

Shifting Evaluation Theory Toward Empiricism: Helping to Ensure Credible and Useful Evaluation

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Evaluation Theory is Who We Are

(Shadish, 1997, AEA Presidential Address)

- A common language
- Identification of important issues (e.g., evaluation use)
- Defines themes
- An identity defining evaluation from other professions
- A face for presentation to the outside world
- A unique knowledge base

Prescriptions for Practice

- Qualitative models, points-of-view, persuasions, and approaches to the process of evaluation
- Principles, rationales, and organization for the procedural choices made by evaluators
- Orient practitioners to the issues and problems with which they must deal

Two Types of Theory

Scriven (1998)

- External theories of evaluation
 - Theories about the multiple dimensions of evaluation practice
 - Encompass most of our evaluation theory literature
- Internal evaluation theories
 - Concerned with evaluation as an intellectual discipline
 - Two levels more abstract from evaluation practice

Why Move Toward Empiricism?

- Practitioners need a clear idea of what they are doing, why, and what to expect as a result of their actions.
- Requires a shift from working knowledge to evidenced based practice.
- Supplying more accurate, well-tested theories of evaluation will contribute to the engineering of more effective, more efficient evaluation procedures – which should yield better evidence.
- Demand for evaluation on the rise, a firm academic grounding is necessary.
- Requires a shift from theories based on discourse and experience to those developed from empirical study.
- Move from talking about individual theorists' writings on evaluation to considering theories of evaluation
- Develop more contingency theories.

Benefits of Empiricism

- 1-Define and “demarcate” evaluation.
- 2-Develop knowledge on evaluation issues.
- 3-Revise current prescriptive theories by clarifying what transpires when evaluation is practiced.
- 4-Develop comprehensive contingency theories of evaluation. e.g., UFE

Theory Development and Testing: Shifting from Discourse and Experience to Empiricism

- *Current*: Grounded in the experiences of those conducting evaluation studies, rather than through empirical investigation
- Good methods exist to study evaluation empirically
- Four benefits:

Moving Beyond Individualism: Shifting From Theorists to Theories

- Hofstede's Scale:
 - US: 91
 - Australia: 90
 - UK: 89
 - Canada: 80
 - World average: 43

Shifting From Working Knowledge to More Evidence Based Practice

- Working knowledge- two meanings: “the special domain of knowledge that pertains to one’s work” and “that the knowledge itself is tentative, subject to change, as the worker encounters new situations or knowledge”
- Does not lend itself to the highest quality decisions

Evaluators' Working Knowledge

- Four general components:
 - Formal evidence
 - Experience
 - Interests or goals
 - Beliefs (which include values)
- An evaluator's working knowledge includes:
 - What is learned from work
 - Assumptions about what is a good study
 - Knowledge about the social problem
 - Political and organizational factors
 - Interests of relevant stakeholders

For Deliberation

What constitutes credible evidence
in evaluation practice?

Evaluation Use: An Example of Empiricism at Work

- Observation: evaluation findings were not being used
- Research initiated
- Patterns identified, tentative hypotheses generated & explored, general conclusions derived
- Contingency theory developed

In Closing...

- Evaluation theory as it stands today has had a significant impact on our field.
- Introducing empiricism more prominently will only better situate evaluation theory for achieving even greater influence on the profession, the discipline and the practice of evaluation.