Stage Four).

The ethical principles outlined by DFID (2019) are based on *maximising* benefit and *minimising* harm, respecting people's rights and dignity, acting with honesty and accountability, and delivering evaluations with integrity and credibility. Table 15.1 summaries the core ethical principles associated with The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) Ethical Guidelines and the DFID (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities.

| **The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) Ethical Guidelines** | **The DFID (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities** |
|---|---|
| Evaluation design should help organisations serve stakeholders needs. | Evaluation should generate evidence that is of utility to different stakeholders. |
| Evaluation should be necessary and justified with benefits outweighing. | Evaluation should be useful, necessary and feasible. |
| Evaluation should be independent and free from bias. | Evaluation should be preserved against bias or external influence. |
| Evaluations should be impartial and credible, with information on the strengths and weaknesses balanced. | Evaluation should be aligned with principles of impartiality, credibility and objectivity. |
| Evaluators should acknowledge and disclose conflicts of interest (in writing) to ensure credibility. | Evaluators should ensure information is shared to help identify and mitigate conflicts of interest. |
| Evaluators should ensure honesty and integrity. | Evaluation should preserve the integrity of evidence. |
| Evaluators should ensure completion of evaluation within agreed timeframes, noting changes to plans or risks. | Evaluation has been implemented, delivered and disseminated in accordance with agreed timeframes and/or contracts. |
| Evaluators should respect culture, local customs, personal characteristics and | Evaluators should provide accurate and sufficient information on participants rights |

| The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) Ethical Guidelines | The DFID (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities |
|---|---|
| practices; minimise disruption; and ensure participants rights to privacy. | (confidentiality, privacy etc.) to ensure informed consent. |
| Evaluators should ensure participants rights, fair representation and compliance. | Evaluators should ensure participants rights and dignity, promoting equitable participation. |
| Evaluators should respect participants rights to confidentiality, explaining any limits of confidentiality. | Evaluators should ensure participants are provided with accurate information on arrangements for guarding confidentiality. |
| Evaluators should minimise the risk of harm and negative consequences of participation. | Evaluators should acknowledge any risk of harm to participants and the wider society. |
| Evaluators should ensure the accurate, complete and reliable presentation of evaluation reports. | Evaluators should consult on risks, benefits and mitigations to ensure accuracy and completeness. |
| Evaluators should disclose wrongdoings or omissions uncovered through the evaluation. | Evaluators should have clear processes for reporting and/or disclosing wrongdoing. |

**Table 15.1:** Ethical principles in evaluation research

Guidelines from The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) and DFID (2019) are summarised under eight core ethical principles: Utility and Necessity; Independence, Impartiality and Conflict of Interest; Honesty, Integrity and Accountability; Respect for Dignity and Diversity; Rights and Confidentiality; Avoidance of Harm; Accuracy,

Completeness and Reliability; and Transparency, Omissions and Wrongdoing (The United Nations Evaluation Group 2008; DFID 2019) (Table 15.2).

| **Core Principles** | **Description** |
|---|---|
| Utility and Necessity | Evaluations should serve the needs of beneficiaries, stakeholders and society. Evaluations should be necessary, useful and justified. The benefits of evaluation should outweigh the risks. |
| Independence, Impartiality and Conflict of Interest | Evaluation should be independent, preserved against bias or external influence. Evaluators should acknowledge and disclose conflicts of interest (in writing) to ensure credibility and mitigate concerns. It should be aligned with principles of impartiality, credibility and objectivity. |
| Honesty, Integrity and Accountability | Evaluators should ensure honesty and integrity, preserving the integrity of evidence and conclusions. They should ensure completion of evaluations within agreed timeframes, noting any developments or changes. |
| Respect for Dignity and Diversity | Evaluators should respect culture, local customs, personal characteristics and practices; minimise disruption to participants and organisations; and ensure participants rights to privacy. |
| Rights and Confidentiality | Evaluators should respect participants rights to confidentiality, explaining the arrangements for guarding confidentiality. |
| Avoidance of Harm | Evaluators should minimise the risk of harm and negative consequences of participation to participants and the wider society. |

| Core Principles | Description |
|---|---|
| Accuracy, Completeness and Reliability | Evaluators should ensure the accurate, complete and reliable presentation of evaluation reports. They should consult on risks, benefits and mitigations to ensure accuracy and completeness. |
| Transparency, Omissions and Wrongdoing | Evaluators should disclose any wrongdoings and/or omissions uncovered through the evaluation. They should have clear processes for reporting and/or disclosing wrongdoing. |

**Table 15.2:** Core principles in evaluation research

## 15.5. An ethical framework for social impact measurement

Sustainability has strong grounding in ethics, with the Brundtland Report (1987) outlining the fundamental principles for sustainability based on social justice, poverty and equality. The focus on sustainability has grown since the Brundtland Report (1987), accumulating in the development of the Millennium Development Goals and The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were introduced to promote a sustainable, peaceful and prosperous planet for all, through the development of 17 core goals (UN Sustainable Development Goals 2020). Promotion of the SDG agenda creates pressure for organisation to develop activities and programmes that address the systemic barriers recognised in the goals (Paterson-Young and Hazenberg 2021). This pressure creates an opportunity for organisations to align impact measurement with the SDGs to demonstrate local, national and global impact (Paterson-Young and Hazenberg 2021). Understanding the ethical implications associated with social impact measurement is crucial for understanding the impact of programmes and interventions in alleviating societal problems.

Research shows that, despite the existence of ethical frameworks for evaluation research, these frameworks vary in usefulness and rigor (Williams 2016). Adopting an ethical framework for measuring social impact, aligned with the SDGs, will allow evaluators and researchers to ensure professional standards in evaluation research. Figure 15.1 provides an overview of an 'Ethical Framework for Social Impact Measurement' evaluation and/or research. The 'Ethical Framework for Social Impact Measurement' draws on core ethical principles outlined by The United Nations Evaluation Group (2008) Ethical Guidelines and the DFID (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities. It embeds the scope of activities (*outputs);* the positive and negative outcomes experienced by beneficiaries (*outcomes*); long-term changes in beneficiaries and society (*impacts*) (Clifford et al. 2014; McLoughlin et al. 2010; Paterson-Young and Hazenberg 2021) with the role of other stakeholders/partners in this change (*alternative attribution*); the changes that would have occurred anyway (*deadweight*) and the changes declining over time (*drop-off*) (Clifford et al. 2014; Paterson-Young and Hazenberg 2021). It also acknowledges the dissemination and reporting of the evaluation, externally and internally, to ensure transparency (Clifford et al. 2014; The United Nations Evaluation Group 2008; DFID 2019).

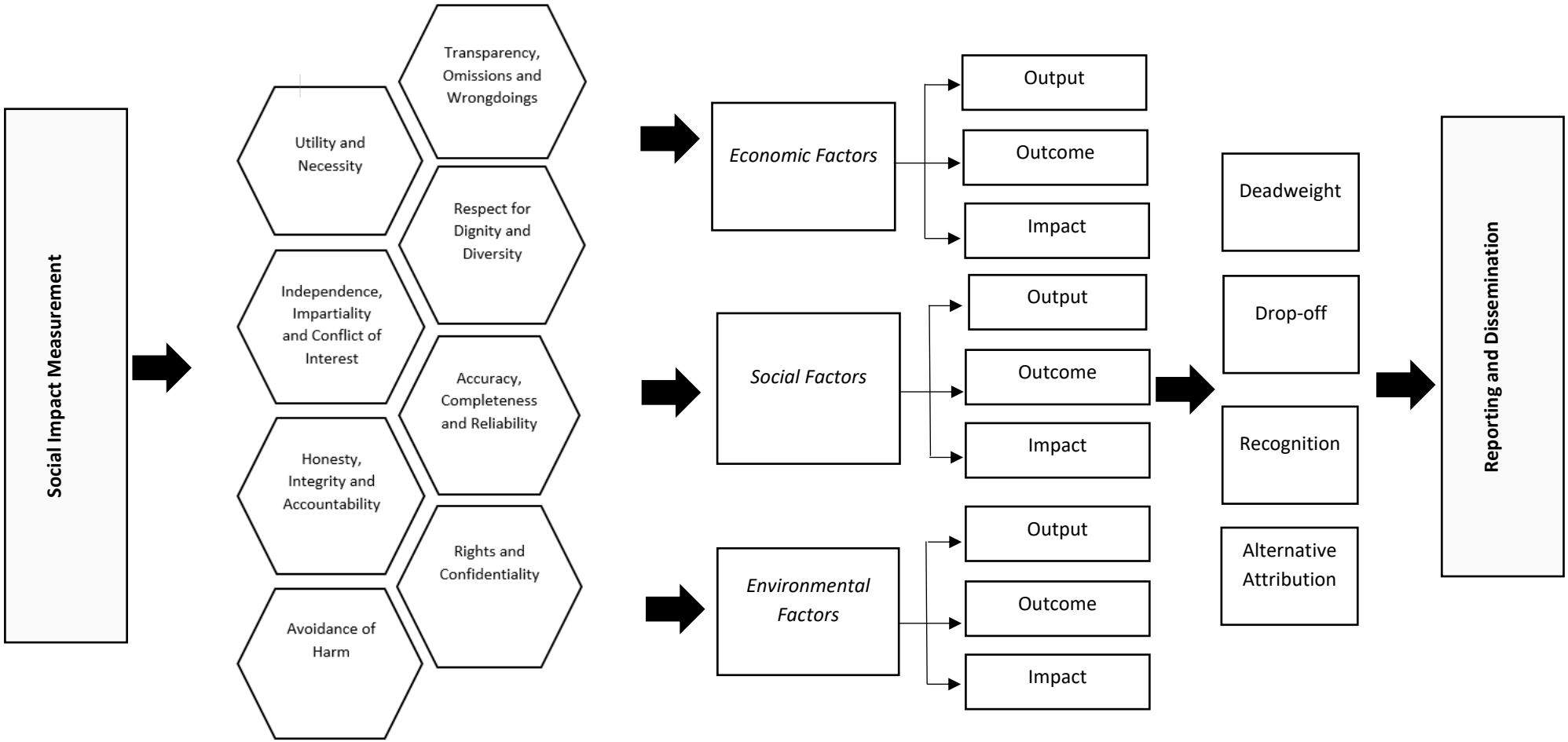


**Figure 15.1:** Ethical Framework for Social Impact Measurement

## 15.6. Ethics and impact

Effective reporting of social impact measurement, aligned with the United Nations' SDGs, is pivotal for allowing us to better understand the impact of programmes and interventions in alleviating societal problems. Ethical issues in evaluation research focus on the challenges of conducting evaluation research (Morris 1999; 2015 and Williams 2016), offering insight on evaluation experience (de Montclos 2012; Hendricks and Bamberger 2010; Klerman 2010; Trimble, Trickett, Fisher, and Goodyear 2012; Buchanan and McDonald 2011; Morris and Clark 2013).

Social impact measurement, and evaluation research, can result in ethical violations that directly impact beneficiaries, stakeholders and society (Morris 2015; Williams 2016). Acknowledging the ethical issues (for example, informed consent, stakeholder expectations, conflicts of interest) associated with social impact measurement is imperative in ensuring evaluation research is reliable and valid. It empowers organisations in evaluating the social impact of activities and helps position the theoretical within the practical, especially in tackling the SDGs.

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