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RECONNECTING KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION AND EVALUATION UTILIZATION DOMAINS OF INQUIRY

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Abstract: This article provides commentary for the thematic segment titled "Applying a variety of methods to the evaluation of various efforts aimed at transferring knowledge generated from research." The authors revisit arguments supporting inquiry that takes up the challenge of connecting cognate fields of evaluation utilization and the broader domain of knowledge utilization. The central contribution of each of the foregoing articles is identified and situated within the context of ongoing inquiry in this domain.

Résumé : Cet article fournit un survol critique du segment thématique institulé « Appliquer des méthodes variées pour évaluer des efforts variés de transfert des connaissances issues de la recherche ». Les auteurs ramènent à la table les arguments qui encouragent les enquêtes qui soulèvent le défi de joindre deux domaines de recherche connexes : l'utilisation de l'évaluation et le domaine plus large de l'utilisation des connaissances. La contribution centrale de chacun des articles précédents est identifiée et située dans le contexte de la recherche en cours dans ce domaine.

Although it is well known that evaluation utilization research finds its roots in organizational theory and knowledge use theory (Hofstetter & Alkin, 2003; Leviton & Hughes, 1981), the links between these streams of inquiry have been blurred by their ongoing parallel developments. The articles presented in this thematic segment of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* illustrate the importance of periodically returning to our roots to draw on the understanding developing in these sister fields in order to better address the perennial problem of facilitating the use of evaluation

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results. Michael Huberman, referencing cognate fields of research and evaluation utilization, made the case for taking up the challenge several years ago:

> [T]he communities of research utilization and evaluation utilization have evolved an overlapping corpus of work to guide future research applications, with little concern for the meaningful distinctions between the two fields. (1994, p. 7)

While others have delved into understanding the interconnections between these cognate fields (e.g., Cousins & Shulha, 2006), the collection of articles in this issue provides a fresh new perspective by examining interconnections from three distinct perspectives. By means of a thorough and well-articulated conceptual essay and the description of several case examples, the authors have highlighted the parallels between evaluation utilization and knowledge utilization research and have raised issues of importance to evaluation theory and practice. By synthesizing and critiquing the arguments and findings presented in these three articles, we aim to further emphasize the implications of the points raised in the broader context of evaluation utilization.

In their article on the use of the theory-driven evaluation approach as a strategy for increasing the use of knowledge generated from research, Chagnon, Daigle, Gervais, Houle, and Béguet make the case that knowledge use—and the use of evaluation results—can be fostered by adopting approaches that actively involve users throughout the knowledge development—or evaluation—process. Although we have seen, and continue to see, this case being made in the evaluation literature (Cousins, 2003; Shulha & Cousins, 1997), it is quite valuable to see it emerge from a careful review of knowledge utilization models, which further confirms the parallels between these two domains. It is clear that the concerns over the non-use of evaluation results, which sparked the flurry of research on evaluation utilization seen over the last four decades, has also provided a strong impetus for continued research in the area of knowledge utilization, particularly as it relates to issues of accountability for taxpayers' dollars spent through research grants.

In their description of the factors that can facilitate or hinder the use of knowledge generated from research or evaluation, Chagnon and colleagues make a point of describing users' tacit knowledge

as a filter through which new knowledge is both judged and translated. Thus, evaluation and knowledge development processes that tap into and influence the tacit knowledge of individuals and organizations help pave the way for increased knowledge utilization through better alignment of explicit and tacit knowledge. Although they particularly emphasize theory-driven evaluation as being an approach that helps achieve these aims, the authors could have also highlighted other collaborative or participatory approaches to evaluation or research.

Although the authors make a convincing case, what is left unexplored is the fundamental tension between drawing knowledge users and/or program stakeholders closer to the research/evaluation process, and maintaining the type of neutrality and objectivity that continues to be privileged in many decision-making contexts. It would have been valuable to better understand the extent to which the tacit knowledge of practitioners is valued in various contexts, and seen to be at par with other forms of knowledge. It would also have been useful to further describe the degree to which the tacit knowledge of decision-makers is influenced by interactive approaches such as theory-driven evaluation, given that their availability to participate in such exercises is often limited. To what extent do the effects of these activities extend beyond those closest to the program, in order to influence corporate-level and systems-level decision-making?

In the second article, Daigle, Chagnon, Saint-Laurent, and Houle compare three quite distinct networking strategies aimed at fostering the use of research knowledge in areas related to suicide and trauma prevention. Through a cross-case analysis, Daigle and colleagues further emphasize the importance of interactive processes to the generation and application of knowledge generated through research. Through their recounting of the three experiences, which all made use of technology as the primary means of communication, the authors highlight a number of observations regarding the strengths and limitations within and across networking strategies. For instance, although the strategies helped to generate action and reduce professional isolation, network participants were confronted by the challenges associated with the need to rally around a clear goal and ensuring optimal size and composition of groups—challenges that are very familiar to evaluators in pulling together working or advisory groups, or in consulting stakeholders for the purpose of prioritizing evaluation issues and questions. Unfortunately, the authors do not draw many broad conclusions from their findings,

and do not make explicit the many potential implications of their observations for evaluation practice. For instance, one could conceive of developing communities of practice around evaluation utilization, or of using such communication technologies for interacting with program stakeholders who are dispersed geographically. Overall, many of the observations made by the authors, such as the importance of striking a balance between group facilitation and empowerment, can also be of value to evaluation practitioners.

In the final article of this segment, Dagenais, Ridde, Laurendeau, and Souffez provide an overview of concept mapping as a methodology for involving researchers and practitioners in the task of updating research priorities aimed at improving the transfer and use of population health knowledge. The authors provide a careful and valuable description of the process followed, challenges faced, and strategies developed to mitigate these challenges. This constitutes another case in which the users of the knowledge being generated through this process were actively engaged, helping to ensure that the research priorities identified would be seen as relevant and useful in the eyes of both researchers and practitioners. In fact, the authors report that the results were validated by stakeholders from various sectors and found to reflect current preoccupations of decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers alike. It would have been valuable to get a sense of the extent to which the research priorities identified were successfully implemented, and the degree to which participants of the concept mapping exercise attributed this implementation to their involvement in the process. Although implications for evaluation practice are not explicitly discussed, the steps, challenges, and benefits appear to be, for the most part, transferable to evaluation problems. However, some nuances would be worthy of note. For instance, although the approach provides the benefit of ensuring that the views of all participants are given equal weight, this may not be desirable in evaluations where the views of some stakeholder groups need to be given greater weight or importance.

Taken together, these articles highlight the importance of increasing our understanding of recent developments in the knowledge use literature in order to inform further theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work in evaluation utilization. By treating evaluation results as a particular form of knowledge, one that competes against other forms of knowledge—both explicit and tacit—for the attention of decision-makers and knowledge users, we continue to ensure the development of more effective ways of achieving the goals of our practice.

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