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Theory of Change

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Origins

Theories of change have been largely used as a tool for evaluation, long before ActKnowledge or the Roundtable began refining the process. It is probably impossible to pinpoint the £first¤ use of the term "Theory of Change," but a hint at its origins can be found in the evaluation community among the work of notable methodologists, such as Huey Chen, Peter Rossi, Michael Quinn Patton, and Carol Weiss. These methodologists, along with a host of others, have been thinking about how to apply program theories to evaluation for at least 20 years.

The Roundtable has been one contributor to the recent interest in theories of change related to community initiatives. Community-based change initiatives often have ambitious goals, and so planning specific on-the-ground strategies to those goals is difficult. Likewise, the task of planning and carrying out evaluation research that can inform practice and surface broader lessons for the field in general is a challenge. The Roundtable has been particularly intrigued by the difficult task of planning & evaluating complex community initiatives, and has taken steps to move the field forward in creating new ways to think about how to tackle these tasks.

The Roundtable's early work focused on working through the challenges of evaluating complex community initiatives. This work culminated in a 1995 publication, New Approaches to Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives. In that book, Carol Weiss, a member of the Roundtable's steering committee on evaluation, hypothesized that a key reason complex programs are so difficult to evaluate is that the assumptions that inspire them are poorly articulated. She argued that stakeholders of complex community initiatives typically are unclear about how the change process will unfold and therefore place little attention to the early and mid-term changes that need to happen in order for a longer term goal to be reached. The lack of clarity about the £mini-steps¤ that must be taken to reach a long term outcome not only makes the task of evaluating a complex initiative challenging, but reduces the likelihood that all of the important factors related to the long term goal will be addressed.

Weiss popularized the term "Theory of Change" as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the mini-steps that lead to the long term goal of interest and the connections between program activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way. She challenged designers of complex community-based initiatives to be specific about the theories of change guiding their work and suggested that doing so would improve their overall evaluation plans and would strengthen their ability to claim credit for outcomes that were predicted in their theory. She called for the use of an approach that at first blush seems like common sense: lay out the sequence of outcomes that are expected to occur as the result of an intervention, and plan an evaluation strategy around tracking whether these expected outcomes are actually produced. Her stature in the field, and the apparent promise of this idea motivated a number of foundations to support the use of this technique, later termed "the Theory of Change approach," in the evaluations of early CCI efforts. In the years that followed, a number of evaluations were developed around this approach, fueling more interest in the field about its value.

For more about Theory of Change and community change initiatives:

New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, Vol. 1: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts

New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, Vol. 2: Theory, Measurement, and Analysis

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