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Taking stock of four decades of quantitative research on stakeholder participation and evaluation use: A systematic map

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholder participation and evaluation use have attracted a lot of attention from practitioners, theorists and researchers. A common hypothesis is that participation is positively associated with evaluation use. Whereas the number of empirical studies conducted on this topic is impressive, quantitative research has held a minority position within this scientific production. This study mobilizes systematic review methods to 'map' the empirical literature that has quantitatively studied participation and use. The goal is to take stock and assess the strength of evidence of this literature (but not to synthesize the findings) and, based on this assessment, to provide directions for future research.

1. Introduction

Evaluation use and stakeholder participation are undoubtedly two 'hot' topics in the field of evaluation. Evaluation use—closely related terms include utilization, impact and influence—has certainly been one of the main concerns for program evaluators since the emergence of the field in the 1960s (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Weiss, 1998). As Henry and Mark (2003, p. 294) have argued, "use has served the field of evaluation as both a motivating concept and a focus of theory, research, and debate". Furthermore, the current movement in favour of evidence-based policy (see Hansen & Rieper, 2009; Oakley, 2002; Pawson, 2002) contributes to sustain—and even to increase—the preoccupation for use as evaluation reports are an important source of evidence for decision-makers.

While somewhat more recent, there is arguably strong interest in stakeholder involvement and participatory approaches to evaluation such as utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2000), collaborative evaluation (O'Sullivan, 2012) and participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992). Described as one of the most important trends in the field nearly 15 years ago (Mark, 2001), stakeholder involvement is now a well-accepted principle in the evaluation community (Fleischer & Christie, 2009; Mathison, 2005). Whether based on pragmatic, political or epistemological justifications (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Weaver & Cousins, 2004), stakeholder participation has become popular with many evaluators. Moreover, the recent research literature on stakeholder involvement, collaboration and participation, building on an earlier generation of groundbreaking studies such as Ayers (1987), Greene (1987) and Papineau and Kiely (1996), has exploded (see e.g., Aragon, Aranguren, Diez, Iturrioz, & Wilson, 2013; Burford et al., 2013; Cullen, Coryn, & Rugh, 2011; Jacob, Ouvrard, & Bélanger, 2011; Lawrenz, King, & Ooms, 2011; Plottu & Plottu, 2009; Rodrígues-Campos, 2012b; Smits, Champagne, & Brodeur, 2011; Springett & Wallerstein, 2008).

1.1. Does stakeholder participation foster evaluation use?

There is a deeply ingrained belief in the evaluation community that stakeholder involvement contributes to evaluation use. For instance, 86% of evaluators who responded to a large-scale survey believed that "involving stakeholders in the evaluation process" is an influential or a very influential factor affecting use (Fleischer &

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Christie, 2009, p. 164). Moreover, a significant portion of the recent literature on stakeholder participation has studied its relationship with evaluation use (Poth, 2008).

Many review and synthesis endeavours have examined the relationship between evaluation use and a handful of factors. These reviews have generally pointed to stakeholder participation as a key variable affecting evaluation use (Cousins & Leithwood, 1993; Hofstetter & Alkin, 2003; Johnson et al., 2009; Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Tomlinson et al., 1993). Recent reviews have also increased our knowledge of participatory processes (Nitsch et al., 2013) and on the reported impact of participation on evaluation use (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2013; Cousins & Chouinard, 2012). With more than a hundred studies examined from 1997 to 2012, Cousins and Chouinard (2012) have conducted the most extensive review of empirical research on participatory evaluation. This 'state-of-the-art' study concluded that stakeholder involvement is positively associated with different types of evaluation use, in particular process use (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012, p. 151). Cousins and Chouinard also found that the overwhelming majority of studies in their sample were reflexive case narratives (69%) and case studies (21%), with only a small portion of the studies using mixed or quantitative methods, a finding consistent with other research on this topic (Toal, King, Johnson, & Lawrenz, 2009). To be sure, narratives and qualitative studies are legitimate means for generating knowledge about participatory evaluation, but they also have drawbacks compared to quantitative studies in terms of their ability to test relationships between variables and the generalizability of their findings (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Cousins and Chouinard (2012) have therefore argued in favour of "more systematic forms of inquiry" and have urged researchers to embrace methodological diversity and quantification in their work on participatory evaluation. It is worth mentioning that calls in favour of a higher standard of evidence with respect to research on evaluation have been voiced by other literature reviewers and critics (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2013; Brandon & Singh, 2009; Leviton, 2003). For instance, Brandon and Fukunaga (2013) have suggested that researchers should go beyond the case study research design to use "causal methods" to investigate the topic of stakeholder participation. Whatever one's methodological perspective on the issues of validity and research design, it cannot be disputed that quantitative research has occupied a minority position within the scientific production on stakeholder involvement, collaboration and participation in evaluation. This represents a lost opportunity because quantitative methods can provide a different yet relevant perspective on the 'participatory hypothesis,' that is, the claim that participation is positively associated with evaluation use.

2. Study purpose and methods

This study reviews the quantitative literature on the relationship between stakeholder participation and evaluation use in order to draw a clear portrait of the scientific production on this topic. Two objectives are pursued through this review, namely "to examine the extent, range and nature of research activity" and "to identify research gaps in the existing literature" (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005, p. 21).

Systematic review principles and methods (Hansen & Rieper, 2009; Labin, 2008; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) guided this study. In contrast to 'traditional' literature reviews, systematic reviews are a kind of research which relies on explicit, transparent and replicable methods to identify, screen, assess studies and synthesize their findings. The main advantage of a systematic approach is that it provides readers with enough information to assess the credibility of the conclusions (Oakley, 2002; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Although the methods used in this review are systematic,[1] the focus is on 'mapping' the scientific production on participation and use, in contrast with synthesizing it. Because this review does not assess the quality of *individual* studies or synthesize their findings, it is more accurately labeled a 'scoping study' (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) or a 'systematic map' (Gough, 2004), whose aim is to "summariz[e] a range of evidence in order to convey the breadth and depth of a field" (Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010, p. 1).

This study is structured in two parts: first, it systematically maps the quantitative research that has been produced on the participatory hypothesis in terms of methods, operationalization of main variables, policy sectors covered, and findings; secondly, it critically assesses the strength of the evidence provided by this body of literature. This scoping review contributes to the research on evaluation literature by offering suggestions for future research endeavours. It also provides researchers with a 'database' that could be mobilized in whole or in part in other studies of participation or evaluation use. The data would be useful, for instance, in a study that focuses on the consequences of evaluator-stakeholders interactions on process use, or as the main data source in a full research synthesis (including a quality assessment of individual studies) of this sample.

2.1. Literature search

The initial study aimed at reviewing all types of empirical studies that examined all the factors of evaluation use. For reasons that are explained elsewhere (Daigneault, Jacob, & Ouimet, 2012), it was later decided to restrict the review focus to one factor, namely stakeholder participation. Following the publication of Cousins and Chouinard (2012) which identified limitations in the evidence base on participatory evaluation, it was furthermore decided to limit the review to quantitative studies. Since the search process was carried out *before* narrowing the review focus to participation and favoured a 'sensitive' search (i.e., aimed at identifying *all* relevant studies) over a 'specific' one (i.e., aimed at identifying a high proportion of relevant studies), the search terms combinations were clearly less specific than what would be warranted by best practices in systematic reviews. The literature search was conducted in 2009 (and updated in 2010) by combining the following terms and their derivatives, in English and French,[2] in references' titles, abstracts and keywords: *evaluation* AND (*use* OR *utilization* OR *influence* OR *consequences* OR *impact*). Depending on the database, descriptor search was also used (e.g., *evaluation utilization* in ERIC). When the number of hits was high and their relevance seemed at first glance doubtful, terms such as *policy*, *program* and *factors* have been used to narrow the search. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of evaluation (Jacob, 2008), electronic databases from different academic disciplines were searched and the results were imported into Endnote, a bibliographic management software (Table 1). A total of 11,798 references were added to the database.

The search process was completed by a hand search of *all* references of evaluation and knowledge use journals that appeared relevant a priori (Table 2). Hand-searching is notably recommended for systematic reviewers as a way to compensate for deficiencies in database indexing (Littell, Corcoran, & Pillai, 2008;

[1] As used in this article, systematic review refers to an 'overview of primary studies that use explicit and reproducible methods' (Greenhalgh, 1997, as cited in Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 283). This broad definition of systematic review thus includes scoping studies, systematic maps and rapid reviews in the extension of the concept as long as they use explicit and reproducible methods to search, screen and analyze the literature (see Daigneault, Jacob, & Ouimet, 2012).

[2] While the main language used in the diffusion of academic research is English, restricting a review to this language incurs the risk of excluding important studies, especially those with negative findings (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 234). Ideally, *all* studies, irrespective of their language, should be included in systematic reviews. The author of this review could only understand English and French, however, hence this criterion.