

THREE ACHILLES HEELS OF PROGRAM THEORY EVALUATION

Presenters:

Patricia Rogers (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)

Bron McDonald (Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Victoria)

Discussant:

Nick Tilley, (Nottingham Trent University and UK Home Office)

OVER VIEW OF SYMPOSIUM

Program theory evaluation is an attractive technique which encourages participation by staff, can be used for incremental building of organisational capacity to evaluate, and has spin-off benefits in program planning and management. But, after more than a decade of using it, there remain challenges in the theory and practice of program theory evaluation. This presentation focuses on 3 of these challenges:

- the continuing difficulty of attributing the observed outcomes to the program;
- the tendency to focus on intended outcomes to the exclusion of unintended outcomes; and
- practical issues in identifying and understanding how different groups of service users experience the program, and follow different paths to reach the intended outcomes, or to reach other outcomes

FORMAT

Three panellists will combine their complementary experience to examine these issues. The symposium is organised in the form of a dialogue between theory and practice, focusing on each issue in turn.

Patricia Rogers is a Director of the Program for Public Sector Evaluation at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. She has a special interest in program theory evaluation, having used it, and encouraged others to use it, since 1987. She will address each issue “in theory”, through presenting a summary of each issue, the challenges posed, and different solutions which have been posed. She will also begin with an introduction to program theory evaluation to ensure the symposium is accessible and useful even for participants who are unfamiliar with the approach.

Bron McDonald is the leader of the Evaluation Pilot Program in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (Victorian State Government) which works to develop methods for evaluating projects and programs within the Primary Industries Division of the department. She will address each issue “in practice” through presenting examples of actual evaluation work that has addressed these challenges.

Nick Tilley is Professor of Sociology at Nottingham Trent University, currently seconded to the Home Office, and co-author of Realistic Evaluation – a book which argued that program evaluation should be built on program models which identified the contexts within which desirable processes operated. He will be a discussant for each issue.

The symposium will be designed so that all who attend have an opportunity to discuss these challenges and comment on their experiences. The presenters will outline the theory then discuss actual examples where program theory helped, hindered or was insufficient to meet evaluation requirements. The discussant will then respond and the audience invited to comment.

PROGRAM THEORY EVALUATION

By 'program theory evaluation', we are referring to evaluations that are guided by an explicit model of how the program is understood to achieve its intended outcomes. This is not an entirely new approach to program evaluation; the first suggestions for evaluating programs in this way date from the 1960s and 70s (Suchman, 1967; Weiss, 1972; Argyris & Schön, 1978). It was during the 1980s, however, that interest in this approach grew (e.g. Bennett, 1982; Patton, 1986; Chen 1980; Bickman, 1987, 1990). In Australia, this approach was strongly encouraged by the New South Wales Public Service Board in the 1980s (Lenne & Cleland 1987; Funnell, 1990). Program theory evaluation is now widely encouraged (Weiss, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Chen, 1990; Milne, 1993; Owen, 1999; Bullen & Weller, 1992))

Differing and inconsistent terminology plagues this approach to evaluation. . In this paper we have tried to refer consistently to "program theory evaluation". It is sometimes referred to as "theory-based evaluation", 'theory-driven evaluation", "the program logic approach", and "outcomes hierarchies" – with different nuances attached to each label by different camps. Sometimes the term "theory-driven" is reserved for evaluations that are based on some research theory rather than on practitioners' "theory-of-action" that might be little more than a codification of observed regularities. And sometimes the term "program logic" refers to Funnell's (1997) program logic matrix that uses the program model as a basis for asking a series of evaluative questions for each intended outcome.

In all case, however, the program theory is not a description of the sequence of activities that are undertaken to produce the intended effect – such as booking a venue, advertising a program, and registering participants. It refers to the mechanisms, or processes, by which the outcome is achieved.

ATTRIBUTING CAUSE

One of the enduring challenges in program evaluation is attributing causality. Did the program cause the observed outcomes? Program theory evaluation is based on a simplified causal model of the program (usually linear) which shows how program activities (A) lead to intermediate outcomes (B) and then to ultimate outcomes (C). If a program can demonstrate that A, B and C happened (either overall or in particular circumstances), this is often taken as evidence that the program has been successful.

Is this sufficient? Do we need to rule out alternative explanations for the observed outcomes? How useful are testimonials from program clients attributing the outcomes to their involvement in the program?

How appropriate is it to expect small projects to address the issue of causal attribution, in the ways that are usually associated with program evaluation? Should we aim for more modest questions in any one evaluation, as Lipsey (1993,1997) has suggested, and aim to accumulate more comprehensive knowledge about causes over many evaluations?

How do we acknowledge the role of external factors in achieving the desired outcomes? For example, the weather will strongly influence some farmers' attitudes to change. Often adverse weather conditions can motivate people to make changes they normally wouldn't consider doing in a good season. The attitude of the community, particularly whether or not it is supportive of change, is another important factor. Often these influences are outside the direct control of the program but are critical to

achieving the outcome. In instances where the change process is complex, is it possible to confidently attribute the outcomes to the program?

Perhaps we should instead frame our activity as searching for evidence your program has increased the probability of the outcome? Is this sufficient?

Does some of the weakness of program theory evaluation stem from the overly simplified, linear models that are developed for programs? Would non-linear models might address issues of thresholds (Batterham, Dunt and Disler, 1996) and vicious and virtuous circles?

DEALING WITH UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

Guides to using program theory in evaluation usually advise evaluators to firstly, build a causal model of the program which shows the intermediate outcomes by which the program achieves its intended ultimate outcomes, and then to use this model to guide the evaluation in terms of identifying evaluation questions and conducting data collection and analysis. But this prescription can lead to a complete emphasis on the intended outcomes of the program, to the exclusion of unintended outcomes (either positive or negative). A project or program needs to measure all impacts for accountability and organisational learning purposes.

For argument's sake, a project which might achieve its outcome as articulated in program theory may not be perceived in a favourable light in the next round of funding if it created some other negative impact, such as environmental damage. While in theory, success (or failure) is measured by an indicator or indicators as highlighted in the program theory, in practice, rarely are these considered alone in assessing the merit or worth of the program. For example, cost benefit analysis may be used in some circles but such a measurement is meaningless to others who might be more interested in the impact on people's lives rather than the economic impact to the State.

How can we use program theory to guide evaluations in such a way as to not ignore unintended outcomes?

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS THROUGH THE PROGRAM

One of the limitations of program theory evaluations is that they usually only show a single program model, which is understood to operate across all project sites and for all program clients. Pawson and Tilley (1997) have advocated a quite different ways of thinking about program theory and of representing it visually, describes a mechanism or process, which operates within a particular context to create a particular result. Drawing an analogy with gunpowder, which will only 'fire' in favourable conditions, they understand program causal mechanisms as only firing within favourable contexts. To fully understand the context within which causal mechanisms operate; we may also need to develop program models that do more than include program clients simply as passive recipients of treatments that change their lives. The issue of considering the role of program clients in making programs work is often very important in understanding how and when programs do and don't work.

However, in any one project, there are a myriad of contexts and a myriad of mechanisms operating usually resulting in a myriad of outcomes. What processes should we use to determine which contexts and mechanisms to investigate in our evaluation (and to focus on in our intervention)? How do we recognise the role of clients in making programs work – and should this be reflected in processes to involve them in planning and interpreting the evaluation?

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