Theorising from Qualitative Evaluation

John Guenther, Ian Falk, & Michael Cole, September 2023

Presentation based on:

Guenther , J., Falk, I., & Cole, M. C. (In press). Theory Building from Qualitative Evaluation. *Evaluation.*

Batchelor Institute

Acknowledgements

Evaluation Use

1. Decision-making, action-oriented

2. Accountability, instrumental

3. Program theory development

4. But what about social theory/knowledge creation?

5. Generalisation (e.g. upscaling, expansion)?

The concern in this presentation is theory-building

Lewin (1951) *"There is nothing more practical than good theory"*

What is theory?

Klyukanov (2020) "A theory is a system of interrelated concepts and propositions, explaining the nature of a certain object"

Leavy, (2014: 4) " A theory is an account of social reality that is grounded in empirical data but extends beyond that data"

Ozili (2020) "...set of principles or propositions are called theories", "principles are theories"

Theory is a plausible and testable explanation of the evidence (data) derived from an evaluation, which takes the form of propositions and principles.

So why shouldn't/couldn't evaluators contribute to social theory building?

Delimiting this topic

1. We are not talking about developing 'theories of change'

2. We are not talking about developing program theory.

3. And we are not talking about social theory as an input to evaluation.

4. We are talking about social theory development as a product or use of evaluation.

5. We are not saying evaluators *must* build theory. Or that they always will.

In evaluation practice, what would contribute to theory building?

Evaluation Questions

Open, issues/principles-related questions

For example: *'Why are some people dropping out of the program?'*

Becomes: *'What principles could be applied to limit future program dropout?'*

The form of questions is important

'What principles of practice justify an expansion of program A into other contexts?'

Allows for propositional answers, e.g.

'If A is carried out in the context of B through mechanism C, then outcome D will probably result.'

Evaluation Design

*Sample McMeeking et al. (2012): model of iterative theory building where evaluations can be designed through framing and reframing questions which lead from **project evaluation** to **program evaluation**, to **implementation theory building** and ultimately **general theory building**. In this model the initial evaluation concerns are about **accountability**, and then progress to **issues of sustainability** and **scale**, to **fidelity**, and finally towards **replication** and **future research**.*

What else might lead to theory-building?

1. Theory of change construction as an iterative action learning process

(the process of remaking Theory of Change across or transcendent to an evaluand)

2. Recommendations (or Findings): e.g. lessons learned, propositions & principles

Illustrations from practice

Program example	Social concern	EQ example	Theory in response to question	Theory in recommendations
Codes 4 Life	DV and men's behaviour in Aboriginal communities	What processes and practices underpin and lead to change in Codes 4 Life participants?	Principles of cultural safety and men's agency, cultural governance, cultural integrity underpin effective delivery	Principles of Indigenous led services drawing on Elder cultural authority gives credibility
Suicide Story	Suicide in Aboriginal communities	How can the impact be strengthened with follow up [or other] processes?	Confidence, language and resilience in Aboriginal communities are foundations for suicide prevention	Aboriginal community led/controlled programs give increased credibility
inDigiMOB	Digital exclusion in remote Aboriginal communities	Under what circumstances (contexts and mechanisms) is inDigiMOB likely to work best to achieve desirable outcomes for Whom?	Community led interventions are effective means of achieving digital inclusion	Digital inclusion can be achieved by removing impediments

Illustrations from practice

Program example	Social concern	EQ example
Suicide Story	Suicide in Aboriginal communities	How can the impact be strengthened with follow up [or other] processes?

1. 'Bidirectional' knowledge sharing is essential - in the context of researchers and communities working together.
   - Storytelling is commonly described as part of this practice

2. Local language - The practice of using one's own language is identified in several Australian programs.
   - Recognition in the international literature that use of traditional language is an important element of resilience and a cultural protective factor.

3. Cultural safety as 'an approach to communication and care that requires the reflection of the facilitator's own cultural identity and its impact on the larger group throughout workshop engagement'

Benefits of building theory from evaluation

1. The value of the findings from a particular pragmatic issue within a program or intervention may be extended beyond a program or intervention (e.g. in policy development contexts, pilot program testing).

2. Theoretical learnings of an evaluation can be tested and refined to support the development of more nuanced social, program, organisational, and policy theory.

3. The perceived value of evaluation as a discipline or practice is enhanced, at least in the eyes of academics, and quite likely in the eyes of commissioners too.

Questions?