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Teaching Note—A Call for Including Theories of Evaluation in Program Evaluation Courses Taught in Schools of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Many schools of social work offer courses on program evaluation. However, one component of program evaluation—theories of evaluation—may all too often be left out of the curriculum. This teaching note defines and describes evaluation theory and the benefits of including it in a program evaluation curriculum in schools of social work. Specific ideas for incorporating this content into MSW and doctoral courses in schools of social work are provided.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Many schools of social work offer courses on program evaluation. An abbreviated online search reveals that nearly all the *U.S. News and World Report's* (2019) top 10 graduate social work programs offer at least one course in program evaluation, some offer multiple courses or have centers that specialize in evaluation, and one offers an MSW practice method concentration in program evaluation (Council on Social Work Education, 2016). Instruction in program evaluation is critical for social workers. Even though they may not go on to be evaluators themselves, social workers may have the opportunity to work with evaluators to help design evaluations to best showcase and meet the information needs of their home organizations. Social workers are also in a position to help explain the value of evaluation, the rationale for specific evaluation decisions, and evaluation findings to their colleagues, helping facilitate the evaluative process and supporting use of the findings. Finally, social workers can use evaluation findings to inform their practice and to advocate for additional resources to support their work.

That so many social work schools offer courses on program evaluation, and that they have been discussed in this journal (John & Bang, 2017), is encouraging as they help prepare social workers to take on the role of evaluator. However, one component of program evaluation—theories of evaluation—may all too often be left out of the program's evaluation curriculum. At the MSW level, this may be an oversight as instructors confound theories of evaluation with program theory, theories of change, theories in use, or theory-driven evaluation. Alternatively, this may be a deliberate decision as instructors respond to MSW students' disinterest in what they perceive to be purely abstract or theoretical conversations. At the doctoral level, conflation of evaluation theory with social science theory may result in instructors' reluctance to develop classes or content on evaluation theory because it is perceived to be duplicative of existing theory courses. This teaching note argues for the importance of including evaluation theory content in master's and doctoral courses in schools of social work. This teaching note begins by defining theories of evaluation and how they are distinct from other seemingly related terms in the field of evaluation, such as *program theory*, *theories of change*, and *theory-driven evaluation*. I then discuss the value of evaluation theory overall and its specific added value for social work. This teaching note concludes with specific recommendations for developing and integrating evaluation theory content into MSW and doctoral social work curricula.

Theories of evaluation: what they are and why they matter

Evaluation theory is not theory, at least not in the way most of us think of theory. In his article reviewing the many ways we discuss and use theory, Abend (2008) identifies seven different meanings we may intend when using this word. On one end, in referring to a theory, we may be referring to a proposition or set of propositions that specify and even explain or predict relationships between two or more variables for a particular social phenomenon (e.g., theories of health behavior change). Alternatively, we may refer to more general propositions that are not tied to a specific time or place. On the other end, though, we may use theory in a more abstract way to describe our overall perspective or outlook, that is, how we see and interpret the world (e.g., feminist theory, Marxist theory). If we think of theory in this way, as a means for understanding the world around us and existing on a sort of continuum from the most specific to the more abstract, we can attempt to place evaluation theory somewhere along the continuum. However, we would be hard pressed to find a home for it.

It would be difficult to place evaluation theory among these other ways of thinking about theory because its purpose is strikingly different. Whereas sociological theories, from the most specific to the abstract, provide us with ways of thinking about and making sense of the world around us, evaluation theories do not. Instead, evaluation theories provide quite practical frameworks “for making the myriad decisions that are part of designing and conducting an evaluation” (Miller, 2010, p. 390). Indeed, some have argued that evaluation theories would be more appropriately termed *approaches* or *models* as they do not explain or predict substantive phenomena (Alkin, 2004a; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014)¹. It would also be difficult to identify where on such a continuum evaluation theory might fit because it is somewhat abstract and specific at the same time. Evaluation theory is abstract in that different theories of evaluation have different ways of looking at the world and evaluation’s role in it; evaluation theory “provides the face that evaluators present to the outside world” (Shadish, 1998, p. 5). At the same time, though, evaluation theory is quite specific in that many theories of evaluation provide detailed steps that the evaluator must follow when using it, for example, culturally responsive evaluation (Hood, Hopson, & Kirkhart, 2015) and utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008). Thus, although they all answer to “theory,” evaluation theory is quite different from the rest.

Theories of evaluation provide practical frameworks to guide evaluators’ overall approach as well as specific decisions they make throughout the evaluative process. Each evaluation theory, and the field has developed many (Alkin, 2004b; Christie & Alkin, 2008; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014), provides unique guidance. Some evaluation theories prioritize the use of the evaluation findings above all else and frequently call on stakeholders’ active engagement in the evaluation as their participation in the evaluative process is thought to support the use of the findings, for example, practical-participatory evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) and utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008). For example, in Patton’s (2008) utilization-focused evaluation, evaluators base their evaluation decisions on what will result in the intended use of the evaluation findings by the intended users. Thus, this approach requires the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders throughout the evaluation process, and a select group of such stakeholders must commit to making use of the evaluation findings before the evaluation even begins. As the evaluation proceeds, and the evaluator is presented with a decision point, the evaluator must choose the path forward that will best support use of the evaluation findings in the end.

Other theories also promote stakeholder engagement, but for different reasons. These theories see and use program evaluation as a tool to combat inequity and promote social justice, for example, deliberative democratic evaluation (House & Howe, 1998) and transformative evaluation (Mertens, 1999). For example, in Mertens’s (1999) transformative participatory evaluation, the evaluator’s primary role is to ensure marginalized groups are not only included in the evaluation but that

¹Nonetheless, the term theory prevails among evaluation scholars and is used here.

their voices and perspectives are given precedence (see also Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Members of the marginalized groups served by the program under evaluation (i.e., the *evaluand*) play a major role in all stages of the evaluation process, from initial planning and evaluation question selection through the use of the findings. When faced with a decision, the evaluator does not consult with stakeholders on which path forward will best support the use of the findings and then decide accordingly, as in utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008). Instead, the evaluator turns to members of the marginalized groups, allowing and supporting them to make the decision.

Another strand of evaluation theories focuses on methods—prioritizing experimental design and the use of controls—and on moderators and mediators to evaluate if and how a program has an impact, for example, experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation (Campbell & Stanley, 1966) and theory-driven evaluation (Chen & Rossi, 1983). In theory-driven evaluation, for instance, the evaluator examines the extent to which the program being evaluated is theoretically sound, with evidence that program inputs and activities cause the intended outcomes and do not produce unintended consequences. The evaluator may invite stakeholders to participate in the process, particularly in helping to illuminate program theory. Then the program theory is used to craft the evaluation questions, select methods, and influence other evaluation decisions rather than placing a primary focus on what will ensure intended use among intended users as in utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), or challenge the status quo as in transformative participatory evaluation (Mertens, 1999).

Still, other evaluation theories prioritize the role of the evaluator in truly valuing the program and going straight to the program participants to determine the program's value (Abma & Stake, 2001; Scriven, 1997). For example, Scriven's (1973) goal-free evaluation requires the evaluator to not learn from program staff what would be most useful for them to know (see also Youker, Ingraham, & Bayer, 2014). With this method, evaluators must shield themselves from learning about the program's objectives or goals as this is thought to bias the evaluative process. Instead, the evaluator goes directly to program participants to learn about their experiences and the program's impact. According to Scriven (1991), "If the program is achieving its stated goals and objectives, then these achievements should show up; if not, it is argued, they are irrelevant" (p. 180).

From these few examples, we can see how the evaluation theory evaluators choose will have a significant impact on the many decisions they must make. How evaluators define their role in evaluation projects and their interactions with individuals tied to the *evaluand* will vary greatly depending on, for example, if they select goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1973, 1991, 1997) as their guiding theoretical framework or practical-participatory evaluation (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). How evaluation questions and methods are selected, and by whom, will likely be different for the same *evaluand* if the evaluator were to use, say, culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2015) instead of theory-driven evaluation (Chen & Rossi, 1983). Whose informational or other needs are prioritized and with whom, when, and how evaluation findings are shared would shift if the evaluator chose, for example, transformative-participatory evaluation (Mertens, 1999) or utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008).

Evaluation theories are all encompassing, providing guidance not only on technical and methodological decisions but also informing ethical dilemmas, how individuals present themselves as evaluators, and even shaping evaluators' ideological perspectives on evaluation. Without exploring the full range of evaluation theories, we draw an artificial boundary around what counts as a good evaluation, causing us and our programs to miss out on the full range of benefits of evaluative practice toward program improvement and toward meeting the needs of the populations and communities social workers intend to serve. Conversely, formal training in evaluation theory provides several key benefits for social work practice as well as research.

Theories of evaluation and social work

First and foremost, training in evaluation theory helps social work practitioners and researchers rethink and reconceptualize the boundaries and purpose of evaluation. Through intentional

exposure to the many approaches to evaluation, social work practitioners and researchers will learn that there is more than one way to conduct an evaluation and that an evaluation can serve many different purposes. A process evaluation designed through the lens of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1994) will likely render strikingly different evaluation questions, methods, and handling of the findings than an evaluation designed through Scriven's consumer-oriented evaluation approach (see Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). If social work practitioners and researchers understand there is more than one way to evaluate a given program, they can offer evaluation clients more options in how to move forward with the evaluation. Even when social workers are not conducting the evaluation themselves, this knowledge is invaluable as they can better understand the decisions made by an external evaluator, be in a position to explain such decisions to colleagues, and even offer alternative, credible paths forward if the proposed evaluation plan has obvious shortcomings.

Second, training in evaluation theory also enables social work practitioners and researchers to engage in more deliberate, informed, and value-driven evaluation practice. Some evaluation theories seem to be a natural fit for the field of social work. Stake's (2001) responsive evaluation theory, Mertens's (1999) transformative evaluation theory, and House and Howe's (1998) democratic deliberative evaluation theory are aimed at advancing social justice, which is a core value of social work. Other evaluation theories place great emphasis on working in partnership with stakeholders in evaluation design, implementation, and use of the findings. By learning about the wide array of evaluation theories available, social work practitioners and researchers can deliberately select those that most closely align with the profession's mission, values, and ethical principles.

Third, training in evaluation theory can help social work practitioners and researchers develop stronger and more competitive application packages. Many grant, fellowship, and other competitive applications require or encourage the applicants to discuss the role of theory in their proposed project (e.g., U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs). Applicants may have a difficult time identifying specific social science theories to include in their application, particularly when they are proposing a program evaluation. Enter evaluation theory: Instead of, or in addition to, identifying a social science theory that will inform or be tested in the proposed project, applicants can identify and describe the evaluation theory that will inform the evaluation process. Even when theory is not required in such applications, its inclusion can result in a stronger, more competitive and distinguished application.

Finally, training social workers in evaluation theory can increase social work's visibility and contribution in inter- and transdisciplinary contexts. Evaluation itself is transdisciplinary (Coryn & Hattie, 2007; Scriven, 2003). As social work practitioners and researchers become more versed in evaluation theory, they will be better equipped to make a contribution to the transdisciplinary field of evaluation and the many other disciplines that congregate around it as evaluation theory "provides the language that we use to talk to each other about evaluation" (Shadish, 1998). This will also increase the visibility of the field of social work.

Implications for social work education

Social worker students at the master's and doctoral levels planning to engage in practice or research would benefit from formal training in theories of evaluation. Fortunately, there are myriad ways for this content to be incorporated into the social work curriculum. In program evaluation courses taught at the MSW level, instructors could dedicate one class session to evaluation theory. In this session, students would learn and discuss what evaluation theory is, how it is different from other similar-sounding terms, and why it matters. Instructors may focus on exposing students to dominant threads in evaluation theory (i.e., use, methods, and valuing; Alkin, 2004b) and leading them through activities in which they design an evaluation for the same evaluand with different evaluation theories to illustrate how evaluation decisions are influenced by the evaluation theory chosen. The goal in such a session would be to develop students' breadth in evaluation theory, equipping them with baseline knowledge to be able to develop depth in a particular evaluation theory later if needed. Instructors may return to evaluation theory content throughout the course, for

example, by asking students to identify which evaluation theories would be most appropriate or are being used in specific case studies reviewed in the classroom. If students are required to complete an evaluation project in the course (see John & Bang, 2017), they could be asked to explicitly identify the evaluation theory that will guide their evaluation, why it was selected, and what was gained or lost from taking that specific approach. At the doctoral level, more advanced, in-depth training in evaluation theory could be offered. For example, entire courses on evaluation theory could be developed in which one evaluation theory is the focus of each class session. One assignment might require students to write a grant application that uses evaluation theory, thus allowing them to practice using evaluation theory to build stronger, more competitive grant applications.

Social work practitioners and researchers are likely to encounter evaluation in their future careers. Explicit training in evaluation theory will help ensure they have the necessary tools, knowledge, and confidence for success, whether they are conducting evaluations themselves, working with evaluators, or using evaluation findings to improve their practice, advocate for additional resources, or make funding decisions. This teaching note is a call to schools of social work to develop, implement, and evaluate new content on evaluation theories in their program evaluation courses.

Notes on contributor

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