

Rethinking Evaluation Use

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Abstract

Historically, perceptions of the use of evaluation information have evolved from a simple utilitarian view to a more complex and inclusive view comprising four different types, conceptual, instrumental, strategic and process. Conceptualisations of the evaluation process and research in evaluation have generally accepted these categories and focussed on understanding their interrelationships and their relationship to other factors. Currently, this perception is used widely in the literature.

Recently, this approach has been challenged on a number of fronts by several authors (Henry & Rog, 1998 and Connor, 1998). Kirkhart (2000) has made the most dramatic challenge proposing a radical rethink of this concept because, in her view, the current conception is too limiting and lacking in theoretical basis. She argues for both a change in focus from use to influence, and the adoption of an integrated theoretical framework. The change in focus is intended to broaden the framework and to move away from the unidirectional, episodic, intended and instrumental connotations of the term use. The theory is based on a conceptualisation that influence has three dimensions, source, time and intention. Kirkhart argues that this theory is inclusive of earlier approaches to use, and enables a focus on both process-based use and results-based use. This paper examines Kirkhart's approach and the arguments which underlie it, compares this approach to more traditional views, and explores some of the implications of adopting this new perspective on how evaluation is perceived, how evaluators might approach their work, and future research.

Key Words

Program evaluation, evaluation use, influence, impact, process use

Introduction

What do we mean when we say, 'This evaluation study was useful'? This very simple statement when unpacked raises more questions than answers. For example, do we mean the actual conduct of the study was useful, and if so, to whom- the consultant, the program practitioners, the stakeholders, or the funders? In a similar vein, but perhaps even more unclear, is the statement, 'This evaluation was used'. What does this imply? One response is that the evaluation information was used by stakeholders. What then do we mean by the term 'use'? And how do we know when the findings of evaluation study have had an impact?

This paper reviews the research on *use* to provide a foundation for examining a new perspective on the impact of evaluations. Karen Kirkhart (2000) has proposed the adoption a new approach to impact by looking at how evaluation studies exert *influence*. She argues that an integrated theory of influence is more helpful in understanding the impact of evaluation studies as well as providing a more fruitful future for research. This paper examines Kirkhart's approach and how it differs from the traditional conception. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the implications of adopting this approach.

The Traditional Perspective

Many evaluators define evaluation as an instrumental activity, that is it has as a major purpose to provide information for instrumental reasons, unlike pure research which usually is justified on the

grounds of adding to the body of knowledge in a particular discipline. Evaluation use has been a major concern of both evaluators and stakeholders for over thirty years. During this period, the meaning of the term *use* has evolved from a simplistic definition related to instrumental use to a more sophisticated, multi-dimensional concept (Cummings, 1997).

By the end of the 1980s, it was widely accepted that *use* was a multifaceted concept comprising at least three different types of *use*:

- instrumental – to make overt decision making;
- conceptual - to better understand a program or policy or the issues related to it; and,
- strategic - to persuade others or to use evaluation findings to gain particular outcomes (Shadish, Cook and Leviton, 1991).

Furthermore, work carried out by Cousins and Leithwood (1993), Greene (1988a and 1988b), Huberman (1987) and Owen (1993) indicates that these three types of use are interrelated in particular ways. They agree that all three types of use may exist in a single evaluation study and that conceptual use generally precedes the other two.

More recently, a fourth type, process use, was described by Patton (1997: 88) as ‘ways in which being engaged in the processes of evaluation can be useful quite apart from the findings that may emerge from these processes’. He identifies four types of process use (1997: 91):

1. enhancing shared understandings, especially about results;
2. supporting and reinforcing the programme through intervention-oriented evaluation;
3. increasing participants’ engagement, sense of ownership, and self-determination; and
4. programme or organisational development.

Forss, Rebien and Carlsson (2002) advocate for an expanded approach to Patton’s concept by identifying 5 types of process use: learning to learn; developing networks; creating shared understanding; strengthening the project; and boosting morale. They go on to argue, in line with Patton (1997 & 1998) and Cummings (1999), that evaluators can ‘plan deliberately for use during the evaluation process.’ (2002: 43). Valovirta (2002) provides empirical evidence that this has occurred in program evaluation studies in Finland. Johnson (1998) has attempted to combine these four types of use into a broad model but to date there has been no empirical studies of its suitability.

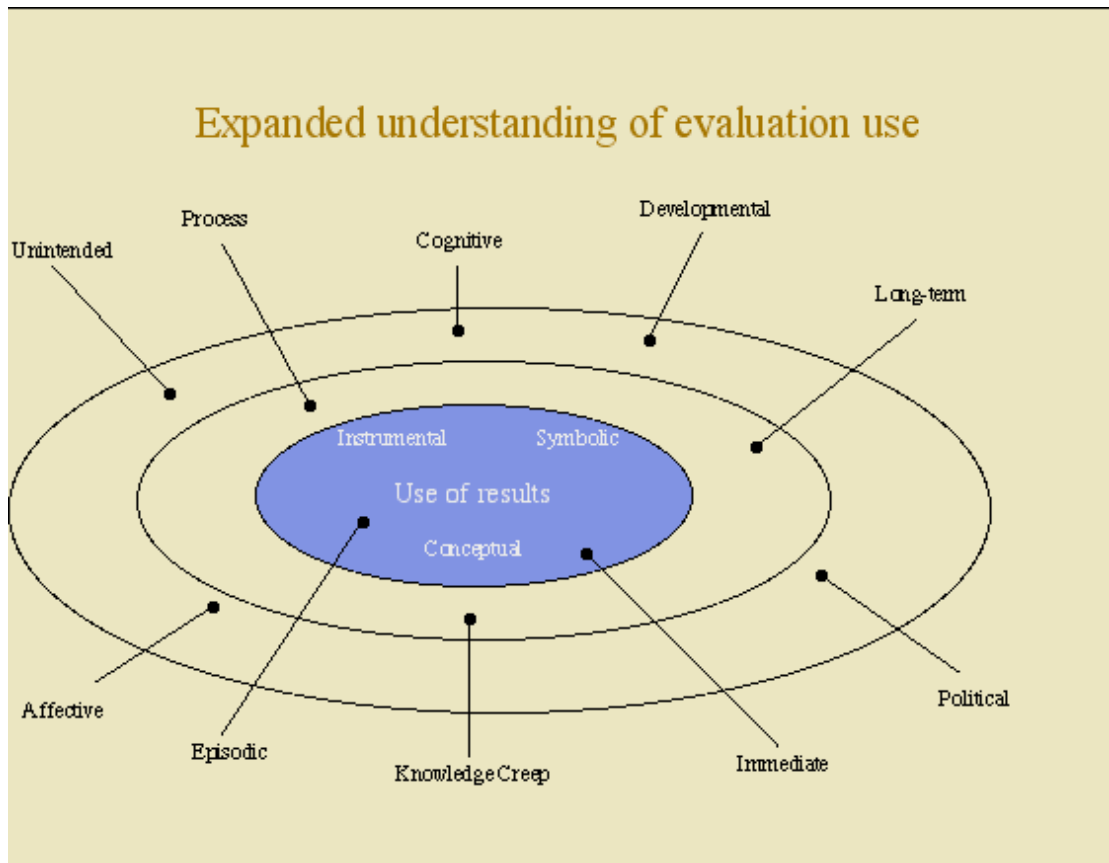
However, there is still considerable debate among evaluators about the categories of use and very little evidence of successful measurement of different types of use in the field. I have previously found that stakeholders perceive that they make considerable use of evaluation study findings, yet it is unclear whether this is conceptual, instrumental and strategic use (Cummings, 1999). In contrast, others (Chelimsky, 1997 and Cook, 1997) have argued that use may not be a requirement of some types of evaluation studies although their view of use is particularly specific. Gary Henry (2002) goes even further and questions whether use should be the defining goal of evaluation, arguing that this perception can blind us to the higher order goal of social betterment. Karen Kirkhart has picked up on this lack of consensus and some would say lack of progress in demonstrating practical benefits from the current perspective on use. She summarises the current thinking on use as lacking a theoretical perspective and as limiting because it is uni-dimensional, episodic and primarily results based. In its place, she proposes a radical rethink of how we might think about the impact of evaluation studies.

Kirkhart argues persuasively that the concept of *use* is oriented too much towards results, has been massaged and enlarged over time to try to incorporate new categories of use, and in spite of all the work done on the concept still inadequately describes the impact of evaluation studies. The major concerns she has with the term *use* are:

- It does not adequately describe non-results based types of evaluation impact, unintended results and the gradual incremental impact over time;
- It is trapped in its historical context which was based in the data driven epoch of social research in the US in the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s;
- A focus on use discriminates against other non-results based approaches to evaluation; and
- It is limiting because it is unidirectional, episodic, intended and instrumental.

The various elements of the current conceptualisation of use are described by Kirkhart in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Kirkhart, 2000: 6.

Kirkhart (2000: 7) broadens the question from *How are the results of an evaluation study used?* to *How and to what extent does evaluation shape, affect, support and change persons and systems?* This does seem to be a more useful question because, as Henry (2000) points out, we are or should be more interested in the impact of the evaluation than the use of the results. This question may also be one which is more easily answered, that is, it may be easier to measure the extent of change in a program or stakeholders views as a result of a study than the actual use of the study's findings.

Kirkhart concludes that it is not fruitful to continue to rework the concept of *use* but instead we should rethink evaluation impact from a new perspective. What she feels is needed is,

(A) clearer vision requir(ing) a reconceptualization in which influences can be examined from multiple vantage points... a framework in which previous understandings of results-based use can be repositioned and examined in a broader context.(2000: 6).

To do this, she proposes both a change in focus from *use* to *influence*, and the adoption of an integrated theory of influence. The change in name is intended to broaden the framework and to move away from the unidirectional, episodic, intended and instrumental connotations of the term *use*. *Influence* is defined by Kirkhart (2000, p7) as, 'the capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means'.

The integrated theory of influence is based on a conceptualisation that influence has three dimensions; the source, intention and timing of influence Kirkhart (2000). Kirkhart proposes that these three dimensions interact in a three dimensional matrix as shown in Figure 2. Each of these dimensions is described below.

Sources of Influence

In Kirkhart's model the source of influence refers to the active agent of change or the starting point of a generative process of change and sources can be categories as arising either in the evaluation process (process based) or the evaluation results (results based). The latter is seen in the traditional categories

of use – instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic/strategic. The process based influences are more in line with the overall direction Kirkhart seems to be taking that influence is a more subtle, multi-dimensional process. These influences are seen to be exerted in the act of being engaged in the processes of evaluation quite apart from the results. Kirkhart uses Jennifer Greene’s (1998b) three dimensions of process based influence:

- cognitive – changes in understandings stimulated by discussion, reflection, and problem analysis involved in an evaluation study;
- affective – the individual and collective feelings of worth and value which result from involvement in a study, and
- political – the role of evaluation in creating new dialogues, to draw attention to social problems or to influence power relationships .

However, as outlined above other writers including Patton (1997) and Forss et al (2002) present different perspectives of the types of process use or influence. Patton proposes four types and Forss presents five categories although there is some overlap between them. The commonality among these three views of process use is the focus on an increased understanding among stakeholders, changes in their sense of worth and value, and the development of new relationships, dialogues and networks among stakeholders. It is clear that some of the influence which arises from the evaluation process will impact on the results of the evaluation study, and thus the two sources of influence are interrelated. However, it is probably the area of process based use which will attract more attention in the future as the subtle nature of influence is unravelled.

Intention of Influence

Kirkhart’s second dimension is the intention of the influence and is defined as ‘the extent to which evaluation influence is purposefully directed, consciously recognised and planfully anticipated.’(2000: 11). Intention is of course a particularly difficult concept to identify or measure, and the relationships between its elements or types are as yet not well understood. In general, it comprises three aspects – the type of influence, the target of the influence, and the sources (people, processes and findings) of the influence but has a range of other characteristics. Kirkhart identifies a number of these characteristics, which I have summarised below in Table 1. Intention appears to be a particularly complex dimension and a fertile field for future research. For example, what are the interrelationships of these characteristics and how does influence vary when different combinations are present.

Table 1
Characteristics of Intention To Influence

Element	Categories
Dimension	Intended Unintended
Explicitness	Manifest Latent
Orientation	Results-oriented Process-oriented
Direction	Positive Negative

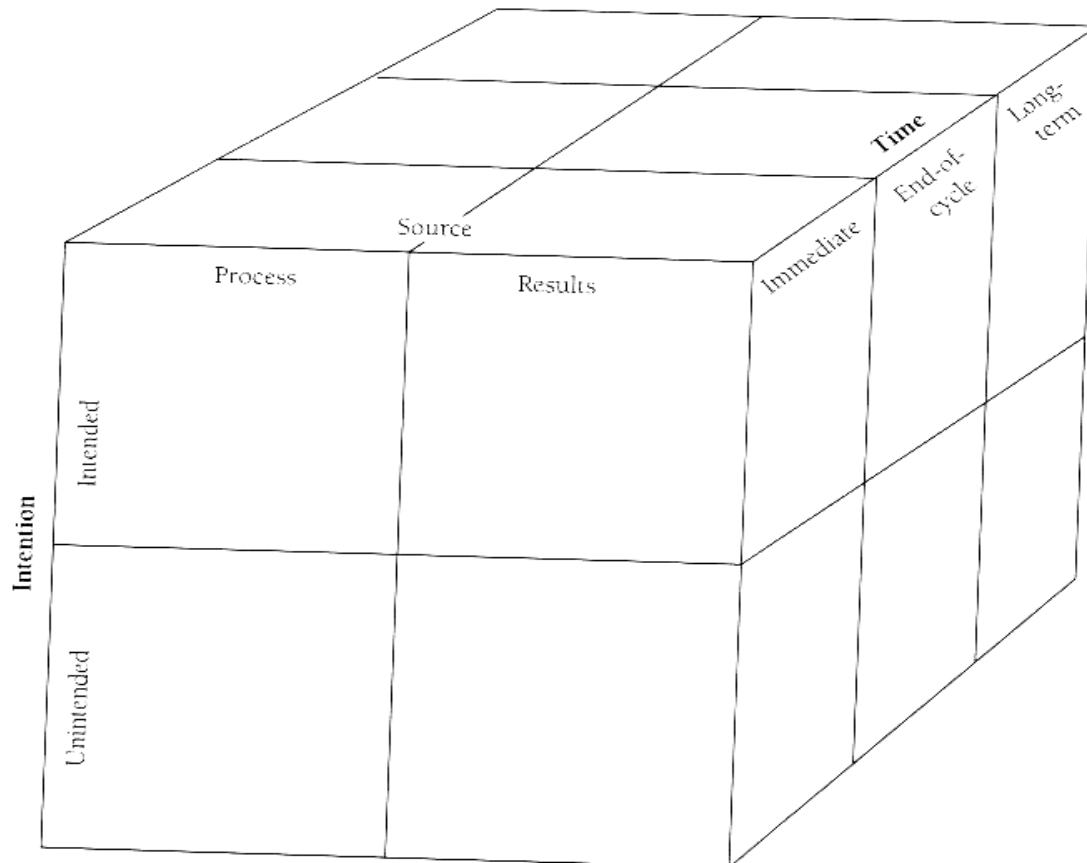
Time of Influence

The third dimension in Kirkhart’s model is the timing of the influence and this has three categories – immediate (during the study), end of cycle, and long-term. This is an area which has been conspicuously absent in past research and in the traditional conceptions of use.

Kirkhart brings together these three dimensions to form an integrated theory of influence as described in Figure 2. An example of how this theory might treat influence may help demonstrate its functionality and usefulness. The development of a program logic model is a common occurrence in many evaluation studies and whereas the developmental process could be seen as a process based,

immediate, intended influence, the presentation of the actual logic model would shift this influence into a results based, immediate, intended influence. One value of this conceptualisation of impact is that it is more easily measured. It seems to me easier to accept the development and presentation of a program logic model as a demonstration of influence than to try to assess whether it has been used and if so, how and to what extent? This does leave open the question of what influence the program logic model has caused and the extent of this influence. It also begs the questions of what effect this influence has had.

Figure 2 Integrated Theory of Influence



Kirkhart, 2000: 8

Benefits of an Integrated Theory of Influence

Kirkhart proposes a number of benefits which she believes will arise from adopting her integrated theory of influence including : the ability to map influences surrounding a particular evaluation study, tracking evolving patterns of influence over time, facilitating meta-analysis of studies of influence, and distinguishing between *use* and *misuse*. It is unclear whether these benefits will develop as there has been little discussion or debate about Kirkhart’s model since it was first proposed in 1995 and fully outlined in 2000.

Further Discussion

Kirkhart's proposed approach raises a number of issues which go beyond just theoretical perspectives. I have raised several below as points for further discussion.

Is Kirkhart's approach really much different than the traditional use approach?

It seems to me that the concept of *influence* developed by Kirkhart portrays impact in quite a different light than the traditional view of *use*. First, it is a more subtle concept, suggesting that stakeholders are gently nudged toward a different understanding of the program or accepting information on its performance. To me, *influence* suggests deliberate change more than *use* does, as incremental impact, encouraging stakeholders in a direction rather than expecting them to accept the evaluation findings quickly. However, it is also a more active approach, expecting the evaluator to design, conduct and report the evaluation study in such a way as to deliberately try to influence stakeholders. Is the concept of influence too deliberate, that is, does it imply a role for the evaluator as a change agent which is too active?

How might it further our understanding of the impact of evaluation studies?

This approach suggests that although impact might be rapid and dramatic, it is also as likely to be slow and incremental. It also suggests that influence is more process-oriented and may take many diverse forms. The various characteristics of influence outlined by Kirkhart also provide a range of useful ideas and directions for further research. Is it more realistic to expect evaluation studies to influence individuals or groups of stakeholders rather than expect stakeholders to use the findings?

What other dimensions might be incorporated in this theory?

It seems to me that Kirkhart's model might usefully include some other dimensions. For example, might the form of the evaluation (Owen 1993) affect the way influence is likely to develop or be received. Are there other characteristics of which might be explored. This seems a fruitful avenue for additional discussion and research.

What are the implications for the practice of evaluation, if any, of adopting influence rather than use?

Will this approach to impact affect how evaluators view their role or the purpose or processes of evaluation? It certainly puts more emphasis on process use, moving it from the periphery as in Figure 1 to the forefront as seen in Figure 2. If the influence approach is adopted by practicing evaluators then it would be expected that they would pay more attention to process use and act accordingly. It could be expected that they would undertake greater interaction with stakeholders and view evaluation more as an educative process rather than an assessment activity. It might even mean that evaluators should adopt a role of educating stakeholders about influence and impact, in order to ensure their expectations are realistic and that they better understand each other's role in the evaluation study. In the end, will this approach make any difference to how evaluators or stakeholders engage with an evaluation study?

Conclusion

Certainly, Kirkhart has challenged our traditional thinking on *use* of evaluation information. She has reconceptualized what past research has revealed about use and developed a different, more coherent picture of the impact of evaluation studies. This in itself is a useful exercise because conceptions need to be regularly challenged and where necessary rethought. However, in my view, Kirkhart has achieved more than this. She has refocused our view away from episodic impact to a more continuous process of influence. This feels more comfortable to me, based on my experiences as an evaluator. It does raise further questions which should be debated within the discipline. The test is whether it better serves practising evaluators and those researching the evaluation process. That is, to what extent will it influence the discipline.

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