How program evaluation standards are put into professional practice

Development of an action theory for evaluation policy and research on evaluation

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Standards: A defining step in the development of an emerging profession

- Hippocratic Oath in medicine
- Law, engineering, academic research

(Schuurbiers, Osseweijer & Kinderlerer, 2009)

- Standards address the "tension between the profession's pursuit of autonomy and the public's demand for accountability"

(Frankel, 1989, pp. 109-110).

- **Rules**: statements of specific dos and don'ts in regard to professional behavior
- **Codes**: compilations of such rules issued by some professional organization
- **Standards**: additionally suggest some ideal or model behavior.
- **Principles**: broader than codes or standards, offer more general guidance when rules do not apply to a specific context.

(Newman & Brown, 1996; cf. Sanders, 1995)

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Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards (PES)

- 1st ed. 1981 "Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials"
  - Utility
  - Feasibility
  - Propriety
  - Accuracy
- 2nd ed. 1994 "Program Evaluation Standards"
  - Thorough revision process
- 3rd ed. 2011
  - Addition of accountability

Goals of the PES

- guide evaluators and evaluation users in the pursuit of evaluation quality

(3rd ed., p. xxii)

- provide guidance to effective evaluation
- enhance the quality and fairness of the professional practice of evaluation
- contribute to social/educational betterment

(2nd ed., p. xviii)

Past research

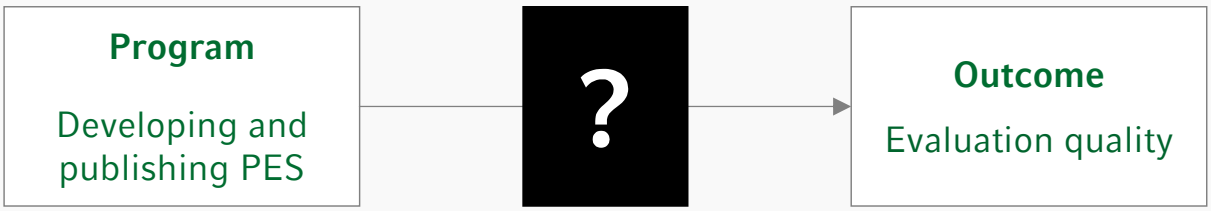
- Some research on violations and challenges

(e.g. Newman & Brown, 1992)

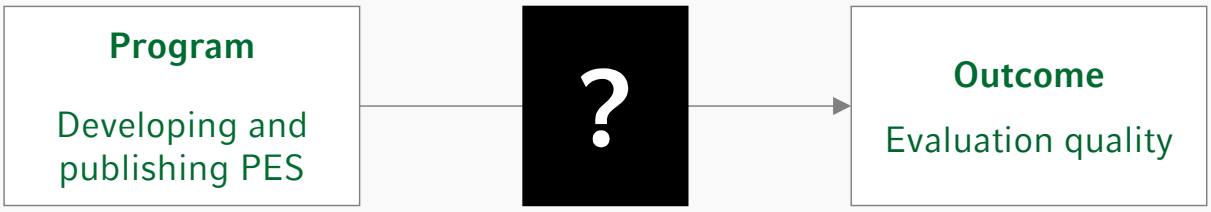
- Little research on actual usage of PES in practice
- It seems that many evaluations are carried out without reference to any code of practice.

(e.g. House, 1987; Worthen, 2001;
cf. Neale, Owen & Small, 2002)

- About half of the evaluators applying for AEA membership had not heard about the PES before.



Applying program theory to close the theory gap



Action theory

how the program is put into action

Change theory

how the actions lead to outcomes

Questions

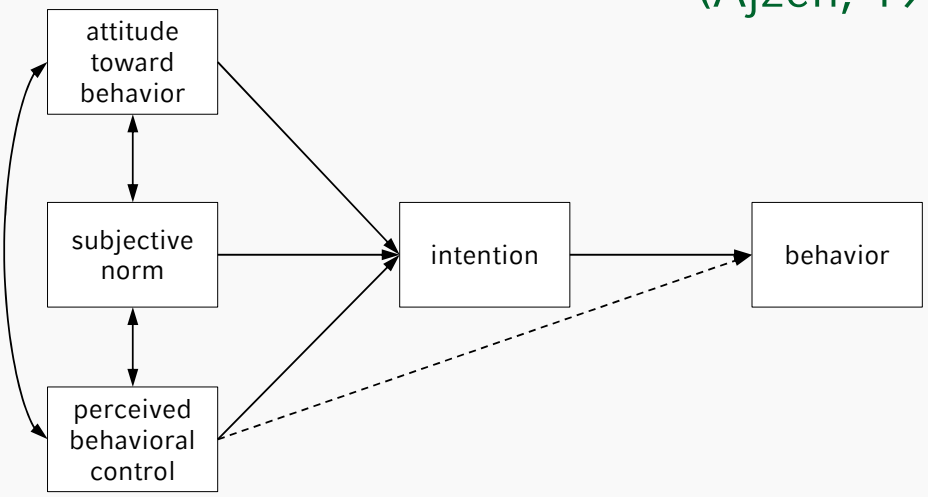
- What are the PES's implicit assumptions about how the individual standards are put into practice by evaluators?
- What possible external factors can be instrumental in influencing this behavior?
- What possible consequences result for evaluation policy? (developing strategies to further promote the standards' application and utility)

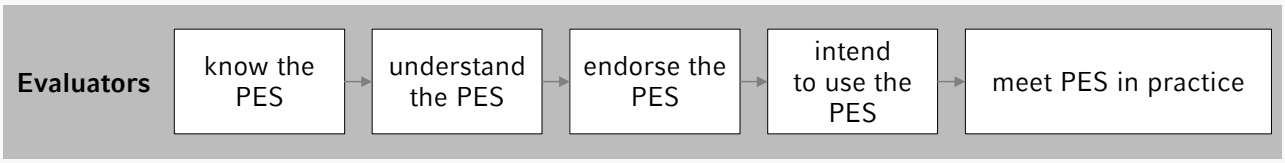
Two approaches

- Reconstruction of **implicit action theory** from PES preface and introduction

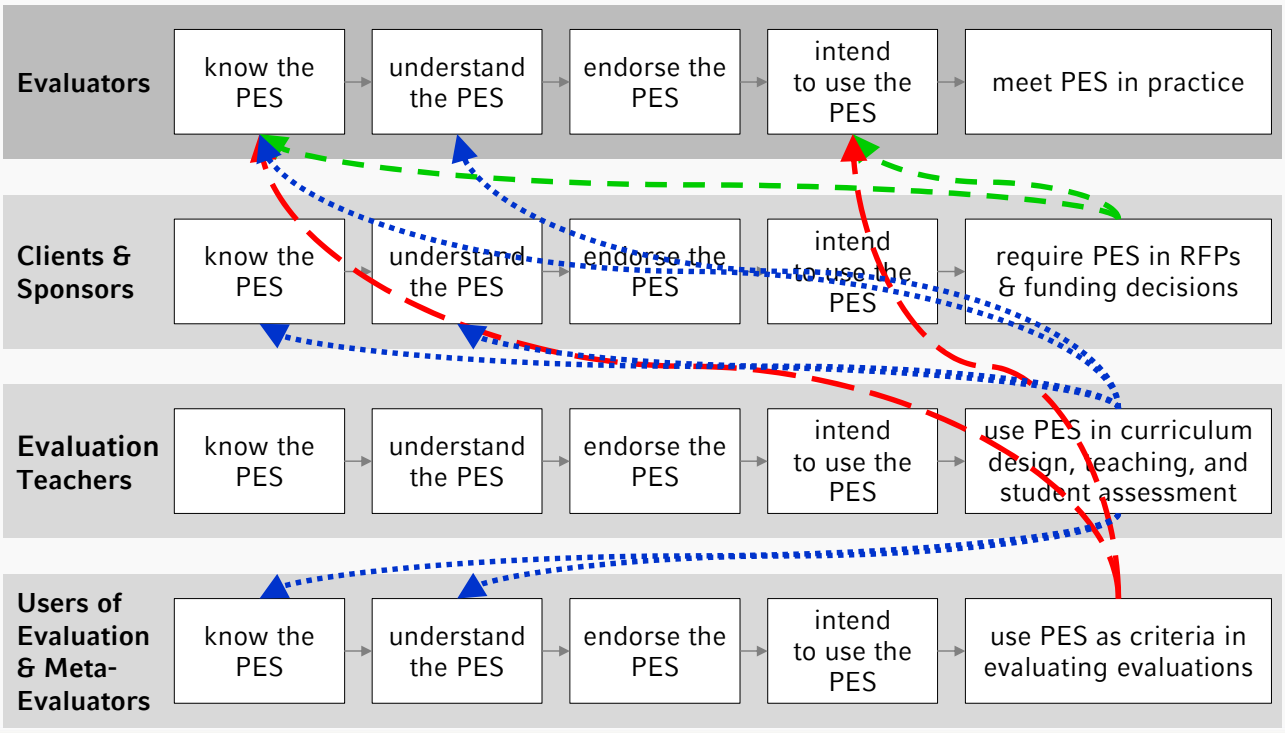
- Draw on **social science theory**

Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991)





Evaluators	know the PES	understand the PES	endorse the PES	intend to use the PES	meet PES in practice
Clients & Sponsors	know the PES	understand the PES	endorse the PES	intend to use the PES	require PES in RFPs & funding decisions
Evaluation Teachers	know the PES	understand the PES	endorse the PES	intend to use the PES	use PES in curriculum design, teaching, and student assessment
Users of Evaluation & Meta-Evaluators	know the PES	understand the PES	endorse the PES	intend to use the PES	use PES as criteria in evaluating evaluations



Applications

1. Empirical Research on PES usage
2. Practical Measures to foster PES usage

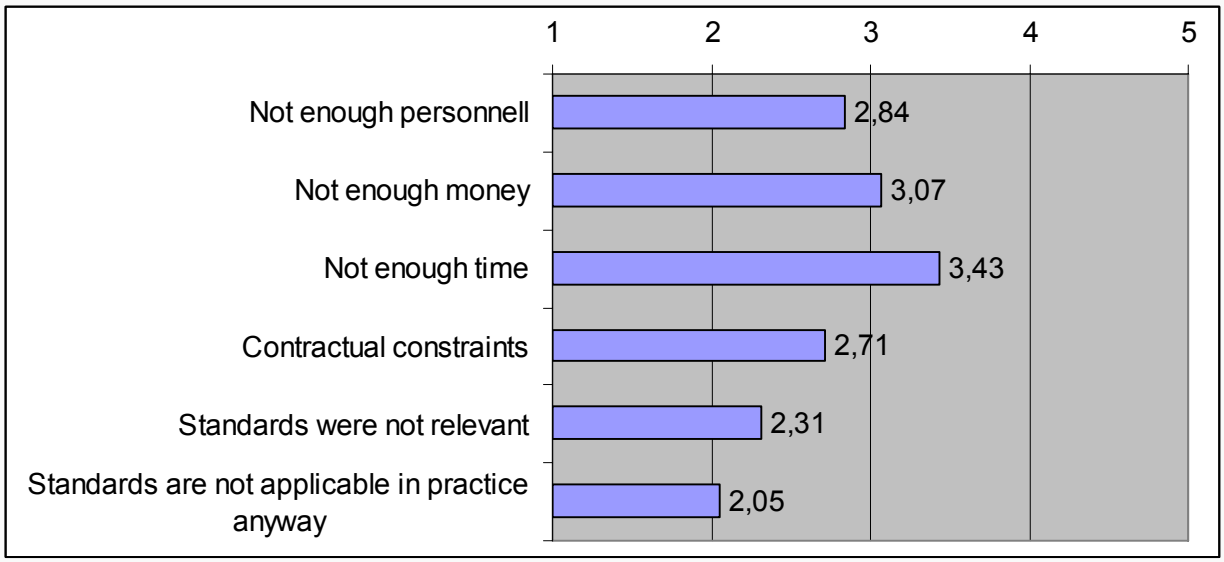
1. Empirical Research on PES usage

- Survey among practicing German language evaluators (N=95)
- *Question 1*: "Given your own experience, please rate how important it is in practice to implement each of the following standards" (1= not important; 5=very important)

- Items ranked lowest:
  - G9 (accuracy): "The documentation of the evaluation allows for a meta evaluation." (M=3.13; SD=0.94)
  - F1 (propriety): "Negotiations of evaluation tasks and duties are conserved in written form." (M=3.40; SD=0,97)
  - D1 (feasibility): "Methods of data collection will balance their expected utility with stakeholders' workload" (M=3.52; SD=0.73)

- *Question 2*: "Think of the last evaluation you finished. To what degree were you able to actually put into practice the following standards?"

- *Question 3*: "If for any of the above you indicated that you were not able to implement some of the standards, what were the main reasons for that?"



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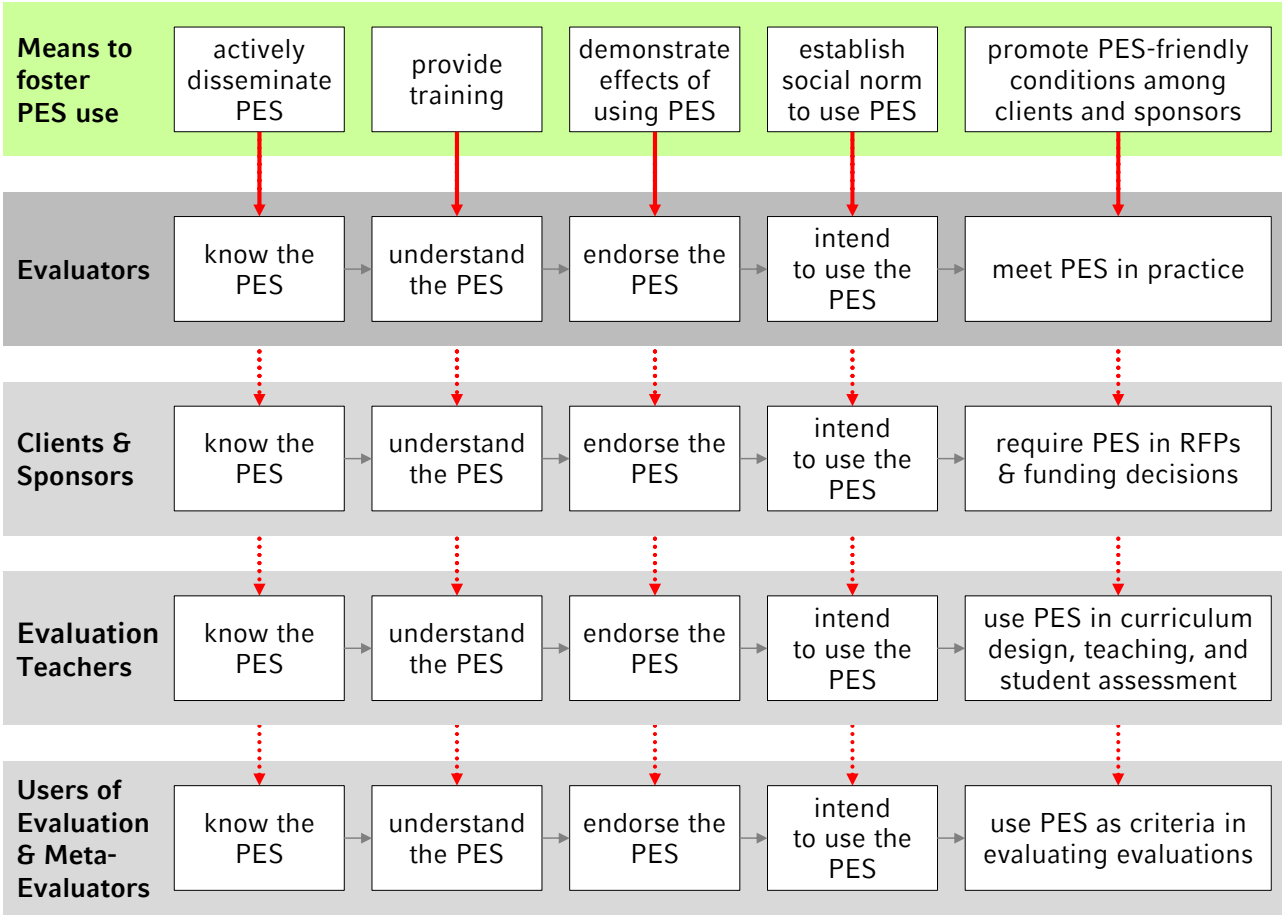

Take away messages

- PES are a great accomplishment for our profession.
- However, we need more efforts to understand and foster their usage.
- First step: develop action theory
  - explains usage on different levels
  - indicates possible means to foster PES usage
- Next steps
  - test theory for weak links
  - refine theory
  - get into action

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