

Evaluation Theory & Practice: Comments and Discussion

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EERS, April 2017

*Eleanor Chelimsky Forum on
Evaluation Theory and Practice*

**Excerpts from Chelimsky (2012),
*Balancing Theory and Practice in the
Real World***

“we may want to incorporate two approaches that run in parallel: a scientific and philosophical approach to achieve the production of strong evaluative information, and a craftsmanlike, audience-related approach to achieve the best possible use of that information.”

Chelimsky's (2012) Four Suggestions...

... “for practitioners and theorists to reflect together on ... problems experienced in practice, along with [resulting] theoretical modifications, efforts at resolution, & follow-up”

- (a) a specialized, on-going forum
- (b) brief reports when an evaluation finds conflict with theory
- (c) a blog, listserv or Google+Hangout
- (d) an annual debate ... on a specific “balance” issue

Purpose of Forum

- Mission: “the presentation of often-encountered practitioner experience that appears to challenge theory in some explicit or implicit way.”
- Aim: “surface the various unresolved issues, commonly raised by theorists and practitioners, for discussion by experts in theory and practice, along with a panel of diverse, experienced evaluators”

ISSUES & RAMIFICATIONS of current practice



MOCK-UP



REAL DATA



ANALYSIS

- **Adequacy of proof**
- Evaluator independence
- Evaluator as coach
- The meaning of “report”
- Professional development and evaluator careers

Why Evaluation Theory”

Evaluation theory as a guide to practice:

“What the field lacks most is people who know something about when, where, why and how different methods could and should be used in evaluation practice. Theory tells us that.”

Shadish (1996)

Evaluation theory as a guide to judgment, not a dispensation from it

(Aside, benefit of being multilingual)

Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991), *Foundations of Program Evaluation: Theories of Practice*

Shadish et al. contend that good evaluation theories need to address five issues (alternatively phrased, to include five components):

- *Social Programming*: how programs operate; external constraints on programs; and the role of programs in social change.
 - *Knowledge Construction*: how we construct knowledge and justify knowledge claims.
 - *Valuing*: how to explicate value issues and select the values to which to attend in evaluation.
 - *Use*: what kinds of use matter, when, and what the evaluator should do to facilitate use (under various conditions).
 - *Practice*: how to do evaluation, including issues of evaluation purpose, evaluator role, selection of questions, design, and activities related to use.
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- Venn Diagram with Practice component in the middle

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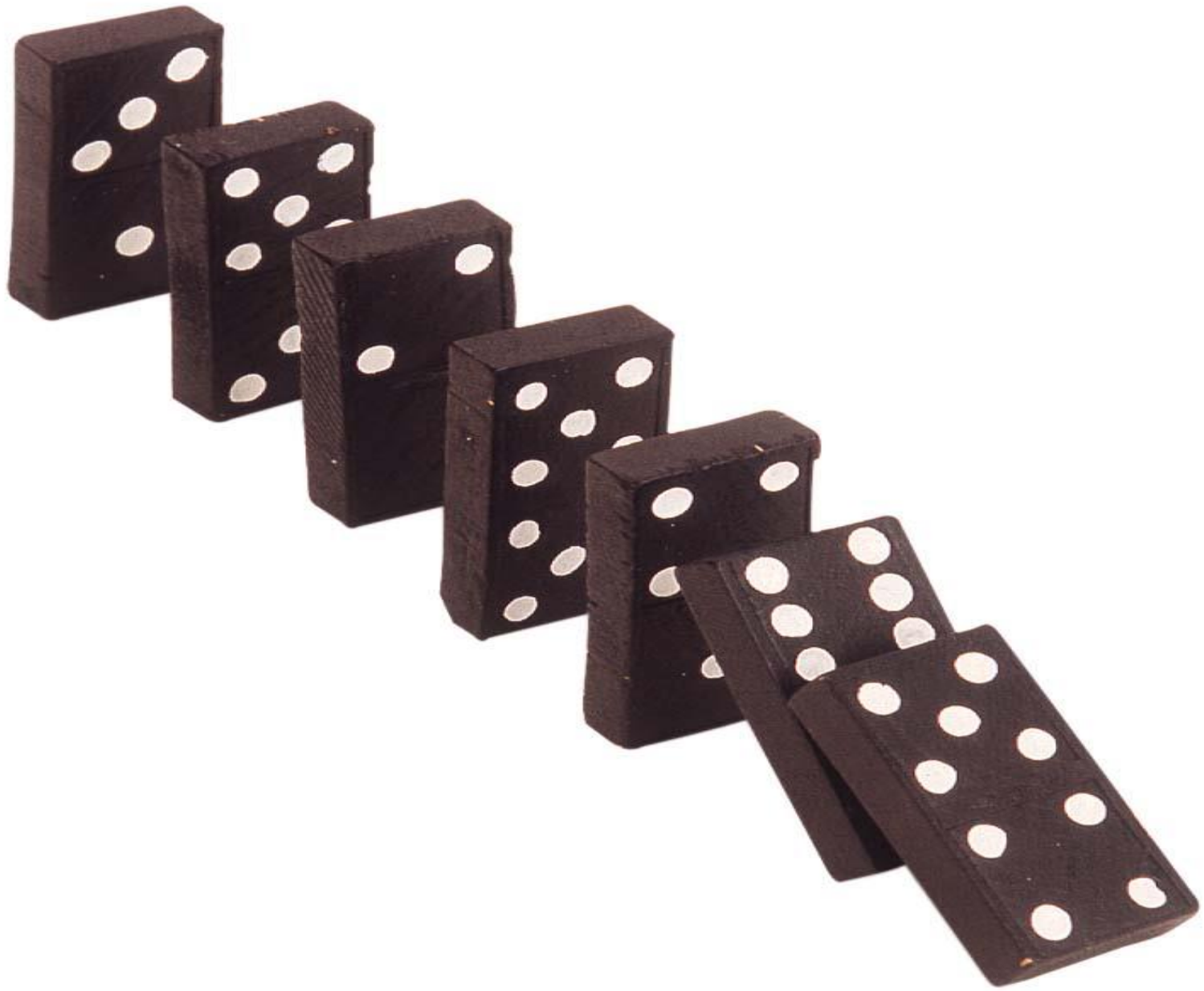
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Knowledge Construction

- Wide range of views across evaluation theory
 - Campbell to Guba & Lincoln
- Benefits of being multi-lingual (maybe eclectic)
- Mixed methods will often make sense given multiple questions, value of multiple perspectives. Not ritualistic

Two thoughts re “Convincing or Persuading....”

- 1. Theories & research from outside evaluation are relevant
- 2. More extreme poles defined by
 - Campbell
 - Patton
- But intermediate roles not well defined. Idea of “influence pathways” may help



One of Several Practice Implications

- Think about *your* (and others') appropriate role re dominoes

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Independence

- Often thought of in terms of organizational structure, e.g.
 - External evaluator for high stakes summative
 - Internal for: co-construction of program with evaluative thinking, formative, internal use summative
 - Reporting structure
- George instead emphasizes evaluator's stance, behavior

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Evaluation in the Face of Limited Budget

- Coaching as one good option
- Or formative work as budget allows
- Sometimes, Wholey's rapid feedback evaluation
- Or....
- Often, a problem lies in funder's evaluation mandate & funding approach. Illuminative function of evaluation applies here as well.

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Additional Thoughts on Reporting Results

- Findings may be more consequential when presented in broader conceptual framework
- Findings that matter not always the focal evaluation question (e.g., population characteristics; implementation feasibility)
- “Procedural influence”: Consequences of procedural attributes of the evaluation, e.g., measurement of children’s well-being as outcome in welfare reform evaluations

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Evaluator Training

- Belongs in Shadish, Cook & Leviton's practice component of evaluation theory.
- Substantial part of final chapter in Cronbach and associates' *Toward Reform of Program Evaluation* (1980)
 - “Lay out a plan to prepare a kind of evaluator-for-all-seasons” (PhD in discipline + + +)
 - “also favor a steady effort to improve training for narrower responsibilities”
- Less attention by most evaluation theorists

Need training/professional development models for different groups

- The (long-term) professional evaluator (Cronbach et al.; George Grob)
- Possibly long-term but via a back-door
- The occasional and/or short-term evaluator
- Evaluation users

Thanks!

- George Grob
- EERS
- RWJF
- Eleanor Chelimsky!

- All y'all

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