

# Positive Thinking Approaches to Evaluation and Program Perspectives

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**Abstract:** *This article deals with the relationship between approaches to evaluation and program perspectives. When evaluated by traditional approaches, programs based on a "direct help" perspective, oriented toward addressing deficits, tend to yield the depressing result that "nothing works." Programs based on an "indirect help" perspective, favouring people's active involvement, require evaluation approaches that are able to value innovation and change, such as positive thinking approaches. This article reviews and compares several of these approaches and analyzes them against those two program perspectives. The article also considers to what extent positive thinking evaluation approaches may be appropriate for evaluating programs of the "direct help" perspective as well as of those based on "indirect help."*

**Keywords:** *approaches to positive thinking, direct help, indirect help, motivations*

**Résumé :** *Cet article traite la relation entre les approches évaluatives et les perspectives des programmes. Les programmes basés sur une perspective d' « aide directe » visent à combler des déficits : s'ils sont évalués par des approches traditionnelles, ils risquent de produire le résultat décourageant que « rien ne fonctionne ». Les programmes qui sont basés sur une perspective d' « aide indirecte » visent à favoriser l'autonomisation des acteurs : ils demandent des approches qui peuvent valoriser l'innovation et le changement, comme les approches de pensée positive. Cet article passe en revue différentes approches de pensée positive, en relation avec les deux perspectives de programme. Il analyse dans quelle mesure les approches de pensée positive peuvent être appropriées à l'évaluation des programmes d' « aide indirecte » aussi bien qu'à ceux d' « aide directe ».*

**Mots clés :** *approches de pensée positive, aide directe, aide indirecte, motivations*

Positive thinking approaches (PTA) to evaluation, such as Appreciative Inquiry and Developmental Evaluation, with their stress on the "success" of programs, have been receiving increasing attention of late. This may be a reaction to the widespread perception that policies for socioeconomic development—

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notwithstanding great effort at planning and funding them—rarely obtain the expected results, inducing the depressing feeling that “nothing works.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, PTA are often faced with the questions “Is it real success?” and “What would failure look like?”

Positive thinking approaches to evaluation are based on social theories that emphasize people’s active involvement and the thrust toward betterment that can result from acknowledging past successes. I have borrowed this common label from Patton (2011, p. 234), who lists several “positive thinking inquiry frameworks” as ways of addressing complex situations. The core of these approaches is far from a naïve expectation that miraculous gains will come out of just “thinking” positively (as the gospel of Peale’s “Power of Positive Thinking” would have it). Instead, focusing on what has worked well is seen as generating new knowledge for future achievements and thus expanding “the realm of the possible.”<sup>2</sup>

Stame and Lo Presti (forthcoming) have reviewed several such approaches, worked out in different policy areas (development, welfare, organizations) and programs. The present article takes up where Stame and Lo Presti left off. While their book chapter was mainly focused on how positive thinking approaches could enhance learning from evaluation, this article explores an issue that was only hinted at earlier: the relationship between the positive orientation of the evaluation approach (evaluation for betterment; see Perrin in this issue) and the perspective of the program, which may vary in the way it promotes change.

Dealing with programs of development assistance, and comparing development assistance to other helping professions, Ellerman (2006) distinguishes between “indirect help” and “direct help” philosophies of assistance.<sup>3</sup>

“Direct help” is offered under two modalities. One is “social engineering,” where the program is intended as the optimal means to reach given ends established from above: external motivations (conditionalities, carrots and sticks) are provided to reward compliance/punish whatever variation from what had been mandated (i.e., the “right” thing that the intended beneficiary is expected to follow). The second is “benevolent aid,” which means that the program provides a solution to “relieve symptoms until next time” while the beneficiary is exempt from “the trouble of learning” (Ellerman, 2006, p. 20). “Direct help” is based on the assumption that the beneficiary is lacking something that has to be provided from the outside.

“Indirect help,” in contrast, is “autonomy-respecting help”: “it finds and starts with the existing motivation of the doer, supplies help on that basis” (Ellerman, 2006, p. 11), and catalyzes social and economic linkages to spread success.

In Ellerman’s (2006) view, most international development assistance that has been offered as direct help has been unhelpful, while only autonomy-respecting assistance can really “help people help themselves,” which is the conundrum of assistance. I am borrowing Ellerman’s distinction between indirect and direct help, because it denotes general traits of programs that can be found in many other policy domains (e.g., education, health, employment) and gets to the heart of the current concern for the unsatisfactory results of many social programs.

**Table 1.** Evaluation Approach Orientation vs. Program Perspective: I

	Program perspective	
	<i>Indirect help</i>	<i>Direct help</i>
Evaluation approach orientation	<i>Positive</i>	
	<i>Traditional</i>	

Moreover, this distinction can aid in highlighting the challenges facing evaluators, who are not passive observers of programs but become themselves actors in the social practice, whether they fully realize this or not. My contention is that PTA are not only suited for enabling the potentialities of “indirect help” programs in ways that other approaches would not do (as is usually understood and may be acknowledged by critics). In contrast, by addressing actors’ capacities and mobilizing their energies, PTA may also help rescue direct help programs from their natural consequences of most probable failure, thus giving pause to the pessimistic mood that surrounds social policies.

To see how the possible matching could work, it will be necessary to clarify characteristics of indirect and direct help program perspectives, and to distinguish positive-oriented approaches to evaluation from traditional approaches that, as Perrin puts it in this issue, are “overly focused on the negative.”

It may be helpful to approach this as a two-by-two matrix, where real cases may be located in cells that represent the matching of a program perspective with an evaluation approach (Table 1).

The following sections will try to populate this matrix, defining first program perspectives, then evaluation approaches orientation. The concluding section will discuss how the different approaches can answer the challenges that are met in each kind of program perspective.

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVES

Although each project or program is different—for example with respect to object, beneficiaries, and context—they can be categorized under a limited number of types. A few typologies could potentially serve our purpose. Vedung (1998) has proposed the famous typology of policy tools: carrots (incentives), sticks (sanctions), and sermons (information, services). Funnell and Rogers (2011, ch. 12) discuss program “archetypes,” or “classes of interventions that are used to activate mechanisms for change”: advisory, information, and education; carrots and sticks; case management; community capacity-building; product or direct service delivery. As is evident, there are overlaps between the two typologies.

Ellerman’s typology of philosophies of help offers a key for interpreting the other two. Seen under that light, carrots and sticks (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Vedung, 1998) are forms of social engineering; direct service delivery (Funnell &

**Table 2.** Typologies of Programs Compared

<b>Funnell and Rogers: Program archetypes</b>	<b>Vedung: Policy tools</b>	<b>Ellerman: Assistance philosophies</b>
Carrots and sticks	Carrots, sticks	Social engineering
Information (advisory)	Sermon	
Case management		Autonomy respecting ?
Community capacity building		Autonomy respecting
Direct service delivery	Sermon ?	Benevolent aid

Rogers) is a form of benevolent aid; case management and community capacity-building (Funnell & Rogers) are forms of autonomy-respecting; information (Funnell & Rogers) and sermons (Vedung) have a more ambiguous status.

What Ellerman's distinction adds to the other typologies is the importance it attributes to the respective roles of the actors and their motivations. Direct help (as in social engineering or benevolent aid assistance) is based on a hierarchical relationship between a donor and a beneficiary, in which the latter is supposed to do what the former thinks is good, thus inducing the latter's compliance, which in practice can result in dependence. Indirect help (as in autonomy-respecting assistance) is based on a collaborative relationship between a helper and a doer, that is, on "helping people help themselves."

More precisely, programs adhering to an autonomy-respecting philosophy embody three "do's":

- Helpers should start from where the doers are (and not from a *tabula rasa*).
- Helpers should see the world through the doer's eyes.
- Helper should respect the autonomy of the doer.

Programs adhering to a social engineering, or a benevolent aid, philosophy embody two "don'ts":

- Helper should not impose will upon the doer.
- Helper should not make doer object of benevolent charity.

Old development programs based on direct help (e.g., conditional help) keep the recipient dependent, whereas recent programs based on such principles as those promoted by the Paris Declaration<sup>4</sup> (ownership, partnership, alignment, etc.) would require collaboration and horizontal learning.

Through this lens it is possible to make sense of the basic assumptions of programs based on incentives and sanctions, that is, inducing people to do what

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Program Perspectives

	Indirect help	Direct help
Goals	Goals not defined: do not know exactly where programs will lead, but certainly somewhere worth going	“If you don’t know where you want to go then you can’t go anywhere”
Implementation	Implementation not fixed: know that there may be different ways of implementing, leave it to implementers	People should follow rules. If there are not rules, there is dis-homogeneity, chaos, etc.
motivation	Trust that certain group of people (youth, women, etc.) will take advantage of the program  Relate to intrinsic motivation	People will not act unless compelled (extrinsic motivation).  Distrust of agent’s motivation
Resources	Mobilizing latent resources, looking for slack to be used	Providing missing factors, starting from a negative  Benevolent aid (helper solves problems, and dispense doer from answers, no knowledge for doer)
Ownership	Autonomy respecting	Social engineering (helper provides motivation, and right answers)
Learning	Learning through experience	Knowledge is information that is taught, transmitted to the target population

they would not have done otherwise (external motivation), often coupled with devices that do not mask the policy-maker’s distrust of the agent’s motivation; in fact, following a principal-agent scheme, the main worry of policy-makers becomes trying to avoid “moral hazard” (agents could act in their own interest, different from the principal’s) and “adverse selection” (when an agent is not the right person for the job).<sup>5</sup>

Indirect and direct help program perspectives can be contrasted on many accounts (see Table 3), even if it should be considered that—given the complexity and variety of programs—they are not two opposites, but rather the poles of a continuum.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, most programs are a mix of different components that may represent the whole spectrum of perspectives.

## TRADITIONAL EVALUATION APPROACHES

Positive thinking approaches try to overcome the shortcomings of a traditional practice of evaluation that, as Perrin has indicated in his article in this issue, often ends up being felt as a punitive exercise by the objects of an evaluation.

By “traditional” approaches to evaluation, I refer to the common practice of looking primarily at prestated goals imposed upon the program (with limited or no consideration for unexpected consequences), monitoring whether the program is implemented as expected, and establishing whether results correspond to the objectives. And when, as so often happens, negative results are reported, the cause of such failure is mostly attributed to unclear goals, implementation that did not follow protocols, or impact that is difficult to measure. Using Scriven’s (1981) terminology, these are “goal-oriented” approaches. And they generally assume direct help program perspectives as a matter of fact.

But when a program is based on an indirect help perspective that may look at both ends and means, traditional approaches, with their search for direct results with desired outcomes expected to follow a linear cause-and-effect chain, are unable to inquire into the unpredictable paths taken in specific cases thanks to people’s commitment and ingenuity, and tend either to measure results that are not relevant or to use indicators that underrepresent positive cases. This point has been thoroughly explored by Perrin (2002) in his article on the evaluation of innovation I will refer to below.

In fact, traditional approaches to evaluation are indifferent to the program perspective, because they do not question existing policies. They consider the program as mainly reflecting the external motivation (the incentive, the sanction) imposed from above and disregard the intrinsic motivation of the actors (the recipients’ desires, the implementers’ attitudes, etc.). Schon (1971, p. 177, italics added) depicts this situation as follows:

[The standard approach] treats government as center, the rest of society as periphery. Central has responsibility for the formation of new policy and for its imposition on localities at the periphery. Central attempts to “train” agencies at the periphery. In spite of the language of experimentation, government-initiated learning tends to be confined to efforts to induce localities to behave in conformity with central policy. Localities learn to beat the system. Government tends to bury failure or learn from it only in the sense of veering away from it. *Evaluation, then, tends to be limited to the role of establishing and monitoring the extent of peripheral conformity with central policy.*

In the language of variables, traditional approaches are interested in how the independent variable (the program) affects the dependent variable (the target), by way of the intervening variable (the implementers). In so doing, they do not investigate why some people react one way and others another way, producing different trajectories for the same programs.

Long experience in program evaluation, however, has taught us that programs are what they become through their implementation—that is, with the combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations—and that evaluation approaches

should be able to interpret these developments and adapt to them (Majone & Wildavsky, 1979; Woolcock, 2009). Theory-based approaches to evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Weiss, 1998) have offered the theoretical rationale for this, implying that evaluation can either be a theory-testing or a theory-building exercise<sup>7</sup>: notwithstanding the official program theory (the policy-maker's theory: to be tested), programs may actually work according to alternative theories (the actors' theories: to be discovered).

As realist evaluation has specifically pointed out, programs invariably “work” for some people in given circumstances, but not for others in different contexts.<sup>8</sup> It has been possible to show that programs based on direct help perspectives work for some kind of subjects, but not for others in other circumstances. This is well illustrated by the example of programs based on the “naming and shaming” mechanism, analyzed by Pawson (2006). Naming and shaming is based on a negative feeling, shaming, that is meant to motivate the people named to react positively to redress their reputation and/or self-confidence. By reviewing many programs based on this mechanism, Pawson has shown that it worked when the target identified with the program designer's values (e.g., the car maker who does not want to be considered lax on car security will promptly improve the locking system and anti-theft devices), but did not work when the target did not consider the program designer's values legitimate (e.g., people listed for not having paid the unpopular poll tax were proud of being so profiled and created an antitax movement). The combination of mechanisms and context calls into question the correspondence between the internal motivation (the actor in the context) and the external motivation triggered by the mechanism.

## OVERVIEW OF POSITIVE THINKING APPROACHES

Positive thinking approaches share a position that clearly challenges what can be considered the “bias for failure”<sup>9</sup> of standard evaluation approaches. Fully aware of the uncertain outcomes of human action, and of the possibility of failure, PTA's main tenets are “overcoming the dependency syndrome” and “there is always something that works.” The approaches differ, however, regarding methodologies for discovering successful cases, eliciting people's motivations, mobilizing latent energies, and innovating on the basis of past success. Table 4 summarizes the main features of the various approaches that were compared in Stame and Lo Presti (forthcoming), where their strengths and limitations were more extensively discussed than can be done in this article.

In this section I will investigate how, and to what extent, these different ways of opposing the negativity syndrome may make PTA better suited to evaluating programs based on either a direct help or indirect help perspective.

### *Appreciative Inquiry*

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)<sup>10</sup> starts from the organizational theory of Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, and Yaeger (2000) and the Positive Principle, the

**Table 4.** Positive Thinking Approaches: Differences

	Appreciative Inquiry	Success Case Method	Most Significant Change	Positive Deviance	Evaluation of innovation	Developmental evaluation
Basic assumption	Positive images lead to positive actions	In any situation there are cases where the program worked	Values evolve: a dynamic values inquiry (Campbell's "evolutionary epistemology") People like stories	In any community there are people whose behaviour has found solution to common problems Start from internal positive	Innovation defined as for Campbell's processes of variation and selective retention Like venture capital assume a calculated risk	Slack, energies to be mobilized
What they are fighting (overcoming the negative bias)	The idea of problem solving, that looks at yesterday's problems and victim blaming	The idea of the average participant	The traditional way of collecting evidence that does not suit the stakeholders	The need from external help	The average score that preserves the status quo Against a linear cause-effect logic	The "evaluation boxes," like the distinction formative/summative
Where suited	Organizations; complex programs	Organizations	Complex, participatory programs	Communities that want to change	Innovative programs	Complex, innovative programs, organizations
What criteria for identifying success	What the people think was a success	Understand the expected goals and way to address needs; reaching goals broadly defined	Success is when a positive change is identified by stakeholders	They are statistically the best performers on the indicators of interest	Identify the outliers; then investigate what changes occurred	Internal people recognize that something is positive

What evidence for success	Participants' capacities are released	Good use of a program	The stories stand the test of selection	They have already solved the problem of the rest of the community	An innovation has been introduced: doing things better or differently	When the program has developed to a further stage
Methods	Dialogue between stakeholders, peer interviews, then brainstorming Identifying relevant issues The 4-D model: ask people about their discovery, dream, design, destiny	Surveys to detect best and worst performers Interviews that elicit storytelling (naturalistic inquiry, case studies) plus empirical evidence	Collecting stories from people and filtering them up the levels of authority of programs People asked to say why the change identified was positive	Involvement of local people to find positive cases	Quantitative methods to discover outliers, then qualitative case studies Intentional sampling, not random	Bricolage between evaluation designs, research techniques
Role of evaluator	Facilitator of dialogue Ability to resist negative syndrome	Interviewer and methodologist	Facilitator of stories' selection	Invisible helper of participation	Analogous to venture capitalist Get at exceptions, be flexible and open to serendipity	Facilitator of identifying positive change

Adapted from [Stame and Lo Presti \(forthcoming\)](#)

Constructionist Principle, the Simultaneity Principle, the Poetic Principle, and the Wholeness Principle. It is used within organizations. Its main tenet is that to get future results you should start from “the best of what is.” The mobilization of people’s energies—at the core of the approach—can only be obtained if one keeps the negativity syndrome at bay, in both programs and methodologies.

Programs aimed at “problem solving,” being deficit-oriented, lead to victim-blaming and tend to create more problems. Instead, AI promotes a language of hope and possibilities based on what has worked in the past, which creates a new vision: AI is not trying to “solve problems,” but to generate collective agreement about what people want to do together. There are a lot of problems out there, and they may be dealt with only if it can be demonstrated (and this is not difficult) that people have the energies and the capacities to overcome them. Program perspectives should not be based on mistakes or failures to be corrected, but on dreams to be designed and projected into the future.

Analogously, AI contrasts with traditional evaluation techniques (based on the “neutrality” of the interviewer) that lead to victim-blaming and the resentment of evaluation as a punitive process on the part of the recipients. The AI approach instead develops a “methodological game” consisting of techniques of inquiry such as dialogue or peer interviews (where people are asked to identify and share their best experiences), interviews purposely framed in a positive (not neutral) way, and group sessions in which the evaluator is constantly alert to the need to “hold the course with client groups who continue to fall back to well-known and comfortable patterns of negativity” (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 139).

Given its positive orientation, AI is naturally suited to evaluate programs with an indirect help perspective, where it can offer the stakeholders opportunities to unleash their dreams and desires and build a future based on their better qualities. But it is with direct help programs that it has engaged in a real fight. Believing that traditional evaluation methods reiterate the negative status that the direct help programs are not able to change, AI aims to thwart the logic of those programs by helping people to resist it. As MacCoy shows in his article in this issue, this may succeed only as far as the evaluator is able to reframe the programs while stakeholders and beneficiaries themselves change their attitudes during the evaluation.

### **Success Case Method**

The Success Case Method (SCM) is an approach that can also be used to evaluate the performance of organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2003). According to the SCM, what constitutes a success (a good performance) is not given, notwithstanding the existence of an “impact model.”<sup>11</sup> A success should be identified through evaluative research that can find cases of good performance that have actually occurred, specify what a good impact is, and recognize (an unexpected) one when it is reported. Once the best cases have been identified, they should be circulated throughout the organization to “provide models and examples to motivate and guide others” (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p. 15). Moreover, when things change rapidly, knowing what works at a given time may help build better solutions for the future.

The SCM is based on the idea that a program cannot end up a complete success or a complete failure: there are always cases where the program worked, even if it seems like a failure. If we want to understand problems and identify ways of solving them, we need to know best and worst cases. Extreme cases of failure as well as success provide the most telling data. On the contrary, the average data usually collected provide no indication about what can be done. But it is the success cases that show how to take action in new directions.

The SCM employs a methodology that mixes storytelling (where people express themselves best) and naturalistic inquiry (observation of best cases) with more traditional surveys and interviews in which people are asked about what they consider to be best cases. Qualitative and quantitative techniques are used with a positive attitude, to elicit examples that can guide future actions. And similar research methods can engage stakeholders in adopting innovative practices.

Given its idea that what is success is not given, the SCM offers tools for each perspective. When what is at stake is the improvement of the organization without a definite specification (indirect help), it helps to overcome the uncertainties of what success is and to find the positive cases to be shown as examples for future action. When the improvement of the organization is forecasted to happen by an impact model (which implies a definite way to overcome a negative situation, as in direct help), it provides ways of understanding that there may be alternatives to that impact model.

### ***Most Significant Change***

Most Significant Change (MSC) has been applied to development programs in particular (Dart & Davies, 2003). It aims to improve programs by providing “information on unexpected outcomes, performance information by way of the best success stories, and a form of dynamic values inquiry” (2003, p. 140). The specific case analyzed in the presentation of the approach is a program based on information to farmers on dairy extension in a developing country.

This participatory approach asked people to tell their own stories about what they consider to be the most significant changes they underwent as a result of the program. The emphasis of MSC is on recognizing people’s ability to construct their own discourse by making their own emotions public and sharing with others the values that have helped positive change emerge from routine practice.

The MSC approach is based on a series of steps in which people first discuss what changes need to be evaluated. They then write stories. Finally, stories representing examples of the most significant positive change are selected and sent to the program funders who in turn will make their own choice. All this happens through phases of intense dialogue (e.g., to establish the criteria through which stories will be selected) and of feedback and communication between stakeholders.

The main idea about people’s active initiative and participation is that people will feel they are protagonists in a program if their values are made explicit, and values are a criterion for assessing what worked—that is, what was most significant.

At the same time, the methodology of storytelling will be able to accommodate the fact that significant changes are ways of overcoming negative situations.

Development programs may be of a direct or an indirect help perspective. MSC is naturally suited to evaluate indirect help programs. But its way of allowing different views and values to be taken into consideration makes it fitted to revive programs of direct help that might have failed if they had been only intended to promote one way of dealing with what the decision-makers consider a critical area.

### ***Positive Deviance***

Positive Deviance (PD) has been used in development programs, especially those concerned with health and nutrition (Sternin & Choo, 2000). It is based on the idea that, whatever the problem, there will be people in any community who have found better solutions to that problem than their peers (they eat healthily, they follow hygiene rules, etc.), and this means that good behaviour is already practiced and need not be introduced from outside. Traditional statistical methodologies would treat such cases as deviant and of no significance. This approach, on the contrary, considers their deviance positive because it offers a hint that things can be solved from within, which is the basis of social mobilization: people are excited at the idea that a solution to their problems exists.

PD is thus strongly oriented toward challenging the negative theories that usually underpin development programs that are “prescriptive, top down, or donor driven, and difficult to sustain without ongoing external resources” (Marsh, Schroeder, Dearden, Sternin, & Sternin, 2004, p. 1177); in so doing it recognizes the community’s ability to solve its problems from inside, and to gain recognition for its own thinking.

To this end, PD uses participatory methods, first to search for the positive cases (interviewing and observing to discover the enabling factors) and then to design behaviour-change activities aimed at encouraging the adoption of the new behaviour by others.

PD could not be used with indirect help programs: by definition it stresses deviance from a negativity, therefore it depends on negativity. But its strength is found where it is able to challenge the negativity on which the program theory is based, by a deviant case that nonetheless gets the importance of an example or a model. Therefore PD is suited to a direct help perspective, insofar as it contests its assumptions.

### ***Evaluation of Innovation***

The Evaluation of Innovation (EI) deals with programs that are themselves positively oriented: they aim at introducing an innovation and hope that people will innovate. As Perrin (2002) notes, this immediately raises the issue that traditional approaches are not suited to evaluating such programs, because what an innovation will be like cannot be established in advance; hence it is not possible to assess success or failure against a definite goal.

The program itself requires a methodology able to identify the success cases from many attempted projects, among which it would be silly to take an average. To this purpose Perrin (2002) suggests using quantitative methods—with intentional rather than random sampling—to identify outliers (positive deviants), and then to investigate the outliers using case studies.

Perrin's (2002) approach to EI openly addresses the question of success and failure, because it incorporates the principles of trial and error that are the basis of experimentation. In such cases, failure is not seen as something to be punished, but as a step in a work in progress. It is to be expected and, indeed, embraced when a program is trying something different or exploring the unknown.

EI was born to withstand the drama of applying traditional evaluation methods to indirect help programs, for which it moulds an appropriate approach. But it could come to save evaluations of direct help programs that had unclear goals and showed varieties of implementation trajectories, by allowing the discovery of unexpected consequences.

### ***Developmental Evaluation***

Developmental Evaluation (DE) builds on Patton's (2011) Utilization Focused Evaluation:

evaluation done for and with specific primary intended users for specific, intended uses ... it can include any evaluative purpose (formative, summative, developmental), any kind of data (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), any kind of design (e.g., naturalistic, experimental), and any kind of focus (processes, outcomes, impacts, costs). (2011, pp. 13–14)

In DE, on the contrary, the intended use is development; the approach helps “those engaged in innovation examine the effects of their actions ... test their hypotheses about how to foment change in the face of uncertainty in situations characterized by complexity” (2011, pp. 13–14).

DE avowedly recognizes its use can be limited to indirect help program perspectives in innovative organizations whose complex nature prevents knowing in advance what success would look like. DE takes up the challenge of recognizing positive changes. It does so through a participatory approach based on reflective practice and action research, and on a collaboration between the group innovators and the evaluator, who poses specific questions about specific developmental practices and impacts, helps keep track of the various meanings that are explored, and facilitates understanding of key guiding concepts and emerging principles.

DE is based on people's desire for change and on their ability to mobilize and innovate. Its focus is on development and innovation. It implicitly addresses the question of the balance between success and failure when it counters its search for development with formative evaluation concerned with improvement. The latter is presumably based on a balance between what works and what doesn't, while

developmental evaluation is more interested in breakthroughs: “those aiming to change the world focus their energy on what can be done, on strengths, not weaknesses” (Patton, 2011, p. 5).

By its own admission, DE is fitted for indirect help perspectives, while it would hardly interact with a direct help one.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As we have seen, although the various positive thinking approaches discussed in this article share many theoretical and methodological characteristics, they are articulated in different ways. Moreover, they each have specific uses.

Concerning their common characteristics, it is interesting to note that even the mobilization of people’s energy, by far the most basic tenet, can happen in different ways. Appreciative Inquiry builds people’s trust by recognizing their ability to do something good, in contrast to those systems of performance management that invariably report misbehaviour. Success Case Method looks for examples of good performance that will motivate other people to take action. Most Significant Change stresses the role of values in making people aware of their own position in environments that by definition do not seem autonomous. Developmental Evaluation is concerned with tracking emergent realities that support the dynamics of innovation.

Balancing success with failure may also be done in different ways (see [Table 5](#)). For all of the PTA that I have identified, failure is not represented by the number of cases in which an expected result was not obtained; what it depends on the kind of program and situation. In the Evaluation of Innovation, “failure” is a necessary step in a learning process; in Appreciative Inquiry failure is the knee-jerk reaction to a routine, which the Positive Principle may dispel; in Positive Deviance it is the normality that may be belied by the outliers. In all cases it is possible to fight against an ever-recurring failure complex by focusing on how obstacles have been overcome, new paths have been opened, and hidden potentialities have surfaced.

Not surprisingly, the greater differences show up in the potential uses of PTA in situations of indirect help vs. direct help program perspectives. Having reviewed the different approaches, in [Table 6](#) we are now able to populate the cells of the matrix of [Table 1](#).

Some PTA are naturally—and mainly—suited to evaluating cases of indirect help program perspectives: the Evaluation of Innovation is for programs for innovation and Developmental Evaluation is for innovative organizations. In such cases, PTA are a bastion against misrepresentation and perverse consequences that could occur if such programs were evaluated with traditional approaches (see Perrin’s article in this issue). Assessing results against indicators established in advance would not do justice to the need to recognize an innovation (which in itself brings a taste of serendipity), and would judge as failures situations where solutions have indeed been found but could not have been described in advance.

**Table 5.** Positive Thinking Approaches: Balancing Positive vs. Negative Aspects

	Appreciative Inquiry	Success Case Method	Most Significant Change	Positive Deviance	Evaluation of innovation	Developmental evaluation
Balancing negative with positive aspects	Managing the "negative syndrome"	A mixed methodology oriented to elicit positive examples by the evaluation	A change is significant insofar as it overcomes an obstacle	The outliers offer the example that there are internal assets	The few best performers speak for the success of the program. Trial and error. Failure is work in progress	It contrasts development (breakthrough) to improvement (formative/summative)
Relationship to program perspective (indirect help/direct help)	Openly contrasts "problem solving approach" of "direct help" by focusing on the beneficiaries resources: "what worked in the past"	"Success" is not given, and failure is not predetermined, as in "direct help." Success should be identified based on what worked ("indirect help")	What counts are the values of the stakeholders (as with indirect help), not the goals of programs (as with direct help)	Belies the program perspective of aid assistance based on direct help	Suits the positive perspective of innovative programs based on indirect help	Suits the development motivation of innovative organizations, as with indirect help

**Table 6.** Evaluation Approach Orientation vs. Program Perspective: II

	Program perspectives	
	<i>Indirect help</i>	<i>Direct help</i>
<i>Positive</i>	All PTA, with the exception of PD, are naturally suited to programs based on this perspective  Some approaches are by definition only suited to them:  EI supports innovation programs	Some PTA try to rescue the programs based on this perspective, by detecting latent potentialities and addressing intrinsic motivation  PD: finds internal resources for good behaviour  MSC: actors' values may reorient program theory and assessment of results
<b>Evaluation approach orientation</b>	DE is for innovative organizations	AI: contrasts dependency syndrome with orientation toward a better future  SCM: good examples, not compliance with impact models, motivate others' actions
<i>Traditional</i>	Unexpected positive consequence not detected  Do not account for success that is limited but significant	Success only if conformity to goal (rare condition)  Negative bias reinforced

Calculating a mean of performers would not recognize the innovators, the best performers, the few cases that can show others the way forward.

Other PTA exist insofar as they challenge the traditional approach to evaluation of direct help programs. This is true in the case of Positive Deviance, which challenges a whole strategy of aid assistance.

Other PTA may be used in programs with both perspectives. It is noteworthy that they are not only suited to indirect help program perspectives, but their efficacy is great also in dealing with direct help programs, where they can succeed in overcoming the feared consequence of maintaining the beneficiary's dependence, as in the case of development programs, which were the primary object of [Ellerman's \(2006\)](#) observation. This could be true of Most Significant Change, with its emphasis on people's values, hardly a must even in recent development programs: by asking people to surface their values, MSC is able to make intrinsic motivations play with extrinsic ones. And it works the same way within organizations that

are trying to fix their own problems. For Success Case Method, the resistance to “impact models” that never materialize can be overcome by refocusing programs on the “good examples that can motivate the others.” With Appreciative Inquiry the focus on “problem solving”—that is, victim-blaming—can be replaced by the promotion of a collective imagination aimed at discovering the community’s capacities and assets.

In this article I have discussed how a group of approaches that share the positive thinking persuasion may suit the evaluation of programs with different orientations toward the aid that can be offered specific actors. While it is generally accepted that similar approaches fit innovative situations that may exist in a niche among programs or organizations, this review has shown the great versatility of such approaches. If wisely chosen in a way appropriate to the program and the context, they can cover a variety of situations and offer ways out of the predicaments of traditional evaluation approaches in accounting for unexpected positive consequences, emerging outcomes, and all that is generated by people’s empowerment.

## NOTES

- 1 This negative feeling originated in development assistance, where it spurred a debate on the results of policies (compare [Easterly, 2006](#); [Sachs, 2005](#)) and on the methodology for evaluating them (see the debate on impact evaluation: [Stern et al., 2012](#); [White, 2010](#)). Similar feelings existed for social policies, as reflected in the movement for systematic reviews (see [Pawson, 2006](#), for a criticism). I have dealt with these topics in [Stame \(2010\)](#).
- 2 I am grateful to David MacCoy for having alerted me to the need for this clarification. Delving into the theoretical roots of Appreciative Inquiry (from Cooperrider’s and Srivastva’s “socialrationalist” view of science back to Gergen’s idea of “generative” theory) I realized that this stream of thought (which originated inside social psychology and public administration) had a lot in common with my original inspiration, namely the “possibilism” of Albert Hirschman, also reflected in Ellerman’s work (coming from development economics and its relationship with politics). The two streams share a criticism of the traditional way of conducting social analysis (“positivist” for Gergen, “probabilistic” for Hirschman), and both take a stand against the negative implications of that starting point (“the problem solving/deficit attitude” for Cooperrider; “fracasomania” for Hirschman). I cannot elaborate on this here; it is a topic for another article. Some useful readings will suffice: [Bushe \(2007\)](#), [Gergen \(1978\)](#), [Cooperrider and Srivastva \(1987\)](#), [Hirschman \(1971\)](#), [Meldolesi \(1995\)](#).
- 3 Ellerman’s account is based on a “disciplinary triangulation” among theories that have promoted indirect help in different disciplinary domains: psychology, education, management, development economics, and so on. These theories could well provide the theoretical background for social programs in the respective policy domains.
- 4 The Paris Declaration was signed in 2006 by donor agencies and beneficiary countries. It aims at orienting the policies of international development according to five principles, translated into indicators of effectiveness: ownership (inclusion of local

partners in defining goals and in planning programs), alignment (of aid behind local objectives, to be implemented through the use of local systems), harmonization (integration and coordination of different aid policies among all aid partners), results (centrality of outcomes), and mutual accountability (transparency and accountability of development aid at all level). See the special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* (vol. 27, no. 3, 2012) on Evaluation of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

- 5 A thorough critique of the principal/agent theory and its impact on policy-making can be found in Ellerman (2006, pp. 100 ff.) and Sabel (2004).
- 6 I am grateful to a referee for reminding me of this.
- 7 I consider this a great legacy of Carol Weiss.
- 8 Realist evaluation shares with the PTA the focus on “what works,” even if its theoretical roots are to be found elsewhere (realist epistemology, evolutionary epistemology): Pawson himself warns us that “Realist evaluation presupposes pattern. There will be winners ... and losers” (2013, p. 21). See Sridharan’s article in this issue.
- 9 I am mimicking here the title of one of Hirschman’s books, *A Bias for Hope* (1971), which represents well his approach to development.
- 10 For a fuller presentation of this approach, see MacCoy’s article in this issue.
- 11 “A projection of what success would look like if the initiative ... were really working” (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p. 25).

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