Evaluation [Theory]
Approaches and Models
What different possibilities do evaluators have?
Today’s content (following intros. . .)

1. Review the overarching domains of evaluation “theory”
2. Clarify the meaning of specific evaluation approaches and models
3. Understand the underlying principles and practice applications of recent theories:
   • Systems thinking
   • Developmental evaluation
   • Realist evaluation
4. Appreciate the value of evaluation theory
Who is in the room this afternoon?

YOUR BACKGROUND . . .
Reviewing the overarching domains of evaluation theory

ISSUES REGARDING EVALUATION “THEORY”
An important question

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

Also theory of change — that’s different, but another approach to theory in evaluation
The issue for most evaluators

An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson
An evaluator’s dilemma. . .

Why theory matters to evaluators

• 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”  
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
- “So far... theory has not lived up to its promise in evaluation research” (Berk & Rossi, 1999, p. 33)
Reasons the field has NOT focused 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)
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
Chen’s definition of theory

“A set of interrelated assumptions, principles, and/or propositions to explain or guide social action.”
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)
Marv Alkin takes a different approach to “theory”
Alkin’s concept of evaluation 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 **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 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 evaluation theory tree
Components of Alkin’s “tree”

At the base of the tree trunk

- Social accountability
- Social inquiry
- Epistemology
Components of Alkin’s “tree”

Three “branches” of the evaluation theory tree

• Use
• Methods
• Valuing
Mertens and Wilson’s revised tree

Figure 2.2. A four-branch tree of evaluation approaches.
What distinguishes the three branches?

Trick question:
Which is the best branch?
A DIVERGENT SAMPLING OF THEORISTS

The meaning of specific evaluation approaches and models
Ralph Tyler (methods branch)
Michael Scriven (valuing branch)
Daniel Stufflebeam (use branch)
Michael Quinn Patton (use branch)
Donna Mertens (valuing branch)
Important question

How do you decide which approach to use in which situation?
In choosing an evaluation approach/model, consider...

• THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS
• The methods likely to be used
• The program’s content area
• Type of organization
• Geographical location
• Your commitment to specific approaches
• Your role as evaluator
NEW EVALUATION APPROACHES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Understanding the principles and applications of recent theories
1. The importance of systems thinking

Just when we thought we knew what we were doing...
• The latest thinking in program evaluation moves beyond logic models and strategic planning as too linear

• Larger view of programs as part of complicated or complex systems
Two borrowed examples...
How might a systems perspective affect our thinking about choosing an evaluation approach or model?
2. Developmental evaluation

A recent addition to evaluation approaches that addresses complexity
Formative, Summative, is that all you evaluators got?  

Umm, well, umm how about dev-el-op-men-tal
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 complex adaptive system (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**!

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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:

1. **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

2. **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

3. **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

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**WHAT IS IT?**

**HOW IS IT WORKING?**

**DID IT WORK?**

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

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
3. Realist evaluation

A theory-driven way to integrate systems thinking into evaluation
Realist evaluation summed up

• Whereas the question asked in traditional experimentation was, “Does this work?” or “What works?” the question asked in realistic evaluation is “What works for whom in what circumstances?”

• Thus, you begin by expecting measures to vary in their impact depending on the conditions in which they are introduced
Nick Tilley, developer of realist evaluation

The key problem for *evaluation research* is to find out how and under what conditions a given measure will produce its impacts...
Distinguishing features of realist evaluation

• Focus is on ‘what works for whom and under what conditions?’

• Learning is focused on configurations of

Contexts---Mechanisms---Outcomes

• Realist evaluation is about hypothe-sizing and testing CMO configurations
Definition of “mechanism”

• “An account of the makeup, behavior and interrelationships of those processes that are responsible for the outcome” (Pawson et al., 2004)

• Understanding program mechanisms is critical in understanding how programs work
  • What mechanisms are needed for the program to work?
  • Did the program incorporate knowledge of such mechanisms in its design?
For some people, a problem...
Pulling everything together...
Stated purpose of this session

Present (1) the overarching domains of evaluation theory and (2) descriptions of common evaluation approaches and models, including their strengths and weaknesses and (3) where and how to use them
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
All models are wrong, but some are useful.

-George Box
Thank you!

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