

# Filling the Gaps Between Theory and Practice: A Practice-oriented Evaluation Approach

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## Abstract

More knowledge about the causal mechanisms and core components of a program generating the outcomes are essential to knowledge building in evaluation. However, existing theories of evaluation are not empirical theories that explain how evaluation unfolds in practice. This research introduces a new practice-oriented approach, which employs meta-modeling strategy to induct the pattern of intervention program. The author will analyze sixteen community engagement programs in Beijing to explain how this approach be used in practice. Researchers involve in all the sixteen program's evaluation practice. During the process, they should identify the "node problems" of all these programs and summarize practitioners' response to solve similar node problem in specific social context. "Meta- synthesis pattern" of community engagement programs could be developed based on saturated and iterative program implementation information.

## Reflection on Exciting Evaluation Knowledge

### Reflection on the Synthesis Approaches in Evaluation Field

- Lemire and Christie (2018) pointed out that current approach building knowledge in evaluation heavily rely on the systematic review of experimental trials, excluding other potential blueprints and bricks.
- More information and knowledge about the causal mechanisms and core components of a program generating the outcomes are essential for knowledge building, which could be generalized in different contexts

### Reflection on the Philosophical Foundation of Theory-based Evaluation

- Brousselle and Buregeya (2018) defend that theory-based evaluation, including contribution analysis, logic analysis, and realist evaluation, represent the emerging fifth generation in evaluation, which characterized as explanation generation. They also positioned the approaches in the critical realism paradigm (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson et al., 2004) , which found on "ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationality (Groff, 2004:10)
- However, theory-based evaluation, embracing the epistemological relativism, also advances that "the trajectory from causal mechanisms to outcomes is nonlinear, unstable, and recursive (Brousselle & Buregeya, 2018: 158)".
- Existing theory-based evaluation (contribution analysis, logic analysis and realist evaluation) cannot resolve the critical dilemmas: How to integrate empirical realism and relativism/constructivism together in evaluation practice? How to fill the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge?

### Reflection on the Relationship of Theory and Practice

- Existing theory of evaluation refers to various evaluation models and approaches (Theory-driven evaluation, empowerment evaluation, CIPP model, etc.) are "not empirical theories that explain how evaluation unfolds in practice" (Schwandt, 2015, p.34).

- Schon (1983:68 ) pointed out that practice is not just the application of theoretical knowledge, instead, practitioners should engage in a kind of ongoing experimentation and situated judgements (decision making) which yields a particular kind of wisdom of practice, due to they are often facing "wicked" problems which are indeterminate, untidy, and not well formed. (works in an environment characterized by complexity, indeterminacy, and the necessity to act on the situation at hand (Wagenaar,2004) (Schwandt, 2015, p.32). Practitioner also "theorize" for every case. "

### Evaluation Knowledge Construction Needs Pragmatism-realism

- According to Putnam (1990), pragmatism-realism breaks the objectivity and subjectivity dichotomy of truth and rationality, which is a kind of epistemology integrate physical reality and social construction. The pragmatism-realism disapprove empirical realism in the sense that objects are independent of observers. However, pragmatism-realism is also not accordant with radical constructivism which regard social concepts are totally unrelated with reality (Guyon et al., 2018).
- Actually, evaluation theories are evolving with the practice activities and the sociohistorical context in which they are used.
- In sum, we argue that social programs evaluation should be positioned in the pragmatism-realism epistemology and we need evaluation knowledge which does represent the practical reality, not merely an intellectual construction of that reality.

## A New Evaluation Approach Based on Pragmatism-Realism

- This approach was developed by an evaluation team in China, which involved in thousands of programs evaluation and their program evaluation covered various fields.
- The author will analyze sixteen community engagement programs in Beijing to explain how this approach be used in practice. Researchers need to involve in all the sixteen program's evaluation practice.
- During the process, they should identify the "node problems" of all these programs, such as "how to involve people engage in collective action who have conflict interests in community? "and "how to divide limited resource among people". In addition, evaluation researchers need to summarize practitioners' response and skills to solve similar node problem in specific social context.
- Finally, "meta- synthesis pattern" of community engagement program could be developed based on saturated and iterative program implementation information. It also presents the organic growth process of a program pattern in real contingent and uncertainty world.
- This research could improve Lemire's "meta-modeling" approach because it fills the gap between evaluation practice and theory. Researchers take practitioner's wisdom seriously and synthesize their knowledge systematically which provide solid bricks for evaluation knowledge database.

## Key References

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