

Assessment of, and support for, innovation in public health: Practical challenges for the evaluation of complex public health interventions

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Objectives

- Develop the idea that evaluation is a social practice: the transformative action of an actor on a social reality
- Examine the challenges that complex public health interventions pose to evaluation practices

Plan

- Defining the evaluation practice and its object
- Practical challenges for the evaluation of complex public health interventions
 - Challenge of defining object
 - Challenge of rigorous methods
 - Challenge of actionable knowledge
 - Challenge of meaningful syntheses
- Practical conclusions

Defining the evaluation practice
and its object

Complex Public Health Interventions

- Public health interventions are « social » by nature; they involve transformative actions of humans on the determinants of human health
- Public health interventions involve coordinating actions from social agents capable of agency
- Interactions among interventions' components and with contextual elements produce the intervention
- Public health interventions are always situated in time and place
- Public health interventions behave as social systems: open and complex

Defining Evaluation Research

*Evaluation assists **sense making** about **policies and programs** through the conduct of **systematic inquiry** that describes and explains the policie's and program's **operations, effects, justifications and social implications***
(Mark, Henry & Julnes, 2000, p.3)

Defining Evaluation Research

1: Why to evaluate? *Assist in sense making*

➡ Understanding as oppose to judging

2: How to evaluate? *Systematic inquiry*

➡ Scientific activity

3: What to evaluate? *operations, effects, justifications and social implications of policies and programs*

➡ All elements of a system of action and their interactions

We Recognize Evaluation Research Whenever...

1. **Challenge of defining object**

2. **Challenge of rigorous methods**

3. **Challenge of actable results**

4. **Challenge of meaningful syntheses**

Practical challenges for the evaluation of complex public health interventions

Challenge of defining the object

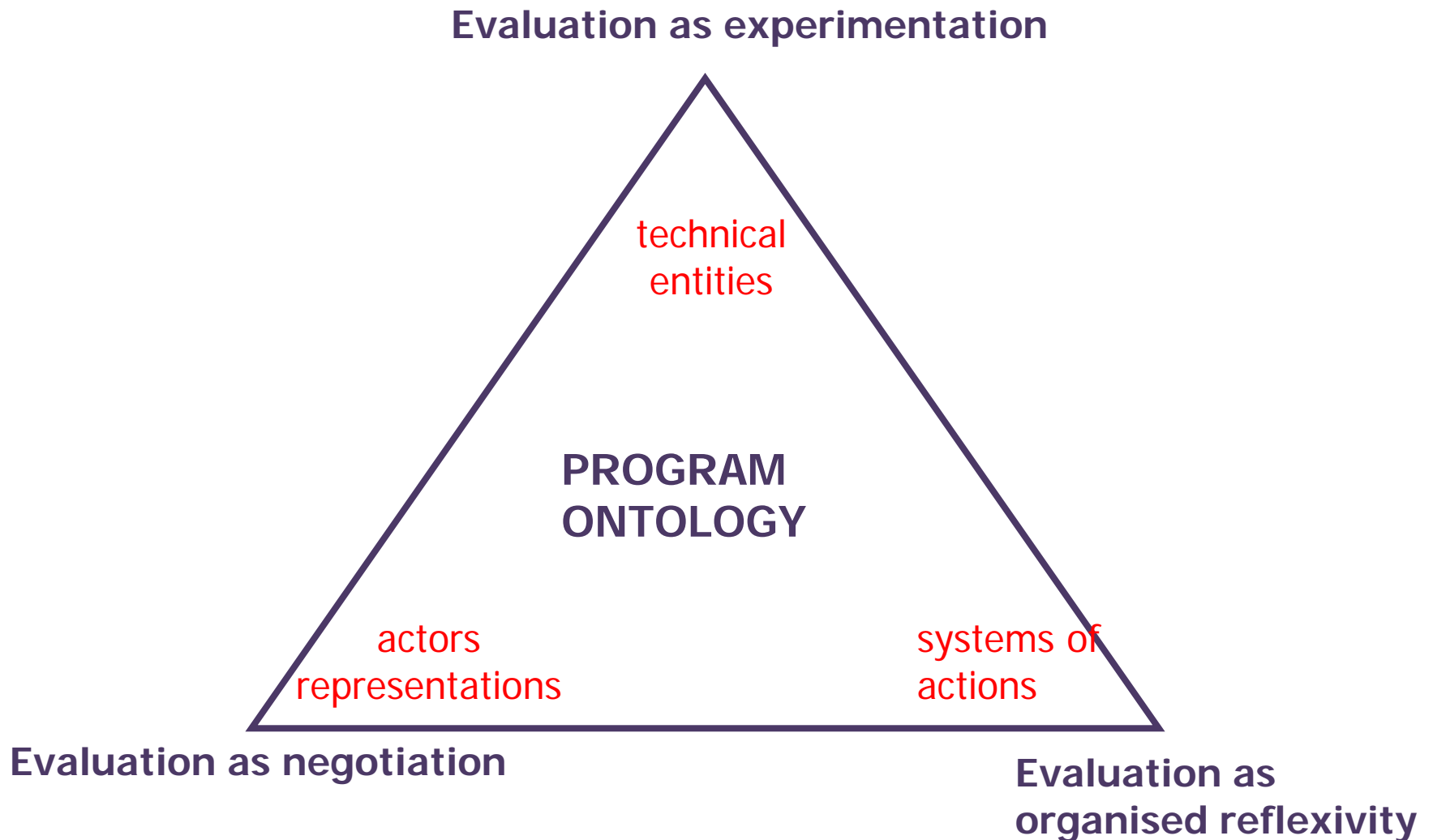
What is an intervention?

- Conceptual confusion: projects, programs, initiatives, interventions
- Always a complex reality
- Always contingent to:
 - Context
 - A point of view (project)
- Is not a thing in itself; its reality is through representations, models
- Usual representations like logic models are devoid of actors who operate interventions' actions

What is an intervention?

- Interventions and programs are often conceptualised as elements imported from outside a situation, creating new entities differentiated from existing context.
- Contradiction with innovation theory and with novel practices promoted in the Ottawa Charter and other public health policy documents.

Producing Knowledge: Three Ideal-Type Practices



Population Health Interventions

- Require a strong integration of intervention's components with contextual conditions
- Based on the establishment of meaningful connections with existing networks
- Are elaborated in context
- Form social systems that adapt and evolve contingently
- Are not compatible with a conception in which participants are passive subjects on which someone intervenes. Actors in interventions pursue their own interests: interventions are political spaces where interests are confronted and conciliated.

Challenging Consequences

- Interventions frontiers are fuzzy and contingent
- Interventions adapt and evolve according to local conditions
- Interventions form the nexus and results of negotiations between strategic actors
- Can only be appraised through a model that make them intelligible
- Models are always situated and relative to a project

Practical Evaluation Consequences

- Arbitrariness of the intervention/environment distinction
- Make sure that there is sufficient agreement on the representation of the intervention
- Make sure that what is being evaluated (the system of action) is what is being analysed (the representation)
- Be aware of what is left out of the representation and its potential impact on the analysis



Challenge of rigorous methods

Parameters of Rigour

- Rigour and scientific method are always associated with specific disciplines
- Domination of epidemiology as the method of choice for public and population health
 - Based on the investigator's control over the content of the intervention and its context (at best controlling for)
 - Low compatibility with complexity and value-based interventions

Two Options for Reconciling Rigour and Complexity

- Within the paradigm of epidemiology (Hawe, Shiell and Riley, BMJ, 2004)
 - Exercise control on the intervention inputs within context
 - Resources invested
 - Functions and mechanisms
 - Initial interventions forms
 - Monitor intervention and processes development according to implementation conditions and context
 - Make conclusions on the right objects: the functions and mechanisms

Two Options for Reconciling Rigour and Complexity

- Adopt a social sciences perspective and develop evaluations that support innovations
 - Better adapted to the study of complex social systems in which strategic actors use their agency to pursue strategic interests
 - Work with the assumption that problems and interventions evolve dialectically
 - Emphasis on mechanisms of action and the transformation of practices
 - Importance of real time observations
 - Suppose an interactive dynamic between intervention and evaluation systems

Producing Knowledge: Three Ideal-Type Practices

Evaluation as experimentation

Experimental
manipulations

METHODOLOGY

Constructing a shared
representation

Following
action

Evaluation as negotiation

Evaluation as
organised reflexivity



Challenge of actable results

Two Roles for Evaluation Research

1. Document interventions' effects

- Leads to standardization of public health practices
- Require highly mature and standardized interventions : black boxes
- Effectiveness and other causal claims are only one type of arguments in the development of public health interventions

Two Roles for Evaluation Research

2: Support the development of innovative public health practices

- Evaluation as a reflexive system for systems of action
- Evaluation as a component of an intervention social space
- The evaluator as a key actor for the integration within the intervention of knowledge produced about the intervention



Challenge of meaningful
syntheses

Dilemma

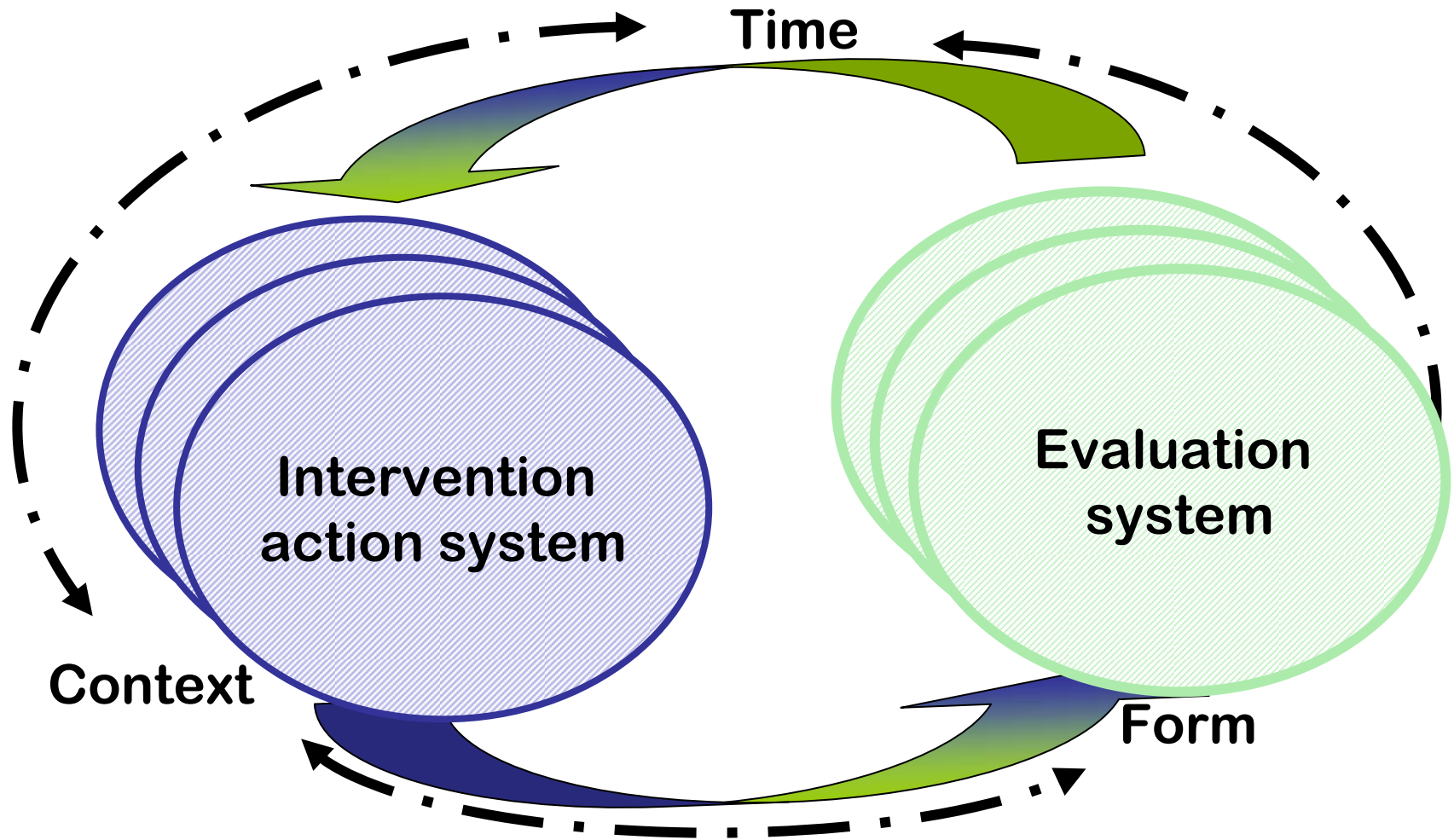
- Synthetic indices require the availability of results produced in comparable conditions:
 - Context
 - Intervention
 - Effect measure
- Production of synthetic indices on trivial interventions or the itemisation of results according to context variations

Solution

- Search for Context- Mechanisms- Outcome patterns of relations
- Use of theory as a heuristic device for knowledge synthesis
- Relevant theory: those that explain how intervention effects can be produced given intervention implementation conditions

Practical conclusion

The Social Space of Intervention



Three Domains of Competences for the Evaluation Practice

MANAGING A SCIENTIFIC SYSTEM IN A POLITICAL CONTEXT

1. Scientific method expertise:
 - Capacity to deploy valid knowledge production devices about interventions « in context »
 - Including the fact that evaluation is part of intervention's context!
2. Translation expertise:
 - Capacity to feed intervention with actable knowledge about the intervention
3. Mediation expertise:
 - Conciliation of varied interests regarding the orientation of evaluation
 - Management of knowledge as a highly strategic resource

Health Promotion Evaluation Practices in the Americas Values and Research

Louise Potvin and David McQueen *Editors*

More and more, health promotion is a crucial component of public health, to the extent that public health interventions are called on to prove their effectiveness and appraised for scientific validity, a practice many in the field consider self-defeating. *Health Promotion Evaluation Practices in the Americas* cogently demonstrates that scientific rigor and the goals of health promotion are less in conflict than commonly thought, synthesizing multiple traditions from countries throughout North, Central, and South America (and across the developed-to-developing-world continuum) for a volume that is both diverse in scope and unified in purpose.

The book's examples—representing robust theoretical and practical literatures as well as initiatives from Rio de Janeiro to American Indian communities—explain why health promotion evaluation projects require different guidelines from mainstream evaluative work. The editors identify core humanitarian principles associated with health promotion (participation, empowerment, equity, sustainability, intersectoral action, multistrategy, and contextualism), while chapters highlight challenges that must be mastered to keep these principles and scientific objectives in sync, including:

- Building health promotion values into evaluation research projects.
- Expanding the use of evaluation in health promotion.
- Developing meaningful evaluation questions.
- Distinguishing between community-based participation research and evaluation-based participation.
- Evaluating specifically for equity.
- Designing initiatives to foster lasting social change.

The applied knowledge in *Health Promotion Evaluation Practices in the Americas: Values and Research* can bring the goals of intervention into sharper focus for practitioners, evaluators, and decision-makers and facilitate communication on all sides—necessary steps to progress from study findings to real-world action.

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