Evaluation Theory: Who Needs It?
Jean A. King

An important question
If evaluation is a field of practice, then what is an appropriate role for theory in evaluation?

Theory? Practice?
“. . . there is nothing so practical as good theory.”
-Kurt Lewin (1951)

“. . . there is nothing so theoretical as good practice.”
-Michael Fullan (2001)
The final word...

In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. **In practice there is.**

-Yogi Berra

The problem for evaluators

An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

A dilemma...

**Why you should care**
- Fields that have theory can conduct research and advance purposefully
- Having meaningful theory might help us become a profession sooner
- It is good to know the theory that exists

**Why theory doesn’t matter**
- Evaluation theory is not in great shape when compared to other fields
- Many practitioners know nothing about evaluation theory—and they practice evaluation just fine, right?
Shadish (1998)  
“Evaluation Theory Is Who We Are”  
Shadish argued that what we say about what we do (our theory) is just as important as—and deeply informs—what we do (our practice) and who we are (our profession) as evaluators.

Current status of evaluation theory  
Since its inception, evaluation has struggled to generate viable theory. As Berk and Rossi (1999) put it: “So far... theory has not lived up to its promise in evaluation research” (p. 33).

Reasons for NOT focusing on theory  
1. Lack of conceptual consensus
2. The relatively recent emergence of the field
3. Lack of financial support for theory development in evaluation
4. A focus on program theory
5. The field’s practical focus
6. A continuing concern with evaluation models and methods

-King and Stevahn (2013)
Topics for today’s session

- Evaluation theory as a concept
- Components of a meaningful evaluation theory
- Alkin’s evaluation theory “tree”
- Sample evaluation theories
- Program theory that brings theory to life in evaluations

And so we begin…

THE CONCEPT OF EVALUATION THEORY

Dictionary definitions of “theory”

- A speculative plan
- A formulation of underlying principles of certain observed phenomena that has been verified to some degree
- The principles of an art or science rather than its practice
- A conjecture or guess
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Chen’s definition of theory

“A set of interrelated assumptions, principles, and/or propositions to explain or guide social actions”

Shadish, Cook, & Leviton’s definition

“No single understanding of the term is widely accepted. Theory connotes a body of knowledge that organizes, categorizes, describes, predicts, explains, and otherwise aids in understanding and controlling a topic” (p. 30, emphasis added)
Shadish, Cook, & Leviton’s framing

“Evaluation theory tells us when, where, and why some methods should be applied and others not... Evaluation theories are like military strategy and tactics; methods are like military weapons and logistics” (p. 34)

SC&L’s five fundamental issues that undergird practical evaluation theory

• Social programming
• Knowledge construction
• Valuing
• Knowledge use
• Evaluation practice

Marv Alkin takes a different approach to theory
Alkin’s concept of eval theory
“. . .while [theory] is conventionally used in evaluation literature, in some ways, it would be more appropriate to use the term approaches or models” (p. 4)

Alkin’s theory distinction
A PRESCRIPTIVE model- “a set of rules, prescriptions, prohibitions, and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be done”

Alkin’s theory distinction
A DESCRIPTIVE model- “a set of statements and generalizations that describes, predicts, or explains evaluation activities—[in other words]. . . an empirical theory” (Roots, p. 4)
Alkin’s evaluation personnel scheme

- Methodologists
- Evaluation issue analysts
- Evaluation interpreters and teachers
- **Evaluation theorists** [Roots, p. 5]

Components of Alkin’s “tree”

- **At the base of the tree trunk**
  - Social accountability
  - Social inquiry
  - Epistemology
- **Three “branches”**
  - Use
  - Methods
  - Valuing

Alkin’s theory tree
Alkin's scheme compared to SC&L's

- Alkin
- Shadish, Cook, & Leviton
  - **Social programming**
  - Knowledge
  - Valuing
  - Use
  - Practice

A SAMPLING OF THEORISTS

Representing each branch on the theory tree

Ralph Tyler (methods branch)
Apply these theorists’ approaches to an evaluation

*Read the MAP evaluation situation and decide how the different theorists would approach the study.*

[There are many right answers!]
An important question (again)

If evaluation is a field of practice, then what is an appropriate role for theory in evaluation?

One answer:

Program theory

A helpful tool by any name...

- Program theory
- Program logic
- Logic model
- Theory of action
- Model of change
- Conceptual map
- Outcome map

(Not theory of change—that's different)
An easy example

Think of as many different ways as you can to get to Minneapolis when...

• It is 10 below zero (F)
• You are in Saint Paul
• You drive a 1986 Buick
• Your car has a dead battery
• You have an important meeting in one hour
• You can’t be sweaty and out of breath

What is program theory?

• A description of a program
• A graphic representation of what is expected to be achieved and how it is expected to work
  Called “program theory” or “program action”
• A sequence of steps; a logical chain of if-then relationships that link investments to activities to results

Program theory in evaluation

"A specification of what must be done to achieve the desired goals, what other important impacts may also be anticipated, and how these goals and impacts would be generated" (Chen, 1990, p. 43)
Patton's definition of program theory

"The full chain of objectives that links inputs to activities, activities to immediate outputs, immediate outputs to intermediate outcomes, and intermediate outcomes to ultimate goals”

*Utilization-Focused Evaluation*

Components of a logic model *(Frechtling, Chapter 3)*

1. Inputs
2. Activities
3. Outputs
4. Outcomes
5. “Context”
6. “Impact”

Connections in a logic model *(Frechtling, Chapter 4)*

- Connections among components
- Feedback loops
Beware “black box” evaluation!

Components of program theory for Funnel and Rogers (p. 31)

- **Theory of change**- “This refers to the central mechanism by which change comes about for individuals, groups, and communities”
- **Theory of action**- “This explains how programs or other interventions are constructed to activate their theory of change.”

Components of a program theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of change (Chapter 7)</th>
<th>Situation analysis: Identification of the problem, causes, opportunities, consequences</th>
<th>Focusing and scoping, setting the boundaries of the program, linking to partners</th>
<th>Outcomes chain: The centerpiece of the program theory, linking the theory of change and theory of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theory of action (Chapter 8)</td>
<td>Desired attributes of intended outcomes, attention to unintended outcomes</td>
<td>Program features and external factors that will affect outcomes</td>
<td>What the program does to address key program and external factors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation with program theory

- Simple pipeline and outcomes chain logic models
- People can learn from:
  - Failure - What reasons weren’t outcomes achieved?
  - Partial success - Differential effects
  - Success - Causal mechanisms

Uses of program theory

1. Clarifying project intentions
2. Enhancing communication among team members
3. Managing the project
4. Designing an evaluation/determining questions
5. Documenting a project
6. Examining a project or constellation of projects

Frechtling, Chapter 2

Common myths about program theory

1. It’s a new approach
2. There’s only one way to do it
3. It is not a good evaluation model
4. It’s really hard (takes too much time)
5. It’s really easy (just draw it)
6. You can’t really test it (can’t find causality)
7. You can surely test it (assume causality)
A bit of program theory history:
Greek origins

“First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.”

- Epictetus

More program theory history

Dates to the late 1960’s
Accountability demands continue to grow
- Public sector – Government Performance Review Act (GPRA)
- Non-profit sector
- Private sector
- International agencies
- Program evaluation

Theory-driven evaluation

- Developed by sociologists Huey Chen and his advisor, Peter Rossi
- Chen’s book published in 1990
  - Normative theory - prescriptive, what should be
  - Causative theory - descriptive, what is
Program theory helps distinguish...

- **Implementation** failure (not done correctly)
- **Theory** failure (done right, but still didn’t work)

What does a logic model look like?
- Graphic display of boxes and arrows; vertical or horizontal
- Relationships, linkages
- Any shape possible
- Circular, dynamic
- Cultural adaptations; storyboards
- Level of detail
  - Simple
  - Complex
- Multiple models
  - Multi-level programs
  - Multi-component programs

Examples...
Types of logic models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipelines</td>
<td>Series of building blocks, useful when activities are all up-front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome chains</td>
<td>Represent the intervention and its consequences as a series of results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realist matrices</td>
<td>Identify the conditions under which the theory will apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narratives</td>
<td>Tell a story about how the intervention works</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pipelines: The simplest form of logic model

![Diagram of inputs, outputs, and outcomes]

A bit more detail

![Diagram with inputs, outputs, and outcomes]

INPUTS: Program investments

OUTPUTS: Activities, Participation

OUTCOMES: Short, Medium, Long-term

What we invest

What we do

Who we reach

What results

SO WHAT??

What is the VALUE?
Pipeline logic models

- Options
  - Single line of boxes
  - Separated causal strands
  - Usually better to separate outcomes into at least short – and long-term
- Additional components
  - External factors
  - Assumptions
  - Needs

Variations of pipeline logic models

1. Charities Evaluation planning triangle
2. United Way’s logic model
3. WK Kellogg Foundation logic model - broader notion of impacts
4. Bennett’s hierarchy - based on Kirkpatrick levels of training outcomes
5. University of Wisconsin logical model
6. Logical framework (AKA logframe)
Bennett’s hierarchy (extension programs)

1. Inputs
2. Activities
3. Participation
4. Reactions
5. Changes in knowledge, aspirations, skills, and attitudes
6. Behavior changes
7. Subsequent changes in social, economic, and environmental conditions

An outcomes chain

- It shows the assumed cause-effect or contingency relationships
  - Between immediate and intermediate outcomes
  - Between intermediate and ultimate outcomes or impacts (short- and long-term)
- It doesn’t just reference outcomes, but also impacts related to reducing the problem, however those occur

Why is an outcomes chain important?

“The outcomes chain, rather than program activities, is the main device for thinking about how the program will function to achieve results and address the situation”

(p. 179, italics added)
Variations of outcomes chain logic models

- People-centered logic model - Often based on Bennett’s hierarchy
- ActKnowledge/Aspen Institute approach to theory of change - Shows the precondition outcomes that lead up to intended final result

Technology for representing program theory

- Drawn logic models
  - Standard computer packages
  - Word processing
  - Spreadsheet (e.g., Excel)
  - Presentation (e.g., PPT, Prezi)
  - Special visual representation (e.g., Visio)
  - Specialist logic model packages

Systems view

- The latest thinking in the field moves beyond program theory as too linear
- Larger view of programs as part of complicated or complex systems
Review: Topics for today's session

- Evaluation theory as a concept
- Components of a meaningful evaluation theory
- Alkin’s evaluation theory “tree”
- Sample evaluation theories
- Program theory that brings theory to life in evaluations

An important question (remaining)
If evaluation is a field of practice, then what is an appropriate role for theory in evaluation?

So what do you think?
1. How might evaluation theory affect your practice?
2. Why should you care about evaluation theory?
Thank you!

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