An Update on the Latest Evaluation Theories & Models

Jean A. King

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.
Topics for this session. . .

• Frame the concept of evaluation theory and one related practice
• Present three recent additions
  ○ Systems thinking
  ○ Developmental evaluation
  ○ Realist/ic evaluation
• [If there is time, clarify the meaning of unfamiliar theory terms. . .]
As we begin our discussion. . .

A QUICK GROUNDING IN EVALUATION THEORY AND ITS DOMAINS
A critical question

If evaluation is a field of practice, then what is the role of *theory* in evaluation?
Theory? Practice? Say what?

Kurt Lewin (1951)  Michael Fullan (2001)

“. . . there is nothing so practical as good theory”  “. . . there is nothing so theoretical as good practice”
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
“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)
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 (1/2)

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” (e.g., empowerment evaluation) (Roots, p. 4)
Alkin’s theory distinction (2/2)

A **DESCRIPTIVE** model- “a set of statements and generalizations that describes, predicts, or explains evaluation activities— [in other words]... an empirical theory” (e.g., actions based on what we know about evaluation use) 

*(Roots, p. 4)*
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)
And so we begin...

OVERARCHING DOMAINS OF EVALUATION THEORY
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 theory tree

Use
- Preskill
- King
- Cousins

Methods
- Cronbach
- Weiss
- Chen
- Henry and Mark
- Levin

Valuing
- Greene
- Mertens

Social Justice

Social accountability
Social inquiry
Epistemology
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alkin</th>
<th>Shadish, Cook, &amp; Leviton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Methods</td>
<td>• <strong>Social programming</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Valuing</td>
<td>• Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use</td>
<td>• Valuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Practice</strong></td>
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</table>
Categories of Evaluation Theory

- Methods/Knowledge
- Valuing
- Use

- Social programming
- Practice
Pick a corner and explain why you chose it . . .

1. Every evaluator should be well grounded in evaluation theory
2. Evaluation theory gives me helpful ideas for practice
3. I consider myself an evaluation “theorist”
4. I have nothing to do with evaluation theory; it makes no difference to me
A practical approach to theory in evaluation that caught on in the 1990s

PROGRAM THEORY (BY ANY NAME)
A critical question (again)

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

Program theory
Theory-driven evaluation (methods branch of theory tree)

- 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* (research based)
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
A fully detailed logic model
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)
Recent additions to evaluation theory- 1

SYSTEMS THINKING/APPROACHES
Taking a systems view

• The latest thinking in the field moves beyond logic models as too linear
• Larger view of programs as part of multiple systems
• Also a response to complexity theory
1. Improving on logic models by attending to systems issues

Funnel and Rogers (2011), *Purposeful Program Theory*
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. . .”
2. Systems thinking as its own field

“Perhaps more than any other area of social inquiry, the systems field provides a wealth of approaches that address the conundrum of keeping the big in mind when you can only handle the small”

Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011, p. 17
Hundreds of systems approaches--
CAS as one commonly used example

- **A Complex Adaptive System (CAS) is defined in terms of its parts, the behavior of those parts, and the emergent behavior of the whole**
- **Change happens all the time, but not following a smooth predictable curve because of the emergent dynamics of the CAS**
- **Predictable outcomes are an artificial construct when evaluating performance in a CAS**
Eoyang & Holladay’s adaptive action

• What? (Description)
• So what? (Search for patterns: Boundaries, differences, relationships)
• Now what? (Plans and follow-up)
Another popular example: Cynefin (Snowden & Kurtz)

Two key dimensions

- Centrality (weak/strong)
- Connectivity (weak/strong)
## Categories of cynefin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Connections</th>
<th>Central Control</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Making a cake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicated</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Launching a rocket ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Raising a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Defeating ISIS?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 10.3. Cynefin framework—situational behaviors (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011, p. 168)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPLEX ASPECTS</th>
<th>COMPLICATED ASPECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Highly context-dependent</td>
<td>• The situation is knowable; answers are accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highly dependent on starting conditions</td>
<td>• Causality is nonlinear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Predictability is not possible</td>
<td>• Effects may be separated from causes in time and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expertise is important</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAOTIC ASPECTS</th>
<th>SIMPLE ASPECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• No apparent patterns</td>
<td>• Clarity of dynamics—anyone can see the things the way they are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impossible to determine any causal relationships</td>
<td>• Very simple linear patterns of cause and effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Things are known</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where does ATTENTION TO SYSTEMS go on the evaluation theory tree?
DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION - A WAY TO ADDRESS COMPLEXITY
Developmental evaluation

- An evaluation approach that can assist the development of social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments
- Facilitates real-time (or close to real-time) feedback to program staff, facilitating a continuous development loop
Why developmental evaluation?

• *Evaluators* and *evaluation plans* must adjust to the ongoing, but unpredictable dynamic behavior of a CAS

• The changing patterns within the system must be *captured* and *described*, without depending on natural end points of behavior or periodic timed samples

• Evaluators must preserve and learn from the “*noise*” in the system

• Looks for the *differences* that make a *difference*!
Formative, Summative, is that all you evaluators got?

Umm, well, umm how about developmen-tal
Isn’t this just formative evaluation by another name? [Hint: NO]

From product evaluation in a known context

- **Formative**- use data to improve the product/program
- **Summative**- test that it achieves its outcomes

In a complex environment (with attention to systems)

- Context is complex, changing, and uncertain
- Program staff are responding to situations as they arise
The lifecycle of an initiative, and its context, determine which of the 3 major evaluation approaches to use:

**DEVELOPMENTAL**
- Initiative is innovating and in development
- Exploring - Creating - Emerging
- Implementers are experimenting with different approaches and activities
- There is a degree of uncertainty about what will work and how
- New questions, challenges, opportunities, successes and activities continue to emerge

**FORMATIVE**
- Initiative is forming and under refinement
- Improving - Enhancing - Standardising
- Core elements of the initiative are taking shape; implementers continue to make improvements
- Outcomes are becoming more predictable
- The context is increasingly well-known and understood

**SUMMATIVE**
- Initiative is stabilizing and well-established
- Established, Mature, Predictable
- The initiative’s activities are well-established and are not changing
- Implementers have significant experience and an increasing amount of certainty about “what works”
- The initiative is ready for a determination of merit, value or significance

**WHAT IS IT?**

**HOW IS IT WORKING?**

**DID IT WORK?**

TIME →
Kinds of developmental evaluation

1. Ongoing development
2. Adapting effective principles to a new context
3. Developing a rapid response to a situation
4. “Preformative development of a potentially scalable innovation”
5. Major systems change and cross-scale DE

Uses common to all types of DE

• Create a documentary record of changes made; identify forks in the road (past and present)
• Generate feedback and learning
• Do contingency planning for the future
• Extrapolate principles

Nora Murphy’s developmental evaluation in practice (2014)

1. Apply systems thinking
2. Choose an appropriate inquiry framework
3. Be flexible with your methods
4. Pay close attention to process
5. Monitor strategies (cf M&E)
6. Examine patterns (including timelines) as data
7. Consider the mountain of accountability (in response to accountability concerns)
The Mountain of Accountability

Mission Fulfillment

Accountability for Learning, Development and Adaptation
- Deep reflective practice
- Developmental evaluation
- Strategic framework evaluation
- Focus on systems change, innovation & complexity

Accountability for Impact and Effectiveness
- Major program evaluations
- External strategic evaluation (Wilder)
- Board survey & feedback
- Grantee Perception Report
- Synthesis of grantees’ reports
- Employee surveys

Basic Accountability for Management Processes
- Financial audits & investment returns
- Personnel evaluation, CEO evaluation
- Basic management information system
- Due diligence
- Routine grantee reporting
- Community indicators for planning

Primary Responsibility

Everyone

Evaluators

Clients
“Developmental evaluation is first and foremost about doing what makes sense”

Where does DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION go on the evaluation theory tree?
REALIST/IC EVALUATION - ANOTHER WAY TO ADDRESS COMPLEXITY
Developed in England, late 1990s

Realistic Evaluation

Ray Pawson & Nick Tilley
Pawson hectors on alone...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJSehOBa75I
Grounding for this work

• Focus on scientific inquiry, policy research, and “evaluation science”
• Conduct evaluations to inform the development of policy and practice
• Use evidence to evolve the realist approach (creating Campbell’s “disputacious community of truth seekers”)
• Ground evaluations in what is already known
Pawson’s claim

• “. . . [A]ny one-off evaluation will always fall short and be open to criticism” (p. 82)
• “. . . [E]valuation can only grow as a science if it learns lessons from investigation to investigation rather than each inquiry emerging freshly out of the egg” (p. 138)
Realist “principles”

1. Is “avowedly theory-driven” - builds on and develops broad program theories

2. Provides explicit statements of specific contexts, mechanisms, outcomes (CMO) (the “most unlovely term”)

\[ \text{What works for whom under what conditions and in what respects?} \]
What works for whom in what circumstances

Program specification

Theory

Mechanisms (M)
Contexts (C)
Outcomes (O)

Hypotheses

What might work for whom in what circumstances

Observations

Data collection and analysis on M.C.O.
Key characteristics of program complexity- VICTORE

1. Volitions
2. Implementation
3. Contexts
4. Time
5. Outcomes
6. Rivalry
7. Emergence
“Contested complexity” (Pawson modeling disputation)

1. Non-productive approaches
   • Augmented trials- underestimate problem
   • Systems perspective- too abstract
   • Critical realist perspective- a bluff

2. A potentially productive approach: The “pragmatist perspective,” if framed using the realistic approach (lacks unifying philosophy otherwise)
Is this statement correct?

“There is . . . a considerable body of literature on complexity emanating from the family variously identified with ‘qualitative,’ ‘formative,’ ‘process,’ ‘action,’ and ‘utilisation-focused’ perspectives. The latest rebranding occurs in the form of ‘developmental evaluation.’”

Pawson (2013, p. 76)
Organizing principles of evaluation science

1. Theory
2. Abstraction
3. Reusable conceptual platforms
4. Model building
5. Adjudication
6. Trust
7. Organized skepticism
Sample conceptual platform for behavioral change interventions

Figure 6.3  A conceptual platform for behavioural change interventions
Where does REALIST EVALUATION go on the evaluation theory tree?
Where and when might you use these new approaches?

WRAPPING UP THE UPDATE
If evaluation is a field of practice, then what is an appropriate role for theory in evaluation?
Compare and contrast

- Systems thinking
- Developmental evaluation
- Realist/ic evaluation
What do you think? Now what?

1. How might these newer evaluation theories affect your practice?

2. Should they?
Thank you!

Jean King
kingx004@umn.edu
Why does our field constantly coin new terms?

SO MANY THEORIES, SO LITTLE TIME
You turn to ask questions... 

Which evaluation theory terms are unfamiliar?

Which need explication?

Note: We are in this together!
Terms to explicate. . .

• ADD