

# Preface

Assumptions pervade program evaluation: from characterizations of how interventions work, how target stakeholders participate and benefit from an intervention, participants' own expectations of the intervention, the environment in which an intervention operates, the most appropriate approach and methodology to use in learning about the program, and how such lessons are applied to present or future interventions.

In a previous publication (Nkwake 2013), I narrated a story from western Uganda. A mother taught her young daughter to never eat food directly from the saucepan, but rather to put it first on a plate. To ensure that the daughter obeyed, the mother told her that if she ever did it otherwise, her stomach would bulge. This little girl kept it in mind. One day as the two visited a local health center, they sat next to a pregnant woman in the waiting room. The girl pointed at the pregnant woman's bulging belly, announcing, "I know what you did!" The pregnant woman was not pleased; the girl's mother was embarrassed; and the girl was puzzled as to why she was getting stares from the adults in the room. The differences in assumptions about what causes stomachs to bulge were a major problem here. But an even bigger problem was that these different assumptions were not explicit. Similarly, clarifying stakeholders' assumptions about how the intervention should work to contribute to desired changes is important not only for the intervention's success, but also for determining that success. This book focuses more specifically on methodological assumptions, which are embedded in evaluators' method decisions at various stages of the evaluation process.

The book starts with outlining five constituents of evaluation practice, with a particular emphasis on the pertinence of methodology as one of these constituents. Additionally, it suggests a typology for preconditions and assumptions of validity that ought to be examined to ensure that evaluation methodology is credible.

The constituents of evaluation practice are listed below.

1. The *competence constituent* refers to the capacity of individual evaluators (microlevel), organizations (mesolevel), and society (macrolevel) to conduct evaluations.
2. The *behavioral constituent* concerns appropriate conduct, ethical guidelines, and professional culture in evaluation practice.

3. The *utilization (demand) constituent* concerns the use of evaluation results, including providing evidence to guide policy.
4. The *industrial (supply) constituent* concerns the exercise of professional authority to provide evaluation services to further client interests.
5. The *methodological constituent* includes the application of methods, procedures, and tools in evaluation research.

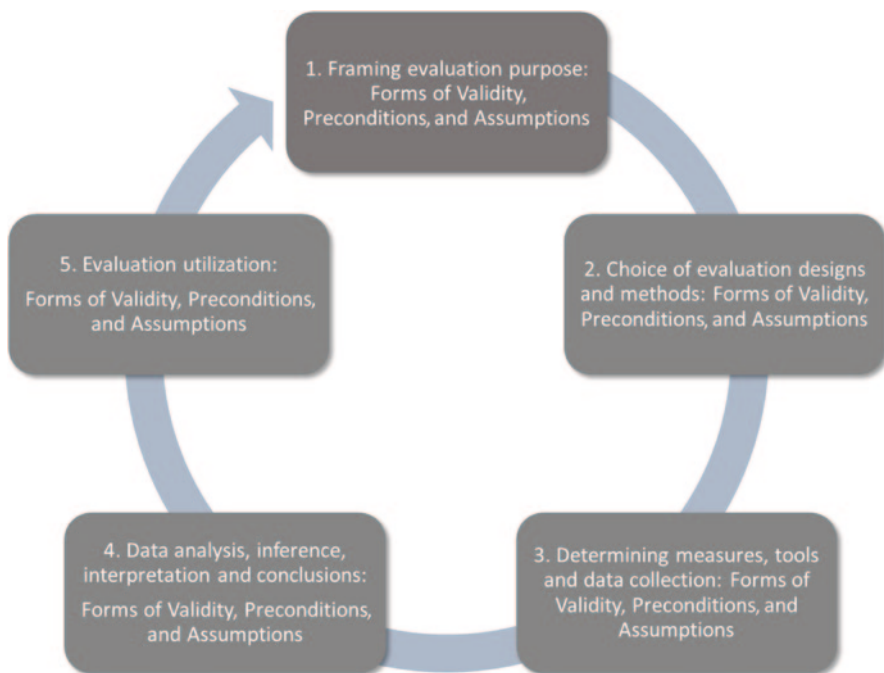
Of these five constituents, evaluators are most preoccupied with the methodology constituent than any other. Former American Evaluation Association (AEA) president Richard Krueger wrote that "...methodology is basic to the practice of evaluation..." (AEA 2003, p. P1). Moreover, it is essential that methodology be credible in guiding evaluation practice, otherwise it could be "... rightly regarded as no more than philosophical musings" (Scriven 1986, p. 29).

Achieving this methodological credibility goes beyond the accuracy of research designs to include arguments justifying the appropriateness of methods. A critical part of this justification, and thus, its methodological credibility, is explaining the assumptions made about the validity of these methods. In this regard, it is difficult to improve on Professor Ernest R. House's statement: "Data don't assemble and interpret themselves" (House 2014, p. 12).

Assumptions are generally understood as beliefs that are taken for granted about how the world works (Brookfield 1995). They may seem as obvious as to require no explanation. In the logical framework approach to program design, assumptions are considered to be factors in the external environment of a program beyond stakeholders' control that are preconditions for achieving expected outcomes. This text discusses assumptions made with regard to methodology and how these methodological assumptions are preconditions for validity. Validity is the extent to which appropriate conclusions, inferences, and actions are derived from measurement and research. Validity has to do with whether the purposes of research and measurement are correctly derived (House 1977), whether findings reflect what is researched or measured (Lipsey 1988), and whether appropriate research methods and measures support the interpretation of data and decisions made.

Evaluators make many assumptions with regard to methodology. This can include assumptions about appropriateness of methods and indicators, whether to base an evaluation on a program theory, and whether it is appropriate to examine causality (Bamberger 2013). There is a host of other assumptions embedded in evaluators' preference for certain methods over other approaches, especially along the quantitative/mixed methods/qualitative evaluation spectrum (Eade 2003; Dattu 1994; Rowlands 2003; Hughes and Hutchings 2011; Rowlands 2003; Donaldson et al. 2009; Bamberger 2013). Evaluators' assumptions may be based on factors including their situational understanding of the evaluation context; the practical application of their tacit knowledge, theories, and logic in judging the appropriate courses of action in a situation; and their response to realtime feedback in the course of conducting evaluations (Kundin 2010).

*Methodological credibility* examines assumptions about validity of arguments about appropriateness of methods. This text outlines a typology of methodological



**Fig. 1** A typology for validity assumptions

assumptions, identifying the decisions made at each stage of the evaluation process, the major forms of validity affected by those decisions, and the preconditions and assumptions for those validities (Fig. 1).

Chapter 1 outlines five constituents of evaluation practice and discusses the salience of methodology in evaluation practice. Chapter 2 examines methodological credibility. Chapter 3 considers validity assumptions in defining an evaluation's purpose and questions. Chapter 4 discusses validity assumptions in identifying methods that will feasibly, ethically, and accurately answer evaluation questions. Chapter 5 examines validity assumptions in the indicators and variables used to address evaluation questions. Additionally, this chapter discusses validity assumptions in data, from the selection of sources, to the data collection process and the instruments used to measure these indicators and variables. Chapter 6 discusses validity assumptions in choosing and using appropriate means to clean, process, analyze, and interpret data; applying appropriate approaches to compare, verify, and triangulate results; and documenting appropriate conclusions and recommendations. Chapter 7 considers validity assumptions in the use of evaluation results. Chapter 8 examines assumptions of validity in performance measurement. Finally, Chapter 9 illustrates examples of explication of methodological assumptions collated from a collective case study of 34 evaluations.

The main aim of this text is not to discuss ways of formulating credible methodological arguments or methods of examining validity assumptions. The text

intends to organize and categorize a number of validity assumptions of evaluation methodology. The typology identifies decisions at various stages of an evaluation process, the main form of validity affected by those decisions, and the assumptions or preconditions for validity. As evaluators make methodological decisions in various stages of the evaluation process, a number of validity questions arise:

1. Are the evaluation's purposes and questions appropriately derived?
2. To what extent has the formulation and prioritization of questions engaged input from relevant stakeholders?
3. To what extent are the prioritized questions feasible?
4. To what extent do measures (methods, constructs, variables, comparisons) accurately depict the essential features of a program?
5. To what extent are acceptable measures, tools, and data collection procedures used?
6. To what extent do the data obtained from the evaluation measures truthfully depict the program's features, dynamics, and outcomes?
7. Are conclusions and inferences correctly derived from evaluation data and measures that generate this data?
8. To what extent can findings from the evaluation provide conclusions about situations other than the one in which the evaluation is conducted?
9. Are consequent decisions in line with conclusions?
10. Does the evaluation address values to which major stakeholders (or audiences) subscribe?

As noted earlier, examining assumptions of validity is necessary for credible methodology in evaluation. If examination of assumptions arising from method choices is to be encouraged in evaluation practice, evaluators have to understand what those assumptions are. A key prerequisite then is one of labeling, defining, and categorizing these validity assumptions, not merely as threats to, but as preconditions for validity. Methods for examining validity assumptions as well as addressing risks to those assumptions are essential elements of evaluation methodology that are proposed for future inquiry.

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