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EVALUATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

Stewart I. Donaldson

One of the topics I was determined to discuss with my European colleagues at the Helsinki Conference was the use of theory in evaluation practice. I was thrilled to stumble upon several thought provoking discussions regarding the use of theory in evaluation. A common theme was the belief that teaching evaluation practitioners about theory was critical to a better future for the evaluation discipline. But why is theory so important? The session I addressed on this topic also involved Frans Leeuw, Evert Vedung and Gary Henry. I emerged from the session with some new (and old) insights about evaluation theory and evaluation practice. This brief article summarizes what I learnt – and what I said.

Leeuw made it clear there are many inter-related uses of the word theory sprinkled throughout the evaluation literature. In fact, he described this vast diversity of the use of theory as a “jungle.” Imagine a newcomer to the field, or even a seasoned veteran trying to sort through the concepts of program theory, policy theory, systems theory, theories of change, theory-based evaluation, theory-driven evaluation, program theory-driven evaluation science, program process theory, program impact theory, intervening mechanisms theories, program logic, logic models, log frames, theories of policy change, policy process theory, social science theories, evaluation theories, evaluation models, evaluation approaches, evaluation forms, concept mapping, implementation theory, middle range theory, translational theory, theory weaving, theory knitting and the like.

In my presentation I emphasized the need for evaluators to seek clarity about the role that specific theories are playing in the context of a specific evaluation, and defined three of the most popular types used to improve evaluation practice – theories of change, social science theory (and research), and evaluation theory. Donaldson, Lipsey and Mark have provided detailed accounts of how to optimize the use of these three types of theory in contemporary evaluation practice.



The third leg of this stool (evaluation theory) emerged as the main topic of conversation throughout the presentations, the panel discussion and the engagement with the audience. For Marvin Alkin evaluation theories are largely prescriptive and “offer a set of rules, prescriptions, prohibitions, and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be done”. My presentation emphasized the need to better inform practicing evaluators about the latest developments in evaluation theory despite the common misunderstanding that theory is not practical or relevant to the lives of practitioners.

In addition to referencing my own work on this topic I encouraged the audience to contemplate why Shadish vigorously asserted evaluation theory is central to our professional identity and why he urged all evaluators to learn about evaluation theory. He claimed that this is what we talk about more than anything else. For him there is little doubt that evaluation theory gives rise to our most trenchant debates. It gives us the language we use for talking to each other, and perhaps most important, it is what makes us different from other professions.

He claims every profession needs a unique knowledge base. For the discipline and profession of evaluation, evaluation theory is that knowledge base.

The good news for practicing evaluators is there are now useful frameworks and categorizations systems to help guide the development of a sound evaluation theory background (see bibliography below). For example, Shadish, Cook, & Leviton provided one of the first frameworks showing how evaluation theory developed through stages over time. Donaldson & Scriven attempted to update and expand upon this early work by having a diverse group of evaluation theorists articulate their visions for the future of evaluation practice. Alkin published a second volume of his book “Evaluation Roots,” which offers a theory tree metaphor for organizing and understanding the similarities and differences between evaluation theories¹. Finally, Mertens & Wilson have recently offered us a more inclusive evaluation theory tree which adds many more theorists and a new branch (social justice).

Despite the advantages of these frameworks for helping practitioners better understand

the links between theory and high quality evaluation, Henry warned us in our session that most of this work is prescriptive and wanting of an empirical basis. He emphasized the need for a better metaphor for representing evaluation theory, and offered an analysis that suggested evaluation theory would be better represented as “rudderless” instead of rooted. He advocated more research on evaluation theory. I am encouraged by some of the recent work that has been done along these lines to develop criteria for evaluating theories of evaluation practice and the actual systematic evaluations of empowerment evaluation and theory-driven evaluation in practice.

Having been energized by the session I have agreed to contribute to a new article on how to improve evaluation theories with Frans Leeuw and Gary Henry. We aim to capture many of the insights gleaned from our panel presentation and the stimulating questions and comments from the audience during the session, as well as during the hallway conversations at Finlandia Hall and in follow up emails. Stay tuned.

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¹ One notable new contribution in the second volume is a chapter by Nicolette Stame offering a European Evaluation Theory Tree.

