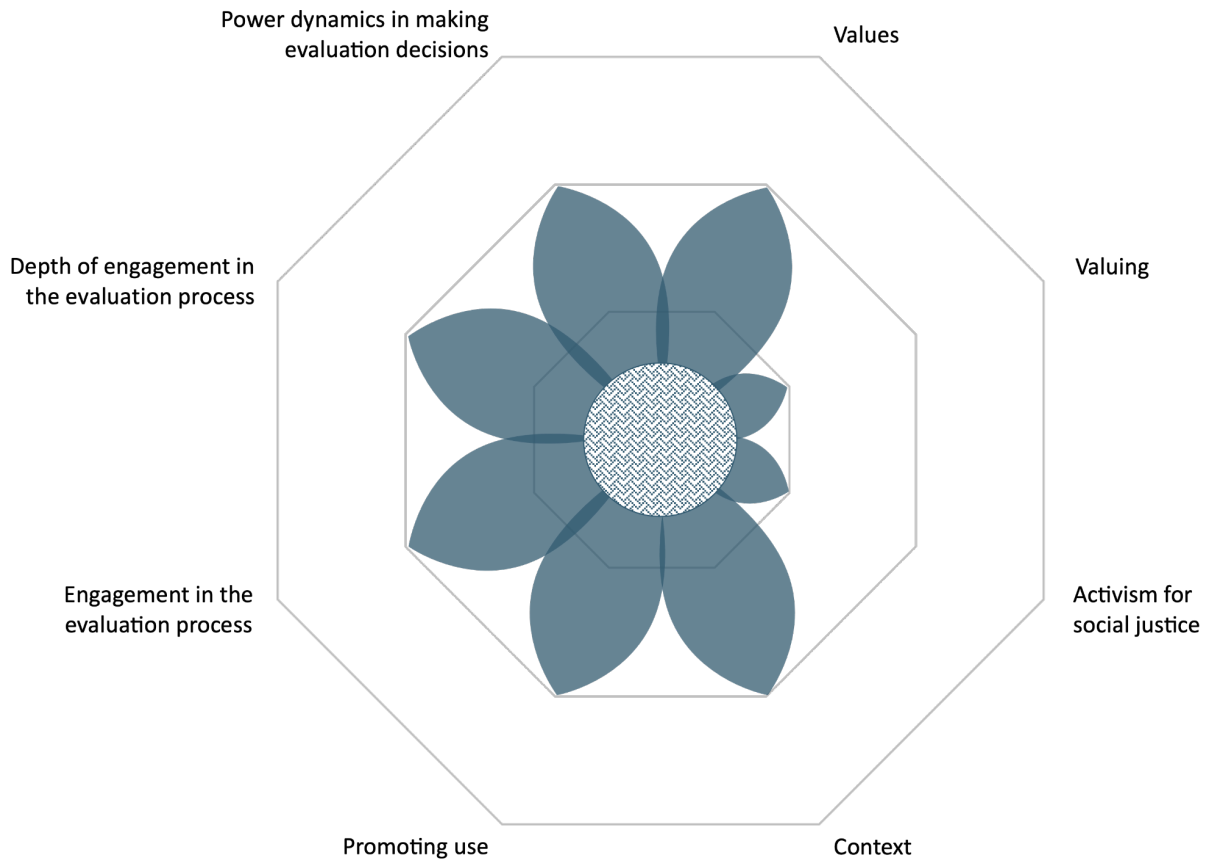


Theory-Driven Evaluation (TDE)

TDE is in the post-positivist paradigm and uses mixed methods. It has been written about by a wide range of evaluation theorists and methodologists over the course of almost a century with its origins dating back to the work of Ralph Tyler in the 1930's (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schröter, 2011). TDE is an approach that is used in program evaluation and is prominent for its formulation and assessment of program theory.



Legend

● Post-positivist paradigm	⊕ Quantitative methods
● Pragmatist paradigm	⊗ Qualitative methods
● Constructivist paradigm	⊘ Mixed methods
● Transformative paradigm	
● Indigenous paradigm	

Citation:

Schroeter, D., Montrosse-Moorhead, B., & Becho, L. (2023, March 16). Theory-driven evaluation handout. Retrieved from osf.io/sdfcw

Theory-Driven Evaluation (TDE)

Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
<p>Values Values refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators includes the surfacing and use of values in an evaluation. Values include the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of those involved in the evaluation about what is of value, good, important, worthwhile, desired, needed, or preferred. Values guide, implicitly or explicitly, what happens at each stage in the process and how the work at each stage is carried out.</p>	2	<p>Values are important, but the evaluation doesn't play an active role in surfacing values beyond those inherent in the program theory or connected to methodological concerns.</p> <p>Values are depicted in program theory (Chen, 1990, p. 57). "Fundamental" values of TDE (Chen, 1990, pp. 61-65) are responsiveness, objectivity, trustworthiness, and generalizability—aka method-centered values.</p>
<p>Valuing Valuing refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators includes an implicit or explicit process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of something.</p>	1	<p>Explicit valuing is not at the core of this approach.</p> <p>In TDE, there is no explicit focus on valuing. Instead, the approach tests or verifies program theory. "If there is consistency between the theoretical expectation and the empirical data, the normative theory is verified" (Chen, 1990, p. 83).</p>
<p>Activism for social justice Activism for social justice refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance for evaluators to take clear action in support of a cause, and its positioning of advocacy or activism as the primary purpose of evaluation activities.</p>	1	<p>Social justice concerns are only central in this approach if the program theory is linked directly to social justice concerns.</p> <p>Activism is not central to a TDE, but justice concerns may be seen as a "value" in the evaluation (Chen, 1990, p. 61). This approach is "used to (a) develop and improve programs and organizations focused on preventing and solving a wide range of pressing human concerns and problems, (b) b to aid decision making, (c) to facilitate organizational learning and the development of new knowledge, and</p>

Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
		(d) to meet transparency and accountability needs" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 10). This includes programs and organizations that are mainly focused on social justice concerns.
<p>Context Context refers to an evaluation approach's guidance on the extent to which evaluations directly and actively attend to their surrounding cultural, historical, and/or political contexts or systems.</p>	2	<p>Context is a consideration as it relates to program participation, important programmatic elements that may facilitate impact (micro-level), and even cultural, political, and economic norms and standards (macro-level).</p> <p>Chen (2015) emphasizes that "Both micro-level contextual support and macro-level contextual support can be crucial to a program's success" (p. 77). However, the extent to which culture can be flipped (and not align with how Westerners think and act) is unclear.</p>
<p>Promoting use Promoting use refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach guides evaluators to directly and actively facilitate use. This use could be use of evaluation findings, or of knowledge gained through the process of engaging in an evaluation. Use can be immediate and large, or slow and steady, occurring over time.</p>	2	<p>Evaluators may facilitate use, though use is not the central concern.</p> <p>Engagement in program theory development is intended to support the promotion of use (see Chen, 1990, pp. 68-69 & p. 71). "The mutual understanding and consensus [between stakeholders and evaluators] may facilitate the utilization of evaluation results" (Chen, 1990, p. 71; bracket added to clarify). Donaldson (2007) states: "Inclusion and collaboration during each step promise to enhance both the validity and utilization of the evaluation findings" (p. 15). However, while TDE can be used within utilization-focused evaluation, use is not at the center of the approach.</p>

Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
<p>Engagement in the evaluation process</p> <p>Engagement refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance to evaluators on who is involved in evaluation planning, interpretation, reporting, and decision-making. These groups of people might include those who work on the design, implementation, and/or management of an evaluation (e.g., donors, funders, taxpayers), those who are the immediate recipients of a program (e.g., program participants, or those who receive services), and those who are not direct recipients but benefit nonetheless (e.g., families of people who participated in the program, others conducting similar activities).</p>	2	<p>Those funding, designing, implementing, or managing an evaluation object are often involved during varying stages of the theory-driven evaluation process, particularly if a “stakeholder approach” is chosen to conduct the theory-driven evaluation.</p> <p>There is a specific differentiation between “stakeholder and social science approaches” to theory formulation in TDE (Chen, 1990, p. 65-66): "The stakeholder approach refers to the construction of program theory in a way that is highly responsive to key stakeholders' perspectives, views, ideas, and/or expectations." The rationale underlying this approach is to reflect the values of those who usually sponsor the evaluation and utilize the evaluation results (Chen, 1990, p. 66). "Relevant documentation includes the program's legislative history, regulations and guidelines, budget justification, monitoring reports, and reports of program accomplishments. Key policymakers, managers, and interest groups would be questioned regarding their assumptions and expectations about the relationships among program resources, program activities, and expected outcomes" (Chen, 1990, p. 66).</p>
<p>Depth of engagement in the evaluation process</p> <p>Depth of engagement refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach’s guidance on the extent to which different groups of people are engaged throughout an evaluation, and in what roles (i.e., no role, consulted, partners, or co-directors).</p>	2	<p>There is some level of engagement in some or all evaluation phases.</p> <p>Experts and decision makers are engaged in the TDE process to the extent needed and deemed appropriate, given scientific knowledge discrepancies.</p>

Dimension	Rating	Evidence to Support this Rating
		<p>"As the evaluator is typically the only one among the stakeholders who possess the expertise and familiarity with the scientific viewpoint that enables him or her to recognize the issues and problems most relevant to the evaluation, it is the evaluator's responsibility to see that these issues are discussed and incorporated into the overall evaluation. . . The role of constituent does not imply that the theory-driven evaluator attempts to substitute his or her values and views for those of the other stakeholders . . . the evaluators should bring multiple stakeholders into an open discussion or even create a formal forum for reaching a consensus" (Chen, 1990, pp. 78-79). ". . . the evaluator identifies what the stakeholders' theory is, how the stakeholders will use the information in the future, what the crucial issues in the evaluation domain are, what type(s) of theory-driven evaluation is most appropriate, what previous studies, theory, and knowledge are relevant to this particular program, and so on" (Chen, 1990, p. 85).</p>
<p>Power dynamics in making evaluation decisions Power dynamic in making evaluation decisions refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance about who is engaged in decision-making and how.</p>	2	<p>The ultimate power is with the TDE evaluator and powerful program constituents.</p>

Steps for Implementing this Approach in Practice

The basic steps for TDE are based on Chen (2015, p. 18 based on CDC, 1999):

Step 1. Engage stakeholders:

Stakeholders include “individuals and organizations with an interest in the program in the evaluation process” (Chen, 2015, p. 18)

Step 2. Describe the program:

Program description “involves defining the problem, formulating program goals and objectives, and developing a logic model showing how the program is supposed to work” (Chen, 2015, p. 18). This step is considered theory formulation. Theory formulation may be informed by existing social science theory, through explicating stakeholders’ theory, via program observation, or an integrated approach that uses a combination of these methods (see Donaldson, 2007).

Step 3. Focus the evaluation design:

This includes identifying key methodological elements by determining “the type of evaluation to implement, identifies the sources needed to implement the evaluation, and develops evaluation questions” (Chen, 2015, p. 18).

Step 4. Gather credible evidence:

To gather credible evidence requires identification of “indicators, data sources and methods for collecting data, and the timeline” (Chen, 2015, p. 18).

Step 5. Justify conclusions:

Justifying conclusions “involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the evaluation data” (Chen, 2015, p. 18).

Step 6. Ensure use and share lessons:

As part of this step, the evaluation team “identifies effective methods for sharing and using the evaluation results” (Chen, 2015, p. 18).

Critically Reflecting on the Philosophical Orientation for this Approach

Theory-driven evaluation is embedded in the post-positivist “post experimental” tradition. Core principles include these (see Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schröter, 2011): theory formulation, theory-guided questions formulation, evaluation planning, and measurement, and theory verification. In essence, all steps within the evaluation are linked to the (program) theory. The evaluator constructs the (program) theory first (based on prior knowledge or stakeholder perspectives) and then identifies the best, scientifically credible methodology to test that theory. Chen (1990) states: “The role of the method selected is to test the theory rather than to supersede the theory. Because the theory-driven perspective is not method bound, the theory-driven evaluation can take advantage of using various qualitative or

quantitative methods as long as the method is appropriate to serve the theoretical purposes” (Chen, 1990, p. 84). “Scientific credibility reflects the extent to which an evaluation meets the standards of scientific principles and provides trustworthy evidence. (Chen, 2013, p. 114). As such, the approach closely aligns with ethical principles of scientific research (beneficence, respect, and justice), yet acknowledges some subjectivity by embedding stakeholder engagement allowing for modified objectivism. But leaning on rigorous methodological designs and the evaluator’s expertise, the approach attempts to minimize bias and maximize an evaluation’s scientific validity and credibility to the stakeholder.

References Used

- Chen, H. T. (1990). *Theory-driven evaluations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chen, H. T. (2013). The roots and growth of theory-driven evaluation. In Alkin, M. C. (Ed.), *Evaluation roots: A wider perspective of theorists' views and influences* (pp. 113 - 129). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Chen, H. T. (2015). *Practical program evaluation: Theory-Driven Evaluation and the Integrated Evaluation Perspective* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Coryn, C. L., Noakes, L. A., Westine, C. D., & Schröter, D. C. (2011). A systematic review of theory-driven evaluation practice from 1990 to 2009. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 32(2), 199-226.
- Donaldson, S. I. (2007). *Program theory-driven evaluation science: Strategies and applications*. New York: Taylor and Francis Group.

Further Readings

- Funnell, S. C., & Rogers, P. J. (2011). *Purposeful program theory*. San Francisco, CA: Sage.
- Rossi, P. H., Lipsey, M. W., & Freeman, H. E. (2004). *Evaluation: A systematic approach* (7th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sridharan, S., & Nakaima, A. (2012). Towards an evidence base of theory-driven evaluations: Some questions for proponents of theory-driven evaluation. *Evaluation*, 18(3), 378-395.