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Volume overview: Working with assumptions. Existing and emerging approaches for improved program design, monitoring and evaluation

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Highlights

- Evaluators work constantly with assumption, yet for decades it appears that assumptions are mostly unexamined by our profession.
- The ubiquity of assumptions in evaluation is perpetuated by the complexity of evaluands and their contexts.
- Assumptions affect every step of evaluation from assessing relevance and need to program implementation to finally the evaluation of program objective achievement.
- There is a need for a typology that links knowledge on program theory driven evaluations with epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions

Abstract

This volume attempts to systematically capture the state of practice, highlight commonalities linking existing and emerging approaches to assumption-making and evaluation. It tries to organize existing and emerging knowledge, tools and terminology into an emergent but useful typology for working with assumptions and complexity in program designs, monitoring and evaluation.

Overview

Assumptions. We work with them constantly as evaluators. Yet for decades it appears that assumptions are mostly unexamined by our profession. Recently a few authors have highlighted the need to "examine assumptions" as a primary focus for developing improved evaluation approaches and tools (e.g., Patton, 2010; Bamberger, 2013; Chen, 2005; Stame, 2004). These authors discuss the problems encountered while working with assumptions from a diversity of viewpoints and for application in a diversity of evaluation situations that has contributed to a proliferation of tools.

This volume focuses primarily on assumptions inherent in evaluands or program theories, commonly held in minds of different stakeholders of interventions and assumptions ingrained in methodological traditions and tools of inquiry. A volume on existing and emerging approaches in working with assumptions for improved program design, monitoring and evaluation is important because of the ubiquity of assumptions in evaluation, which is especially perpetuated by the complexity of evaluands and their contexts. Assumptions affect every step of evaluation from assessing relevance and need to program implementation to finally the evaluation of program objective achievement. Evaluands (program or policy interventions) are premised on several assumptions, e.g. on the root and immediate causes of issues that are being addressed, what are deemed the most appropriate strategies for addressing those issues, and how an intervention's immediate outputs will be transformed into desired changes as well as the range of long term consequences (intended and unintended; desirable and undesirable) that an intervention or combinations of interventions will bring about. Evaluators also make assumptions about which

methodologies and questions are suitable within evaluations: “Evaluators also align themselves on the quantitative/mixed methods/qualitative spectrum with all of the assumptions that these positions entail” (Bamberger, 2013: ix). Whether they are implicit or explicit, these assumptions are the basis of program success and critical to the viability of interventions and the validity of evaluations. As an effort to comprehend complex program aspects, simplification-usually with the use of assumptions, is inevitable for real world evaluators

While understanding assumptions that underlie interventions is essential for conducting valid evaluations, it is just as important to examine assumptions that evaluators make themselves about how to frame the evaluand design, evaluation implementation accounting for that design, and mode of work to achieve their goals. What changes should be measured and which indicators and methodologies should be applied?

While assumption-making is common among evaluators, it could sometimes be characterized as unconscious application of *false* assumptions to the evaluation situation that jeopardizes findings and post evaluative actions. Some examples are:

- Creating simple depictions of complex relationships
- Applying stereotypes of stakeholder groups
- Creating broad characterizations of contexts with simplistic typologies
- Focusing only on program outcomes that are intended and measurable
- Outlining linear input-outcome relationships
- Ignoring activity levels that are nuanced (Patton, 2010, Nkwake, 2013).

Useful program evaluation that suits complex programming expands and draws upon the learning of all players involved in an evaluation and facilitates evaluation use. For this reason, there is a high need to promote explication of assumptions in program contexts, stakeholders, designs and evaluation (Patton, 2010; Stame, 2004; Chen 2005).

To date, an evaluation approach that directly or indirectly emphasizes the articulation of assumptions is commonly known to be "theory-driven evaluation". The emphasis in theory driven evaluation and its variants is the articulation of various assumptions underlying a program or policy being evaluated--how the components are expected to)work together--as well as the sequence of intermediate changes between a program's immediate results and its long term outcomes (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schröter , 2011; Weiss, 1995; Chen, 2005; Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006; Lipsey, 1993). Commonly used program design tools, especially the logical framework approaches, place more emphasis on external or contextual assumptions--preconditions for program success that are beyond the control of program stakeholders. However, other assumptions and preconditions that affect program successes and yet are much within the control and influence of program stakeholders are often overlooked, e.g., causal assumptions, which have to do with how a program's immediate outputs are transformed into intended outcomes (Nkwake, 2013). Besides causal assumptions, stakeholders would do well to examine foundational assumptions about what is believed to be the root causes of social issues addressed by the program (diagnostic assumptions), and why a specific intervention strategy is believed to be the most appropriate course of action (prescriptive assumptions) (Nkwake, 2013).

Yet, today there is no typology that clarifies the various types of assumptions that evaluators must deal with that helps differentiate among those that are worth examining from those that are not. Besides the often overlooked but critical diagnostic, prescriptive and causal assumptions, inquiry in theory driven approaches shows that not all sorts of assumptions are worth examining. Some assumptions are more critical to a program's success than others. Some assumptions are within the influence or control of program stakeholders and others are not. Some assumptions made within an evaluation may be more critical than others. Our field needs an eclectic typology that guides prioritization of assumptions worthy of inquiry. We also need a coherent synthesis of assumption assessment tools that clarify the relevance of different tools for different assumptions and program stages. This kind of synthesis is essential for understanding the utility of different tools vis-a-vis complexity – Which are the appropriate tools for the relevant assumptions?

Purposes and Premises

This special issue attempts to systematically capture the state of practice, highlight commonalities linking existing and emerging approaches to assumption-making and evaluation. It tries to organize existing and emerging knowledge, tools and terminology into an emergent but useful typology for working with assumptions and complexity in program designs, monitoring and evaluation. We also discuss the potential role of improved articulation of assumptions in improving evaluation practice,

The premises of the volume are that:

- A focus on assumptions is foundational to performing sound evaluations yet a poorly developed area of evaluation theory and practice to date.

- Emergent approaches to working with assumptions, their challenges and potential need discussion and synthesis.

There is a need for a typology that links knowledge on program theory driven evaluations with epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions arising from other sources, with some new frameworks for determining when to use which assumption analysis tools, both practical and applied. Our hope is that the collection of papers will serve as the next major step in forwarding assumption- guided and theory-driven approaches to evaluation, help make connections among those approaches, and point out future directions of work in assumptions and program evaluation.

Audiences

Thousands of programs all over the world are implemented in complex environments with program designers and managers, evaluators and evaluation managers, who are grappling with ways to understand how programs work and why some succeed. This Special Issue is written for a diverse audience including evaluators that are theorists, methodologists and practitioners, as well as those involved in designing programs and managing evaluations. Making assumptions becomes inevitable in the course of fulfilling their tasks. A systematic assumption analysis can reduce the risks masked by unexamined assumptions. Anyone who has used a log frame would relate with the discussions in this issue.

Themes and Contributions

The first three articles introduce rationale and key terminology as a common basis for working with assumptions in program design and evaluation. They highlight the paradigmatic assumptions that permeate the theories, characterizations of evaluands, method selection, and the development of evaluation questions. These treatments of assumptions are also at the forefront of

some of the complex and critical challenges facing evaluators today. Nkwake and Morrow outline typologies for paradigmatic, program theory, methodological, and stakeholder related assumptions. Mertens discusses the use of a transformative philosophical framework as a premise for evaluators and to become more aware of the implications of various assumptions made by themselves and program stakeholders. Chen draws on three theoretical perspectives (reductionism, systems thinking, and pragmatic synthesis) to examine assumptions in theories that guide the design of interventions and theories that guide the conduct of evaluation. He then discusses the implications for evaluation practice.

Assumption informed methods and tools in complex organizations and environments is the subject of the next set of three articles. Assumptions are the unifying concept for: developing a framework to surface, describe and strengthen the articulation of assumptions in one complex organization's program documents, developing evaluative thinking through articulation of critical micro-assumptions, and selecting and sequencing methods in a complex environment. Archibald, Sharrock, Buckley, and Cook discuss lessons learned from the application of evaluative thinking in an evaluation capacity building project designed to help community development practitioners to better work with assumptions. Chatterji categorizes common sources of complexity and explores avenues for negotiating design challenges posed by complex social programs (CSP) and their environments when conducting impact evaluations; she discusses assumptions that are commonly violated in the application of traditional study designs for impact evaluations and offers theoretically-supported alternative strategies for countering such challenges.

Finally, two articles examine the application of theory-based tools first in an assumption-laden environment and in the second paper as a response to limitations in the treatment of

assumptions in the Logical Framework Approach and provide some guidance on the when and why to use different theory-based tools to support better articulation and use of assumptions in program design and evaluation. Authors examine the treatment of assumptions in the Logical Framework Approach as an introduction to a review of twelve other theory-based evaluation tools that further elaborate methods for articulation and use of assumptions in strengthening program theory. Assumption aware tools for more appropriate and effective program theory development are compared or organized into descriptive categories based on intended use. Finally, authors discuss features and prerequisites for evolution of assumptions aware evaluation practice.

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