Evaluating Interventions

Dominic Abrams and Hazel Wardrop
Centre for the Study of Group Processes
Department of Psychology
University of Kent

We are grateful to Prof Diane Houston (former Research and Strategy Advisor at the Women and Equality Unit) for comments on this work
Some opening thoughts

- Elements of evaluation
- Commonly applied evaluation goals
- What is an intervention?
- Evaluation frames for interventions
- Importance of a theoretical framework
Why Evaluate?

• Justify
• Amplify
• Influence
• Account
• It’s a living

• Why not?

Understand, explain and predict
Common Evaluation Goals

• Values
  (We want to do the ‘right thing’ ... Public consultation, focus groups, market research, PR, spin........)

• Utility
  (Do the right people [‘user groups’/’stakeholders’] care about x?)

• Feasibility and Pragmatics
  (can x be done? At what cost?)

• Policy function
  (polemical, strategic, tactical implications)
Elements of Evaluation

- Information gathering by
  - Describing
  - Exploring
  - Discovering

- To establish responsibility (accountability, etc.)
  - *Who* is doing something
  - *How* something has been done
  - *What* has been done

- To establish causality (drivers, levers etc.)
  - Single impacts
  - Sequential impacts
  - Multiple impacts
  - Conditional impacts

- To inform planning (practice, policy)
What is an ‘Intervention’?

• Doing something
  – (e.g. a media campaign)

• With a specific set of people

• In a specific location or context

• Over a particular period of time

  Versus

• Doing something else

• With the same or a different set of people

• At the same or a different time
Some Essential Evaluation Frames for Interventions

• Define the Policy Function
  polemical, strategic, tactical levels)

• Specify Relevant Potential Outcomes
  (what happens if x is done, or not done?)

• Establish Measurement Criteria
  (can we detect x and its effects?)

• Defensibility, Specificity and Limitations
  (which parts of x can we evaluate robustly, and how generally? What can we not learn?)

• Consider Iterativeness
  (single or multi-stage problems)
Kurt Lewin famously stated that

“there is nothing so practical as a good theory”
A Good Theoretical Framework Should Be Based on

- Prior empirical, and/or clear theoretical support for the premises of an intervention
  (e.g. ‘degree of segregation is related to levels of prejudice’)

- Explicit principles for intervening
  (e.g., intergroup contact theory to design a prejudice reduction programme)

- Measurable evidence
  (e.g., statistically reliable indicators or manifest [sometimes qualitative] effects that can be verified by independent observers)

- Replicable causal inference
  (e.g., longitudinal and/or experimental design, use of baseline or null-effects comparisons, discrete impacts on focal but not on irrelevant outcomes)