1

The Evaluability Assessment Story

Evaluability assessment or EA was initially thought of as a pre-evaluation activity primarily used to determine the readiness of a program for a productive outcome evaluation. This was accomplished by developing a program theory, usually by examination of program documentation; validating or revising the theory based on stakeholder feedback; and based on viability of the program theory, offering recommendations for outcome evaluation (Wholey, 1979). In current practice, however, EA has become more than a pre-evaluation activity to determine readiness for outcome evaluation. It has evolved into an evaluation approach that can be used at any point in the development and implementation of a program, as well as throughout a program's lifecycle. Despite the straightforward, original thinking for EA and its evolution, EA has suffered from a good deal of misunderstanding over many years about what it is and is not. The purpose of this book is to provide a clear and up-to-date treatment of EA with an eye toward high-quality evaluation practice.

We agree with Thurston and Potvin (2003) who argue that EA needs reconceptualization to account for the many ways in which it is used and understood in different contexts. This book conceptualizes a modern approach for EA by highlighting its multidisciplinary appeal and illustrating purposes and benefits for EA discovered over the last 35 years since its inception. The following sections provide background about the early history of EA, resurgence in EA use and recent developments, the essential elements of EA, and current uses and benefits.

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

- Evaluability assessment
- Pre-evaluation activity
- Sequential purchase of information
- EA work group
- Stakeholder involvement
- Government Performance Reporting Act (GPRA)
- Ongoing participatory EA

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Early History

Birth and Promise of Evaluability Assessment

In the late 1970s, Joseph Wholey (1979) and his colleagues at the Urban Institute developed EA to improve outcome evaluations. They proposed EA as a way of examining program structure to determine whether or not the structure would lend itself to generating useful results from an outcome evaluation. The method was developed in response to the many large survey evaluations done of federal programs in the 1970s, which often used sophisticated quasi-experimental designs to determine impact (Jung & Schubert, 1983; Schmidt, Scanlon, & Bell, 1979; Wholey, 1979). Most troubling with this work is that these evaluations usually found no effects or pogram impact. These no-effect evaluations frustrated congress as their expense became hard to justify knowing what the outcome would likely be. The no-effect findings often cast the program in a negative light and angered those members of congress who viewed the program as an important response to their stakeholder needs. As a result, the value of the entire evaluation enterprise was questioned.

Evaluators were equally frustrated with programs that had no or unclear objectives and widely differing views for the purpose of the program from program personnel, policy makers, and other stakeholders. In addition, it was often difficult to determine the manager or managers who had ultimate responsibility for the program. EA was developed as a means to address the aforementioned problems and prepare programs for outcome evaluation.

Wholey (1979) offered what is likely the original EA model in the publication *Evaluation: Promise and Performance*. It included eight steps: (1) define the program to be evaluated; (2) collect information on the intended program through document review and stakeholder interviews; (3) develop a program model; (4) analyze the extent to which stakeholders have identified goals, objectives, activities, and so forth in measurable terms; (5) collect information on program reality through site visits and document review; (6) synthesize findings to determine the plausibility of program goals; (7) identify options for evaluation and management; and (8) present conclusions and recommendations to management (pp. 49 – 50).

As the last two steps of Wholey's (1979) model indicate, the focus of the model was program management. EA was seen as a pre-evaluation activity to support decisions about further evaluation of programs already in place. The goal was to provide a cost-effective strategy to support managers to use evaluation findings from the EA, and eventually an outcome evaluation, in order to drive positive changes to the program and ensure readiness for outcome evaluation.

EA reports in those years were designed to meet the information needs of program managers. Reports were tailored to help them manage program development and revision. This fostered intent by program managers for evaluation use into the EA process. In addition, the EA reports could provide options for evaluation designs and methods, particularly as the designs and methods relate to various program components thought more important for evaluation by the program manager. By providing possible evaluation design scenarios in the EA report, program managers could anticipate the extent to which their information needs would be fulfilled by a particular evaluation design and at least, in a preliminary way, become vested in the proposed evaluation. This in turn laid further groundwork for utilization of the EA findings by the program manager.

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The model and rationale previously described catapulted EA onto the evaluation scene in the late 1970s with great promise and hope that evaluation of programs at the federal level could be done well and could provide the kind of information needed for making sound decisions about government-sponsored programs. To this end, Wholey (1979) developed a comprehensive four-phase evaluation framework that included (1) EA, (2) rapid-feedback evaluation, (3) performance monitoring, and (4) impact evaluation. This framework was referred to as a sequential purchase of information in that each step would only be procured if the previous step warranted the purchase through positive results (p. 13). While this evaluation framework never became widespread in practice, EA was its first step.

Sequential Purchase of Information

Wholey (1979) developed a comprehensive four-phase evaluation framework that included the following:

1. Evaluability assessment
2. Rapid-feedback evaluation
3. Performance monitoring
4. Impact evaluation

Evolution of Evaluability Assessment in the 1970s and 1980s

Other evaluators saw the promise of EA, and building on Wholey's (1979) work, they contributed additional EA models in the 1970s and 1980s. Details about each of these models and their implementation are beyond the scope of this book and are available elsewhere (see Jung & Schubert, 1983; Rog, 1985; Rutman, 1980; Schmidt, Scanlon, & Bell, 1979; M. F. Smith, 1989). However, the following sections provide an overview of two commonly cited models, those of Rutman (1980) and M. F. Smith (1989).These models demonstrate how EA evolved during this time period.

Rutman's Evaluability Assessment Model

Rutman (1980) expanded Wholey's (1979) initial model. He described EA as having two purposes: analyzing program characteristics (e.g., goals, objectives, activities) and assessing the feasibility of achieving the evaluation's purpose. He saw assessing the feasibility of implementing the necessary evaluation methodology (e.g., research design) as a main purpose of EA. To this end, he offered a six-step model. The first four steps were categorized as program-analysis steps: (1) prepare a program documents model through document review; (2) develop a program manager's model by interviewing management personnel; (3) find out what is really happening by going out into the field; and (4) prepare an evaluable program model based on results of steps one through three. The final two steps of Rutman's model were categorized as steps to assess the feasibility of implementing the necessary evaluation methodology to serve the evaluation purpose: (5) determine key evaluation questions and the information needed to answer them; and (6) determine the feasibility of evaluation procedures.

Additionally, Rutman (1980) directly addressed how the results of EA could be used to enhance a program's evaluability. He described EA as a first step toward identifying issues impeding an effectiveness evaluation and identifying strategies to enhance program evaluability, such as assessing program

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Rutman (1980) argued that one or more program components could be found as evaluable while others may need revision before being ready for evaluation.

implementation, conducting formative evaluation, and developing measurement procedures. He also advocated for the option of evaluating program components instead of an entire program. In this way, EA could help identify components of a program where evaluation efforts should be focused, as well as components not ready for evaluation.

M. F. Smith's Evaluability Assessment Model

M. F. Smith (1989) subsequently offered a ten-step EA model:

> (1) determine purpose, secure commitment, and identify work group members; (2) define boundaries of program to be studied; (3) identify and analyze program documents; (4) develop/clarify program theory; (5) identify and interview stakeholders; (6) describe stakeholder perceptions of program; (7) identify stakeholder needs, concerns, and differences in perceptions; (8) determine plausibility of program model; (9) draw conclusions and make recommendations; and (10) plan specific steps for utilization of EA data (pp. 27 – 30).

Although similar to earlier models, M. F. Smith placed greater emphasis on the need for and role of stakeholder involvement in EA, where stakeholders are participants in the design and conduct of the EA as work group members. Stakeholder involvement in this way was in addition to stakeholders serving solely as data sources to provide feedback on a program's theory. In fact, M. F. Smith noted two primary outcomes of an EA: to identify a program's theory and to identify stakeholder awareness of and interest in a program. She also included an action-planning step to make sure the EA is used.

M. F. Smith (1989) further noted the potential of EA as being more than a pre-evaluation activity implemented with programs already in place, as it had been commonly described in earlier publications, suggesting that EA had become both an evaluation and program development tool. Although Rutman (1980) addressed the potential of EA to enhance program evaluability, M. F. Smith (1989) moved this idea forward, describing EA as a means in and of itself for increasing a program's evaluability. She wrote:

> [T]he process has grown into an evaluation tool in its own right—as a way for determining stakeholder awareness and interest in a program and for determining what needs to be done in a program to make it likely to produce results. It has also evolved into a program development tool—as a way to plan a plausible, evaluable program and to determine resource requirements and availability (p.14).

M. F. Smith (1989) championed stakeholders as key users of evaluability assessment.

Thus, by the late 1980s, EA had evolved into a process useful for formative evaluation and program planning, in addition to program management.

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Decline in Use

Despite its early promise, what is known today about EA use in the 1970s and 1980s is that outcome evaluation recommendations were seldom made or acted on. Rog (1985) documented few EAs in the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education that made recommendations for evaluation or followed through with recommended evaluations. M. F. Smith (1990) reported a similar finding for EAs conducted in the late 1980s for the Cooperative Extension Service programs.

It is likely that other federal agencies employed EA in a similar way. Thus, EA actually had little influence on programs with respect to outcome evaluation, even though this was one of the key-stated purposes. The irony of EA use during this time was that programs determined not ready for an outcome evaluation were unwittingly denied the benefit of an evaluation that could be used to support the program (N. L. Smith, 1981).

In addition, the use of EA decreased in the federal government during the 1980s and into the 1990s. Rog (1985) argued that this was due to the departure of Wholey from the Department of Health and Human Services, who was a strong internal advocate for use of EA in government (p. 144). Also, during the 1980s, most federal education programs were disrupted by being folded into block grants or targeted for partial or full elimination as part of cost saving measures by the administration at that time, as well as a means to reduce the role of the federal government in education (Jung & Schubert, 1983). Consequently, evaluation activities, including EA, saw a reduction as well.

M. F. Smith (2005) suggested that there may actually have been a complex set of factors that were responsible for the decline of EA (pp. 137 – 139). The lack of a clear EA methodology and clarity about EA outcomes may have been a factor in the decline of EA use. Without Wholey to push implementation in the various federal agencies, the lack of clarity and ambiguity worked against adoption by others. In addition, M. F. Smith conjectured that because the original authors of EA promoted the process as a pre-evaluation activity, many inferred that EA was not evaluation (p. 138). Given the challenges inherent in conducting outcome evaluations of federal programs, those responsible for evaluation moved directly to planning and conducting outcome evaluation, bypassing the possibilities associated with conducting an EA.

Resurgence and Recent Developments

By the mid-1990s, evidence of EA use began to appear in a variety of disciplines, programs, and contexts. From 1995 forward, the journal literature shows a steady increase in published EAs, particularly within discipline-specific literatures (Trevisan, 2007). And more recently, Leviton, Khan, Rog, Dawkins, and Cotton (2010) tracked a striking increase in use of EA among health and health related fields as largely evidenced by non-peer-reviewed outlets such as reports, books, and meetings; outlets reflecting the applied nature of EA; and therefore, the kinds of outlets important to program managers and stakeholders. In short, EA has seen resurgence in use, not only in the United States but across the globe.

Why the increase in use? Certainly increased use at the federal level in the United States can be attributed, in part, to the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, which holds all

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The Government Performance and Results Act or GPRA is a key reason for increased use of evaluability assessment at the federal level.

federal agencies accountable for program results (Trevisan, 2007). Agencies must document goals and objectives, report progress, and seek external evaluation of their programs. As part of the documentation process the Office of Management and Budget developed the program assessment rating tool or PART. Until recently, this tool had been used throughout the federal government and connects program funding with achievement of objectives. PART specifically assesses programs for evaluation readiness and, therefore, supported need for EA (Basile, Lang, Bartenfeld, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2005, p. 206).

Increased use can also be attributed to disciplines and programs understanding the power and potential EA can offer. For example, Thurston and Potvin (2003) have described EA as a useful methodology for evaluating social change programs. They argue that the ideal use of EA is ongoing and conducted parallel to program planning and implementation throughout the lifecycle of a program. In addition, they emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation in both evaluation and program planning, introducing the concept of "ongoing participatory EA" (p. 454). Their EA model includes the following six steps: (1) selecting an evaluability assessor, (2) identifying stakeholders, (3) identifying and assessing key documents, (4) developing the program logic model and evaluation plan, (5) reaching agreement to proceed with an evaluation, and (6) identifying and assessing time and other resources required for evaluation (p. 457).

The steps of Thurston and Potvin's (2003) EA model are similar to those of earlier models; however, they include steps specific to furthering an evaluation plan. In addition, their conceptualization of EA as an ongoing participatory process to better address program complexity and evolution and to facilitate social change and stakeholder empowerment expands previous descriptions of EA. And similar to M. F. Smith (1989), they contend that EA can be used at any point in a program's development and implementation, including the proposal stage. For comparison, Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Summary of Steps and Key Contributions of Prominent EA Models

Wholey (1979)	Rutman (1980)	M. F. Smith (1989)	Thurston and Potvin (2003)
Steps of EA Models			
Define the program to be evaluated	Prepare a program documents model	Determine purpose, secure commitment, identify work group members	Select an evaluability assessor
Collect information on the intended program	Prepare a program manager's model	Define boundaries of program to be studied	Identify stakeholders
Develop a program model	Find out what is really happening	Identify and analyze program documents	Identify and assess key documents

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Wholey (1979)	Rutman (1980)	M. F. Smith (1989)	Thurston and Potvin (2003)
Analyze the extent to which stakeholders have identified measurable goals, objectives, activities	Prepare an evaluable program model based on previous steps	Develop/clarify program theory	Develop program logic model and evaluation plan
Collect information on program reality	Determine key evaluation questions and information needed to answer them	Identify and interview stakeholders	Reach agreement to proceed with evaluation
Synthesize findings to determine the plausibility of program goals	Determine the feasibility of evaluation procedures	Describe stakeholder perceptions of program	Identify and assess time and other resources required for evaluation
Identify options for evaluation and management		Identify stakeholder needs, concerns, and differences in perceptions	
Present conclusions and recommendations to management		Determine plausibility of program model	
		Draw conclusions and make recommendations	
		Plan specific steps for utilization of EA	
Key Contributions			
Original EA Focused on information needs of managers	Extension of Wholey's ideas Could determine that one or more program components is ready for evaluation Could use results to enhance a program's evaluability (formative use)	Stakeholders are important users of EA findings and should be included in conducting the EA EA could be used for program modification (formative use)	Ongoing participatory process Expands uses of EA—e.g., facilitating social change, stakeholder empowerment

Sources: Rutman (1980), Smith (1989), Thurston (2003), and Wholey (1979).

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provides a summary of steps in prominent EA models found in the literature. Key contributions for each model are also provided.

Leviton et al. (2010) have also witnessed the use of EA as more than the pre-evaluation activity described in early publications. In the field of public health, EA serves additional functions such as program development, evaluation capacity building, performance measurement, facilitating research to practice, and identifying promising practices for more formal evaluation. They reference Wholey's more recent 2004 EA model (which specifies six-steps rather than the original eight-step model), but note that the steps seem overly linear compared to what happens in practice. They go on to describe EA as a "cyclical and iterative process" (p. 217). They also discuss the complimentary use of EA with other evaluation-planning methods and approaches, such as within the systematic screening and assessment method, which is a relatively new method that identifies plausible innovations within a particular domain, selects innovations for EA work, and from this work makes recommendations for programs and practices. EA is central to the method. Finally, as EA and evaluation theory and practice have evolved, EA is no longer tied exclusively to quantitative outcome evaluation, but it is a valuable precursor to both quantitative and qualitative evaluations and a variety of evaluation approaches (Leviton et al., 2010; Trevisan, 2007).

More recently, Davies (2013) summarized the vibrant EA work associated with international development evaluation. Some of the international agencies that are doing EA work include the Australian Agency for International Development, United States Agency for International Development, United Nations, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Noteworthy in this work are the variety of ways EA is being used in these agencies, including the use of EA for portfolios of programs, policy areas, and strategic plans—activities for which EA has not been commonly used in the past. This international development evaluation work is expanding the boundaries of conventional EA use and illustrates the multidisciplinary appeal and globalization of current EA work.

What This Book Offers

Based on historical EA models and recent developments in EA practice, we have identified the essential elements of EA as developing or clarifying program theory, gathering feedback on program theory, stakeholder involvement, and using the EA. Regardless of which EA model is used and how these elements are integrated into the steps or components of the model, these four elements are the heart of EA. These elements form the foundation of our model that is introduced in Chapter 3 and detailed in Chapters 4–7.

We find the resurgence and recent developments in EA use exciting and full of rich possibilities. This book provides the first account of the multidisciplinary appeal of EA to a broad audience. Many of the case examples in this book highlight discipline and program specific uses of EA, as well as more recently discovered uses and benefits of EA. These uses and benefits include the following:

- Performance measurement
- Program accountability
- Providing technical assistance
- Understanding program culture and context

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- Addressing program complexity and evolution
- Stakeholder involvement
- Stakeholder empowerment
- Organizational learning
- Translating research to practice
- Translating practice to research
- Evaluation capacity building
- Facilitating social change
- Facilitating evaluation use, both findings use and process use

EA has been embraced by many disciplines and contexts. As a consequence, the continued use and development of EA looks bright for the future. Table 1.2 provides a historical timeline of EA development and use.

Table 1.2 Historical Timeline of EA Development and Use

Year	Event	Comment
1970s	Many large-scale quasi-experimental evaluations conducted	Almost all showed no effects
1979	Wholey and colleagues develop first EA model	Part of sequential purchase of information
1980	Rutman's EA model introduced	Extends Wholey's model; argues that particular program components could be ready for evaluation while the entire program may not; directly discusses the use of results to enhance a program's evaluability (formative use)
1985	Rog's study	Documents decline in EA use; noted that few EAs actually determine programs that are ready for evaluation
1989	M. F. Smith's EA model introduced	Argues that EA could be used for program development and modification (formative use); expanded role for program stakeholders
1993	Government Performance Reporting Act (GPRA)	Compels use of EA

(Continued)

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Table 1.2 (Continued)

Year	Event	Comment
2003	Thurston and Potvin's model introduced	Model supports social change programs; could use EA as an ongoing participatory evaluation
2007	Trevisan review study conducted	Notes expanded use of EA and multidisciplinary appeal
2010	Leviton et al. study	Notes expanded use of EA in health and health related fields
2013	Davies	Summarized broad use of EA in international development evaluation

Chapter Summary

EA was initially developed by Joseph Wholey (1979) and his colleagues at the Urban Institute to improve outcome evaluations by collecting data to assess the program structure and management's capacity to use the findings from an outcome evaluation for positive change:

- EA was offered as a means to deal with an impasse between congress, who were frustrated with many expensive evaluations with results that showed programs with no impact, and evaluators stymied by programs with poorly crafted goals and objectives, no logic model, and lack of an individual with defined responsibility for a particular program.
- The model developed by Wholey (1979) consists of eight steps and is focused on the information needs of program managers and their productive use of evaluation.
- Data collection activities include document reviews, interviews, and site visits.
- This model was the first component of an evaluation framework referred to as a sequential purchase of information, with rapid assessments, performance monitoring, and impact assessment as the second, third, and fourth components respectively.

Soon after EA became widely known, others saw the merit in evaluability assessment as a strategic evaluation-oriented activity and offered their own models:

- During the 1970s and 1980s, EA evolved to become an evaluation approach in and of itself.
- The model developed by Rutman (1980) was an extension of Wholey's (1979) model, focusing on the needs of program managers. Rutman (1980) also argued that a component of a program could be assessed as ready for outcome evaluation while other components may need more development and refinement.

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- M. F. Smith (1989) offered a 10-step model that incorporated program stakeholders as key EA users and argued that EA could be used for the expressed purposes of program development and modification.

A decline in EA use and some frustrations with EA were evidenced in the 1980s:

- Few EAs actually recommended that an evaluation commence, instead typically finding programmatic deficiencies and lack of readiness for outcome evaluation.
- During this time, most EAs were conducted in the federal government, pushed by Joseph Wholey, who worked for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The decline in use was partly attributed to the fact that Wholey left the agency, and thus, he was no longer inside the federal government advocating for EA use.
- Another reason for decline in EA use during this time is that procurements of EA often competed with evaluation funding in general; thus, many acted to prevent resources being used to support EA.
- A decline in federal spending during the 1980s and movement during this time to decrease the role of the federal government were other key factors in the decline in use of EA.

Starting in the 1990s, a resurgence in EA use was observed across programs, disciplines and contexts. EA use continues at a brisk pace today:

- EA has evolved in theory and practice. It is no longer seen solely as a pre-evaluation activity, but it can be used at any point in program development and implementation and can be used as an ongoing process throughout the lifecycle of a program.
- Its uses have grown to include facilitating social change, stakeholder empowerment, program development, evaluation capacity building, performance measurement, translating research to practice, and translating practice to research for more formal evaluation and research.
- EA is now viewed as a valuable precursor to a variety of evaluation approaches, both quantitative and qualitative.
- Regardless of the EA model used, essential elements include developing or clarifying program theory, gathering feedback on program theory, stakeholder involvement, and using the EA.

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