Program clarification: an overview and resources for evaluability assessment, program theory and program logic

This contribution to the journal examines program clarification for evaluation purposes. It traces the development of this approach over the past three decades, during which the terms evaluability assessment, program theory and program logic have been applied in turn. This is followed by an extensive list of resources that either discuss one of the terms generally or describe applications to a range of program areas.

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The development of clarification approaches

Evaluability assessment (1970s onwards)

Until about 30 years ago, the emphasis in evaluation was on determining impact for accountability purposes. However, evaluators often ran into problems as they tried to achieve this, because programs could have vague or unspecified goals, which made measurement of outcomes well-nigh impossible. Alternatively, programs could be so complex that it was difficult to understand how they worked in practice and so questions arose about program elements and how they could be evaluated.

Attempts to overcome such problems by determining the extent to which a program is ready for evaluation, led to new terminology and to the emergence of writing by evaluators who are now 'household names' for the profession. For example, in the 1970s Joseph Wholey, faced by such difficulties, was credited with devising (and then wrote about) how to overcome them.

To facilitate impact evaluation, he and others worked with program managers and staff to devise models of programs that could reveal program objectives and agreed performance indicators. The work entailed identifying relationships between, and external influences on, program events. Such in-depth examinations led to increased clarity about goals and objectives and identified whether a particular program was coherent, plausible and measurable. As a result of such work, it became possible to determine which program elements were amenable to further evaluation and which were not.

From then on the process enabled evaluators to acquire detailed, firsthand knowledge of programs that could lead to the development of tailored evaluation designs. This descriptive and analytic process became known as Evaluability Assessment (EA), the objective of which was to: 'determine the extent to which a program is ready for evaluation, the changes needed to make the program more manageable and accountable, and toward what questions a more extensive evaluation might usefully be directed' (Schubert 1982, Abstract). In other words, 'EA is a diagnostic and prescriptive technique that can be used to determine the extent to which different problems inhibit program evaluation' (Wholey 1987).

Indeed, Scherzer (2008) goes further to describe EA as a 'pre-evaluation analysis used to used to determine whether program performance is likely to produce desired results and to increase the usefulness of subsequent evaluations'.

Since the 1980s EA has been applied to a wide variety of programs, disciplines and settings (Trevisan 2007) and most commonly has involved collecting information through document reviews, site visits and interviews.

The emergence of program theory (1980s onwards)

Even so the term and ideas behind EA appear to have declined somewhat as the emphasis moved from solely determining ways to evaluate impact to the task of drawing up a 'map' of a program as a task in its own right, that is, defining a detailed theory underpinning a program. This was required because there was a desire to clarify programs for purposes other than determining impact, such as the need to improve program design, ensure better program delivery and to assist in the development of stronger policy. Subsequently, the role of evaluators has increasingly become one of developing and testing program theory founded on the writings of Huey Chen, Carol Weiss and others during the 1980s and 1990s.

Since then, evaluators have increasingly used substantive knowledge to update, simplify, clarify and make more accessible the underlying theory of programs to inform stakeholders. This involves documentation of the assumptions implicit in program design and an indication of the data required to test these assumptions. The process also identifies links between planned activities and anticipated outcomes.

As a consequence of such developments, the application of program theory developed rapidly and moved from being used just in areas such as health promotion to a wide range of program areas such as energy conservation, community-based initiatives and housing (Rogers & Weiss 2007).

Program logic becomes the common term (1990s onwards)

Gradually the term 'program logic' has replaced, or been used synonymously with, program theory over the last two decades. According to Chen, program logic can be defined as 'a set of interrelated assumptions, principles and/or propositions to explain or guide social actions'. Torvatn (1999) calls it 'chains of reasoning' providing a clear framework of the working and functions of a program.

A program logic is usually conveyed visually by diagrams, flow charts or 'trees'. Linney & Wandersman (1991) define such a display as:

> a logical, graphically depicted series of statements that link a problem to the community that it exists

in, the possible barriers to solving the problem, the activities and resources that are necessary to address the problem, short-term activities that result from these activities and the hoped for long-term outcomes of the program.

Elements or statements in the model can be determined through methods such as document analysis, concept mapping, interviews or focus groups.

People often see these visual documents as a means to see how theory is linked to implementation and outcomes and also to see if these elements are aligned properly. Such diagrams are considered particularly powerful if devised in conjunction with stakeholders and provide a way to clarify underlying assumptions and to reach group consensus. Some also recognise that these charts are not just 'one-off' constructions but are 'living', dynamic documents that can be adapted as environmental and political contexts change.

The contributions of Australasians

At this point we should acknowledge that Australasians have contributed, and added to, ideas about clarification along the way. For example, John Owen has considered the development of what he calls Clarificative Evaluation as a particular form of evaluation (Owen 2006); Patricia Rogers (2000, 2007), along with Jane Davidson (2000), has contributed to ideas about causality in program theory; Rick Cummings and Colin Sharp have considered the application of program theory to educational settings and organisational learning respectively; and Doug Fraser has written about visual displays. Perhaps, though the most influential work has been carried out by Sue Funnell (1997, 2000) who suggested enhancing the usefulness of program theory and logic by developing a matrix where entries have to be made in relation to program contexts, success criteria, potential sources of performance information and criteria for judging such information. This has moved the field on from pure description of the program to providing information that can be used for monitoring purposes.

Further resources

What follows are references that can allow readers to examine the whole area of program clarification further. The material (which is by no means exhaustive) is provided under the major headings of Evaluability Assessment, Program Theory and Program Logic. Each of these sections is then divided in order to present general articles about each term, before showing how the approaches have been applied to particular social science disciplines.

Overall reference

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Evaluability assessment

General

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Community-based programs

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Criminology

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Education

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Health

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Mental health

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Technology

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Program theory

General

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Criminology

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Program logic

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Methods to construct program logics

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Applications of program logic to a variety of disciplines in particular fields (in alphabetical order of discipline)

Agriculture

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Community/welfare

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Criminology

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Education

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Health

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Mental health

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Organisations

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Social work

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