Power of evaluation: influencing decision-making for a better and more equal world

2022 IDEAS Conference and Global Assembly 27-29 September 2022
Complexity-driven evaluation: a new paradigm to tackle transformative change

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Plan

I. Introduction

II. What do we know about the complexity in the evaluation field?

III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

IV. How to encompass the issue of evaluation complexity within an evaluation framework?

V. Conclusion
I. Introduction

Evaluation not only measure change, but really shape social change
A growing interest in addressing the complexity of evaluating policy implementation (Haarich, 2018)

The use of methods of complexity in evaluation is still not widespread in practice (Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021)
Our ambition

- Exploring approaches and methods in the evaluation field to the complex environment
- How evaluators can manage complexity to reach the transformative change?
II. What do we know about the complexity in the evaluation field?
Complexity expresses the emergent, unpredictable, and nonlinear nature of associations between actions and outcomes (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002).

The intervention functioning in complex social systems is shaped by interactions among various changing actors (Keshavarz N, Nutbeam D, Rowling L & Freidoon, 2010).
Complex intervention

Complex intervention emphasizes identifying uncertainties and the role of context in modeling the dynamic relationships between implementation, mechanisms, and context (Moore et al., 2019).
The concept of complexity in the evaluation field

To make change evaluation should integrate the dynamic character of a program to deal with context, politics, and complexity issues (Aston et al., 2022)
The evaluation process complexity
II. What do we know about the complexity in the evaluation field?

II.1. Limitation of the evaluation methodology to deal with complexity
Evaluation does not contribute sufficiently to transformative social change

Dominant ideologies

01

02

03

Not independent

Predetermined guidelines

Mathison (2018)
Evaluation as an establishment-oriented practice

**Bureacracy**
Merged into bureaucratic and administrative practices (Schwandt, 2017)

**Influence**
Decision-makers and bureaucrats are likely to be the most influential stakeholders during the evaluation process (Eckhard & Jankauskas, 2019).

**Settlement-based methods**
Methodological fundamentalism neglects cultural and socio-political pluralism (Moore et al., 2019).
Social transformative interventions are distinguished by unpredictability (Chandler et al., 2016).

Settlement-based methods that capture only predetermined objectives miss unintended outcomes (Moore et al., 2019).

Evaluation misses unintended outcomes and offers only partial truth by
The field of evaluation suffers from a kind of reductionism to deal with complexity

The quantification reduces complex interactions and experiences

(Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021)
Randomized trials fail to understand social change

The complex systems need a deeper understanding of unraveling intervention mechanisms and their relation to the context that statistical hypothesis-testing methods cannot do (Oliver et al., 2020).
Methodological concerns: to link program theory to program outcomes

Understanding unintended consequences improve policy design and implementation in complex systems (Oliver et al., 2020).
II. What do we know about the complexity in the evaluation field?

II.2. Evaluation in Politics
Decision-makers need evaluation-oriented problem-solving to handle the complexity and diversity of interests and values (Norris, 2005).

Defensive mechanisms are hampered when evaluations threaten the status quo in hierarchical organizations working with rigid norms and beliefs (Matheson, 2007).

This paradox adds complexity to an evaluation in a political context.
Politicians try to control the evaluation process

Political power influences the evaluation’s design and implementation (Azzam, 2010).

Governments think it is politically safe to control evaluation content and process (Norris, 2005)
The political influence on the evaluation process

Agenda-setting powers, staff, and budgetary resources, access to evaluation results, and evaluators (Eckhard & Jankauskas, 2019).
Evaluators' autonomy is tackled by ...

- Negotiating the evaluation process
- The volatile political environments
- Political ideology
- The hostile political environments
- Political agenda
- The threats to independence

(Chelimsky, 1995)
III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

Evaluating complex interventions built on multi-actors requires substantial evaluation approaches (Haarich, 2018).
Challenges to evaluate complex multi-levels intervention

- Network diversity
- Adaptiveness and rules
- Blurred boundaries
- Behavior and collective results

(Haarich, 2018)
Evaluation can cope with complexity by using alternative reasoning that underlies social intervention
III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

III.1. Adaptability as a Fundamental Approach to Handle Complexity in Evaluation
Adaptation and innovation as a fundamental approach for evaluation...

- Frontier research
- Open dialogue between commissioners and evaluators
- Flexible evaluation contract
- Adaptive research design

(Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021).
Generative logic and relevance rather than the nature of the methods

Appropriate theory of change and real-time feedback to account for program design and implementation to power relations and social reality (Aston et al., 2022).

Evaluators should consider different perspectives to depict system complexity deeply, and use an adaptive and flexible design (Haarich, 2018).
MORE DELIBERATION

To understand unintended consequences, evaluators can use pluralistic and adaptative methods by using more deliberation during evaluation processes (Oliver et al., 2020).
III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

III.2. Recognizing stakeholders’ plurality in Participatory evaluation
Recognizing stakeholders' plurality to deal with complexity

1. Political power
   Fashions methods, findings, and transformational change

2. Evaluators
   Value the generative method that recognizes stakeholders' plurality

3. Evaluation results
   Clear as possible
   Promote learning and capacity building
   Increase the evaluation utility

(Haarich, 2018)
How to get the most prominent explanations about how an intervention has provided social change?

Engaging with the weakest stakeholder’s views
(Silver, 2021)

Participatory parity to evaluation theory and practice reveals injustice and finds solutions through empowerment
(Stame, 2018)

Evaluation policy must use a participatory approach by adopting the bottom-up methodology
(Silver, 2021)
III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

III.3. Using Innovation in Methods to Address the Evaluation Complexity
The explanatory approaches
Innovation Vs Reductionism

**Reductionism**
The evaluation suffers from a kind of reductionism to deal with complexity rather than detailed analysis and reflection (Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021).

**Mixed methods**
Building and testing theories about the functioning of complex social systems (Moore et al., 2019)

**Plurality**
Adopting plurality in producing knowledge to reduce the predominance of quantitative approaches (Stame, 2018)

**Heuristic approach**
Adopting a heuristic approach and not making separate questions about different outcomes and the context (Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021).
The system approaches to unraveling complex policy evaluation

Intervention as an open system interacting with other systems

A promoting alternative to the top-down approaches
A better understanding of policy implementation
To scrutinize the interrelations of a system's components
The theory-based evaluation as an application of the systems approaches,

(Caffrey & Munro, 2017)
Further alternatives to deal with complexity to tackle transformative change

The theoretically eclectic approach

Applying organizational institutional theory

Principals, intermediaries, and Agents

Knowledge brokering

(Deane et al., 2020)

(Dahler-Larsen, 2012)

(Porter, 2016)

(Olejniczak, 2017)
III. How do evaluation theory and practice cope with complexity?

III.4. Evaluator Role as a Change Agent
The evaluator's role is **FUNDAMENTAL** as a change agent working in complex political environments

(Research/truth)  (Practice/action)  
(Patton, 1988)
Evaluators seem to fit their findings to predominant stakeholders (Picciotto, 2016).

The evaluator can contribute independently and ethically to political ramifications (Patton, 1988).

Evaluators should secure their independence from political interference and disseminate credible and defensible evaluation reports (Chelimsky, 1995).
IV. HOW TO ENCOMPASS THE ISSUE OF EVALUATION COMPLEXITY WITHIN AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK?

Complexity-driven evaluation framework…
Complexity-driven evaluation framework

A complex system's lens shape evaluation design and methods (Morell et al., 2010)

1. The systems approach (Caffrey & Munro, 2017).
2. Adaptive research design (Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021; Aston et al., 2022; Haarich, 2018).
5. Using knowledge brokering (Cooper, 2013).
7. Evaluator as a change agent using Truth-telling approach (Kuntz, 2015).
Complexity-driven evaluation framework

Evaluation should be conducted by the complexity rather than methods

Change Agent: program manager, the institution in charge of implementation

Intervention as an open system...

Evaluation design and methods
- System approach
- Adaptability
- Plurality of methods
- Participatory
- Organizational theory
- Public interest criteria

Findings
- Disseminating
- Truth-telling

Principal

Beneficiaries

Evaluator

Contracting

Commissioning entity

Decision making

Agent

Administration

Knowledge brokers

Feedback

Adopted from (Picciotto, 2016), the tricky rectangle of evaluation governance

Agent: program manager, the institution in charge of implementation
V. CONCLUSION
• The **complexity-driven evaluation** framework aims to guide evaluators in conducting evaluations in a **complex and multi-level environment**.

• It suggests applying the **systems approach** based on **principal-agent concepts** as a conceptual framework. The proposed framework enforces a deep analysis of intervention **interaction** within a whole system to tackle **transformative change**.

• It adopts a **participatory** approach to understanding stakeholders' views and power to lead to more trustworthy findings and integrate more **organizational theory** to explore the complexity of the problem the program is trying to resolve.
Thanks!

Any questions?
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