

Building Evaluation Capacity Session 8

Re-Thinking Proof and Attribution Revisiting Evaluative Thinking and Ripple

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Hi, I donated \$20 last year.
Can you tell me exactly how many
Children I've saved?



freshspectrum.com



What is Proof?



- *Evidence establishing the validity of a given assertion.*
- *Conclusive demonstration of something.*
- *The proving of something by experiment, test or trial.*



Why are Controlled Experiments Difficult for Program Evaluators?

- *Cost prohibitive*
- *Time consuming*
- *Difficult to administer*
- *There are ethical dilemmas*



Outcomes v. Impacts

Outputs

Outcomes
Attribution

Impact
Attribution

Collective Impact
Attribution



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Why is Attribution Difficult for Program Evaluators?

- **Does it work?**
 - hard to define “it”
 - hard to define “work”
 - time is always a factor
- **Can you take credit for it?**
- **Reasons attribution is difficult to establish:**
 - numbers of factors at play
 - system complexity
 - “down-stream” results



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More about Attribution Difficulties

- The difficulties involved in establishing attribution within complex systems are primarily due to context – multiple, varied and dynamic variables affecting complex systems.
- “*One of the most problematic parts of impact assessment is determining causality, because **in real life, a combination of several factors is likely to have caused any observed change***” (Roche, 1999:32).
- “*Traditional evaluation models do not necessarily deal with adaptive, complex systems, which is what human communities and social-information systems are.*” (Whyte, 2000).



Program Evaluation, Rigor, Attribution, and Reducing Uncertainty

- Rigor can be achieved through:
 - Mixed methods
 - Multiple points in time
 - Multiple perspectives
- We strive for rigor instead of ‘causation.’
- Standards of evidence are different for evaluators.

Measurement in the public sector is less about precision and more about increasing understanding and knowledge. It is about increasing what we know about what works in an area and thereby reducing uncertainty.... (Mayne, 1999:5)



Words of Wisdom re: Attribution

- The growing acceptance and use of multiple methodologies within evaluation is linked to the discipline's gradual change in conceptualization of 'causation.'
- There is change in the 'standard of evidence' by which evaluator's 'measure' the effects of interventions. Notably, where 'proof' of attribution is required, the means of establishing it may not necessarily follow 'conventional' methods, including randomized control trials (RCTs).
- *Measurement in the public sector is less about precision and more about increasing understanding and knowledge. It is about increasing what we know about what works in an area and thereby reducing uncertainty....* (Mayne, 1999:5)



More Words of Wisdom

- Increasingly, evaluators are adopting mixed methods to 'reduce uncertainty' and generate 'reasonable confidence' as a satisfactory substitute for 'statistical significance' alone.
- [Evaluators] appear to regard the loss in statistically-based 'proof' as outweighed by the gain in understanding of:
 - which programs work
 - what parts of which programs work
 - why they worked and
 - in what contexts (Mayne, 1999:5)



ACCEPTANCE

We need to accept the fact that what we are doing is measuring with the aim of reducing uncertainty about the contribution made, not proving the contribution made.

Mayne, John. 1999. Addressing Attribution Through Contribution Analysis: Using Performance Measures Sensibly. Discussion paper, Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

Impact and attribution are beyond our realm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f4rNEsyEYY>



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What is Ripple and How do you Accomplish it?

Ripple = extending or spreading evaluation learning throughout an organization. Three key ways to accomplish ripple include:

- *Involve multiple staff in evaluation.*
- *Conduct general training for multiple staff.*
- *Model evaluative thinking and good evaluation practices.*



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Evaluative Thinking: a type of reflective practice that incorporates use of systematically collected data to inform organizational decisions and other actions.

1. Asking questions of substance
2. Determining data needed to address questions
3. Gathering appropriate data in systematic ways
4. Analyzing data and sharing results
5. Developing strategies to act on findings



Organizations that Regularly use Evaluative Thinking Will Also . . .

- Think carefully about developing and assessing programs and other actions.
- Incorporate program evaluation findings and other assessment findings into program and other planning.
- Involve significant others in planning and revising plans.
- Develop written, logical plans.
- Follow plans.
- Have strategies in place to modify plans



Important Vocabulary Changes

Proof → Acceptable Evidence

We are going to prove we are doing a good job. → We are going to collect valid evidence, using rigorous methods, to help us understand to what extent our programs are working and why, and to inform our next program decisions.

Evaluation and Research, though related, are not interchangeable (an evaluation researcher is someone who does research about evaluation).

Anecdotes are short and amusing or interesting stories. Anecdotal evidence is collected in a casual or informal manner. These **should NOT be confused with systematically collected stories and quotes that result in valid qualitative evidence.**

