An Assessment of the Theoretical Underpinnings of Practical Participatory Evaluation

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This article is concerned with the underpinnings of practical participatory evaluation (PPE). Evaluation approaches have long been criticized because their results are often not used. It is believed that PPE addresses this drawback. The article focuses on the mechanisms underlying the links between activities and consequences in PPE. A PPE theory is proposed, based on learning theories and knowledge transfer theories, which comprises four key concepts and three hypotheses. The key concepts are interactive data production, knowledge coconstruction, local context of action, and instrumental use. The hypotheses articulate the relationships between these concepts. The article provides theoretical and empirical evidence to support the hypotheses discussed and present a framework for the proposed PPE theory. The importance of practitioner knowledge and participation in the PPE process in enhancing the use of results is partially supported by the literature. In general, it seems that the support is more theoretical than empirical.

Keywords: participatory evaluation; rationale; learning theory; knowledge transfer theory

The use of results produced by research or evaluation is being given increasing emphasis, especially in today's evidence-based decision making and accountability in policy making. In the field of evaluation, participatory evaluation (PE) is believed to strengthen the use of results (Mueller, 1998; Rebien, 1996). Since the mid-1990s, practical participatory evaluation (PPE) has been touted as a cure; it assumes that the participation of major stakeholders throughout the evaluation process enhances evaluation use.

However, evidence in support of this assumption is offset by evidence of unintended results, including poor use of results. PE has been shown to generate many positive impacts on learning (Bowen & Martens, 2006; Forss, Rebien, & Carlsson, 2002; Rebien, 1996; Taut, 2007), evaluation capacity building (Baker & Bruner, 2006; Bowen & Martens, 2006), participation over time (Bradley, Mayfield, Mehta, & Rukonge, 2002), and the use of evaluation results (Mueller, 1998; Rebien, 1996). However, contradictory effects can occur: failure to translate the evaluation process into learning at strategic levels (Reeve & Peerbhoy, 2007), difficulty for participants in determining how to act (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005), failure to obtain sufficient knowledge of the project (Lennie, 2005), and curtailed instrumental use (Papineau & Kiely, 1996). Both positive and negative and/or unintended effects of PPE have been documented, thereby calling into question the assumed link between practitioner

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participation during the evaluation process and increased use of findings in decision making. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning PPE could provide evaluators involved in PE with tools to identify factors that interfere with mechanisms and modify actions during the PPE process, and to identify or predict variations in the use of results.

Despite the extensive use of this evaluation approach, there is little evidence supporting the logic behind the approach. This lead us to wonder what rationale underpins PE, particularly PPE. Just as program theory–based evaluation is an essential component to understanding how and why program outcomes occur the way they do (Huey-Tsyh, 2004), the program theory for evaluation approaches could be informative as well.

The main question of this study is: How can the involvement of actors in the PPE process strengthen the use of evidence? We will look at the rationales underpinning PPE, in an attempt to understand the mechanisms underlying the links between activities and consequences, and between results, outputs, and outcomes.

After briefly synthesizing the literature on the known components of PPE theory, we will propose a PPE theory and provide theoretical and empirical evidence to support our hypotheses.

A Theory of PPE

By PE we mean applied social research that involves a partnership between trained evaluation personnel and practice-based decision makers, organizational members with program responsibility or people with a vital interest in the program. (Cousins & Earl, 1992, pp. 399-400)

Traditionally, researchers have categorized PEs according to their ultimate aim (Brisolara, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). When a major goal is to generate more social justice for disenfranchised minority groups, it is called empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996). When the participative process aims to increase the use of evaluation results through the involvement of intended users, it is known as PPE (Brisolara, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). In this study, we focus on PPE, which uses a partnership process to reinforce the use of evaluation findings. We conceptualize PE as described by Turnbull: "generally used to describe situations where stakeholders are involved in evaluation decision-making as well as share joint responsibility for the evaluation report with an external evaluator" (Turnbull, 1999, p. 131).

Components of Existing PPE Frameworks

Greene created a framework for PPE that details the contributions of the PE process to the utilization of results (Greene, 1988). The framework originated from interviews with stakeholders. We could not find any other model specific to PPE in the literature. However, broader models of PE have been presented by Cousins (2001) and Turnbull (1999). Other researchers, although not providing a whole picture of PPE, have contributed to our understanding of PPE by adding specific factors, mechanisms, or consequences, or by confirming Cousins' framework (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Greene, 1988; MacLellan-Wright, Patten, dela Cruz, & Flaherty, 2007; Preskill, Zuckerman, & Matthews, 2003; Themessl-Huber & Grutsch, 2003; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Weaver & Cousins, 2004).

Greene's framework portrays the dynamics of results utilization in participatory processes. The process is characterized by dialogue and the diversity and role of stakeholders in the process (Greene, 1988). Greene conceptualizes process use as having cognitive, affective, and political dimensions, including such aspects as ongoing discussions and participants' feelings.

Process use contributes to a learning phase that reinforces understandings and the ownership of results and, eventually, a greater sense of obligation to follow through on the results. The results of PPE can be discussed in terms of increases in the understanding of program results, the acceptance of these results, the perceived quality of results, and the sense of responsibility on the part of stakeholders (Greene, 1988).

Cousins (2001) recently presented a PE framework that summarizes and introduces concepts related to contextual factors, process, and outcomes. In his framework, both PE and PPE, PE in general and PPE in particular, are conditioned by contextual elements. The factors and conditions relate to the evaluation context and decision/policy settings, both of which can orientate the PE process; indeed, time, resources, skills, and administrative support can all slow down or speed up the evaluation. These factors and conditions favor or impede the activities of the participatory process. The partnership process has been characterized as comprising five interactive processes (Weaver & Cousins, 2004): the locus of control for technical decision making (Champagne, Contandriopoulos, & Tanon, 2004; Themessl-Huber & Grutsch, 2003), the diversity of stakeholders selected for participation (Champagne et al., 2004; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Weaver & Cousins, 2004), the power relations among participating stakeholders (Greene, 1988), the manageability of the evaluation process with regards to time, resources, and the depth of participation of practitioners in the process (Champagne et al., 2004; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Weaver & Cousins, 2004).

Finally, processes generate a range of consequences, including the production of evaluation knowledge, the use of processes, the use of findings, and the use of knowledge (Cousins, 2001). As the evaluation is carried out, the process of the partnership unfolds at three levels (Cousins, 2001): individual (Greene, 1988; Taut & Alkin, 2003), group, and organizational level. And this generates three types of findings use: conceptual, instrumental, and symbolic (Cousins, 2001; Weiss, 1981).

Although Cousins' (2001) framework details factors and defines participative activities, it does not provide much detail about the mechanisms underlying the relationships between process and consequences. Moreover, process use is represented at the same level as use of findings. We believe it would be more accurate to represent process use throughout the process activities as a variable that develops over time. As PPE aims to enhance the use of findings, we would complement Cousins' framework by adding the stated aim of PPE.

Cousins, Goh, Clark, and Lee (2004) presented a framework of evaluative inquiry based on the organizational learning system concept. The organization's support structures (rewards, professional activities, etc.) provide the conditions for evaluative inquiries. During the evaluation, process use reinforces the evaluative capacities of the organization and vice versa. In this model, evaluation is embedded in the organizational context of the nonevaluators' team, whereas our model extends the PPE framework to include both evaluators and nonevaluators.

Another researcher studied the causal processes of PE using an equation model derived from the results of a questionnaire. Turnbull (1999) explained the use of PE (instrumental, symbolic, and participation efficacy) with two variables: (1) the level of participation preevaluation and (2) the influence in decision making during the evaluation process. Both level of participation and influence are conditioned by the participative climate of PE, that is, the perceptions of participants as to whether workplace controversy is positive.

The variable *participation efficacy* proposed by Turnbull (1999) regroups many of the consequences of evaluation presented by Cousins (2001; process results, outputs, outcomes), Greene (1988; learning, understandings, ownership of results) and by Cousins et al. (2004; goal attainment). Participatory efficacy is defined as a broad outcome concept that includes evaluation knowledge, evaluation use, results knowledge, and use of findings.

Similarly, the variables that define participatory climate, such as *constructive controversy* and *workplace considerations for controversy*, are conditions that Cousins classified under *policy settings* and that Cousins et al. (2004) define as *employee support for the mission* and *culture for experimentation* in their framework. Similarly, the variables *level* and *influence of participation* are related to Cousins' (2001) *interactive processes*, to Cousins et al.'s *participation,* and to some of Greene's (1988) PE-process elements. Turnbull's (1999) work provides empirical support for Cousins' framework, along with valuable details on the participatory climate aspect. Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences between the four identified frameworks, some of which are centered predominantly on individuals, whereas others are extraindividual in nature.

Building a New PPE Framework

Apart from Greene's (1988) empirically grounded PPE framework, Cousins' (2001) PE conceptual framework, Cousins et al.'s (2004) conceptual and empirical framework, and Turnbull's (1999) tested model of PE, there is little other relevant published research in the PE field. We will now extract the main ideas of these frameworks and models to complement the previously cited models.

Cousins and Whitmore (1998) insisted that PPE needs a trigger to start: the need to improve a program, project, or policy. Once the trigger is present, two teams are constituted: a team of evaluator(s) and a team of nonevaluators/practitioners. Each group of actors must exhibit specific characteristics if PPE is to be successful: Evaluators need to develop technical evaluation abilities as well as interpersonal abilities (Greene, 1988; Preskill et al., 2003), whereas nonevaluators require a commitment to the evaluation (Greene, 1988). Furthermore, both teams interact in a partnership (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Greene, 1988), and there is stakeholder involvement in evaluative decision making.

PE is specific in the sense that learning is believed to develop over the partnership, enabling practitioners to learn how to think and act evaluatively (MacLellan-Wright et al., 2007; Patton, 1998). Such evaluation knowledge is constructed over time to reinforce the use of evaluation findings (Torres & Preskill, 2001). Evaluation knowledge that is responsive to practitioners' concerns and credible and diffused in a timely fashion fosters the use of evaluation findings, thereby facilitating an informed decision about the problem under investigation.

A final key concept is that PPE aims to enhance the use of evaluation results in answering the initial trigger; instrumental use may be more frequent than symbolic or conceptual use.

Based on this brief literature review of PE, in particular PPE, we propose a theory for PPE and represent it in a preliminary model (Figure 1). As we are interested in the mechanisms underlying the relationships between activities and consequences, as well as the mechanisms underlying the various consequences of PPE, we need a framework that focuses on the details of consequences and activities. Given this need, we believe that a combination of the detailed conceptualization of activities and consequences from Cousins' framework (2001), the sequence learning-understanding-ownership-obligation for action in Greene's framework (1988), and the embedding of organization and evaluation structures/conditions in Cousins et al.'s (2004) framework is better suited to our purposes than is Turnbull's model (1999). Our framework, therefore, builds on the work of Cousins and Cousins et al. for factors and conditions, although there are additions from Themessl-Huber and Grutsch (2003) and Champagne et al. (2004) for partnership activities, from Preskill et al. (2003) and Patton (1998) for learning process use, from Torres and Preskill (2001) for the construction of knowledge over time, and from Greene for the various use of findings.

Table 1
Comparison of Available PPE Frameworks

Framework	Greene (1988)	Cousins (2001)	Turnbull (1999)	Cousins, Goh, Clarke, & Lee (2004)
Main focus	Contributions of PE process to the utilization of results	Participatory evaluation framework	Causal processes of participatory evaluation	Evaluative inquiry into the organizational culture
Conditions	Not mentioned	Evaluation context, decision/policy settings	Participative climate	Organizational support structures: -reward systems -professional development activities -communication structures -evaluative inquiry Organizational learning capacities: -culture of experimentation -employee support for mission -evaluation capacity (skills, knowledge, and logic)
Process characteristics/mechanisms	Dialogue Diversity of stakeholders Role of stakeholders	Locus of control for technical decision Diversity of stakeholders Power relations among stakeholders Manageability of evaluation process Depth of participation	Level of participation preevaluation Influence of decision making during the process	Participation Purpose (summative/formative) Choice of method Internal/external Evaluative capacity building
Process results/process use	Learning phase Understanding Ownership of results	Production of evaluation knowledge Use of processes	Instrumental Symbolic Participation efficacy	Organizational consequences: -shared representation -questioning, decision making, goal attainment -evaluation consequences: -process use
Results/use of findings	Increased understanding of program results Acceptance of results Perceived quality of results Sense of responsibility	Conceptual Instrumental Symbolic	Instrumental use Symbolic use Participation efficacy	Organizational consequences: -shared representation, questioning, decision making -goal attainment–evaluation consequences: knowledge production, use of findings

Note: PE = participatory evaluation; PPE = practical participatory evaluation.

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Figure 1
Our Preliminary Model of PPE
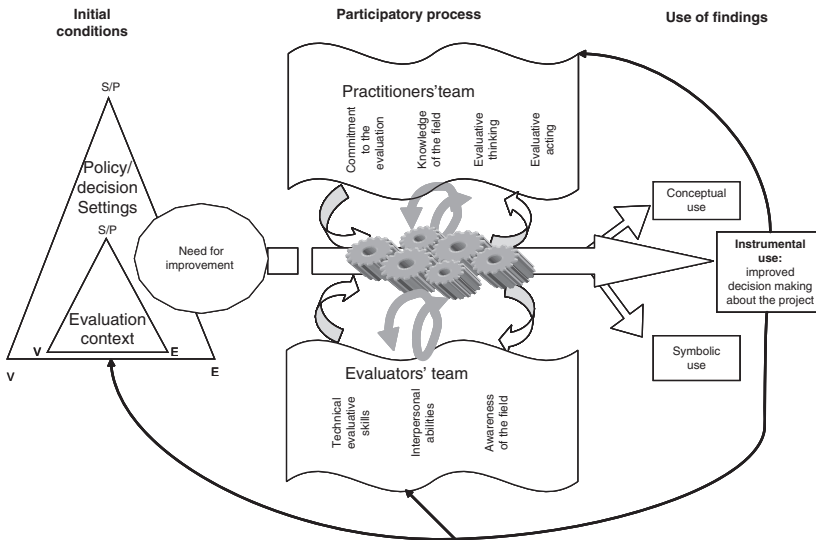
Note: S/P = structures and processes; E = past experiences; V = values.
Source: This model is inspired by Cousins and contains additions from Greene, Preskill, Patton, Turnbull, Taut, Themessl-Huber, Champagne, Torres, and MacLellan-Wright, whose works are cited throughout the article.

The initial conditions presented by Cousins (2001) as the evaluation context and the broader category of decision/policy settings are reformulated in Figure 1. The evaluation context can be described as a subcontext within general policy/decision settings. The general policy decision context of the organization to which practitioners and evaluators belong (they can be two distinct organizations or a single one for internal evaluation approaches) can be characterized by its policy/decision structures and processes, the values of the organization and past experiences. Similarly, the evaluation context of an organization can include its structure and processes, values, and past experiences.

This section of the proposed framework has a lot in common with the framework of Cousins et al. (2004). However, we wanted to highlight the dynamic and temporal evolution of some variables throughout the evaluation process. Therefore, we distinguish between initial conditions, processes and results, and keeping the evaluation context within the general policy/decision settings.

Structures and processes in policy settings. These could be related to Cousins' communication structures (2001), whereas processes are related to teamwork and professional development activities. Values of policy settings relate to reward systems and culture of experimentation. Structures and processes of the evaluation correspond to participation and choice of method. Values of the evaluation refer to the purpose of the evaluation. Finally, experiences of the evaluation relate to evaluation knowledge and logic.

When the trigger is put into action, the partnership process, influenced by the policy/decision settings and the evaluation context, starts between evaluators and nonevaluators around

the topic of interest: the object of the evaluation (horizontal arrow). These three components of PPE—practitioners (upper wave), evaluators (lower wave), and object of evaluation (horizontal arrow)—interact during the various activities. The interaction process is pictured as having wheels. Exchanges (curved arrows) occur between evaluators, who have an initial set of technical evaluation skills and interpersonal abilities, and practitioners, who have an initial set of knowledge about the field and commitment to the evaluation. The three components are transformed through the interactive process: Evaluators somehow integrate some field logics and eventually develop new technical evaluative skills and new interpersonal abilities, especially during their first PPE experience. Similarly, practitioners somehow integrate some evaluation logics and eventually acquire new knowledge about the field, and the object of evaluation is adjusted according to the sensitized evidence generated by PPE. Each element of the participatory process, either from the practitioners' team or the evaluators' team, plays the role of prerequisite to the participatory process and each element can be part of process use.

The practitioners' team provides some input into the participatory process and receives some feedback. The feedback produces either positive or negative loops that reinforce or impede their actions throughout the process. Similarly, the evaluators' team provides inputs and is a recipient of the process. Both groups of actors interact through the interface constituted by the object of evaluation, positioned in the middle of Figure 1 and intertwined in the wheels of the process. The final decision should readjust the object of evaluation, either via a feedback loop to practitioners or evaluators and/or via a feedback loop to factors and conditions. As the main primary focus of PPE, and our main interest, is instrumental use; we have made instrumental use central, although we do include conceptual and symbolic uses.

Missing Links

The available literature on PPE focuses on characterizing the factors that shape the partnership process and tries to define and measure partnership. However, as some researchers have acknowledged about research-based knowledge, major deficiencies in our understanding of the link between participation and use remain (Dudley, 1993; Holdaway, 1986).

There is currently little, if anything, known about the mechanisms underlying PPE theory. In fact, we lack knowledge about the mechanisms behind some very basic aspects of PPE:

- How do practitioners develop knowledge in evaluation?
- How do practitioners think and act evaluatively?
- How does the evaluators' team increase its knowledge of the field?
- How does the partnership generated improve decision making about the object of evaluation?

In the following section, we will explore the missing or implicit links in greater detail. We will focus on the relationships between partnerships during the participatory process and consequences (all kinds), process use, and use of findings. Our goal is to understand the mechanisms that (1) generate actionable knowledge and (2) govern the use of the knowledge generated. To do so, we focus on learning theories and knowledge utilization theories. A mechanism is defined as a sequence of steps by which something is done or comes into being.

Rationale for Using Learning Theories and Knowledge Utilization Theories

Learning theories and knowledge utilization theories were chosen on the basis of the criteria suggested by Weiss (2000): stakeholder beliefs, plausibility, uncertainty, and centrality.

It has been shown that stakeholders believe learning is a part of PPE (Bowen & Martens, 2006; Forss et al., 2002; Rebien, 1996; Taut, 2007), and researchers have mentioned learning as a central mechanism (Cousins, 2001; Greene, 1988). However, a few studies cast doubt on the centrality of learning theories (Reeve & Peerbhoy, 2007). Knowledge transfer theories were chosen as they are believed to be part of PPE. Indeed, evaluation capacity building (ECB) has been demonstrated (Baker & Bruner, 2006; Bowen & Martens, 2006) even though uncertainty remains (Lennie, 2005). The mechanisms for each theory were chosen on the basis of social science literature specific to these learning and knowledge utilization theories, as well as on the basis of theories cited in the evaluation literature.

We decided to examine learning theories as a way of understanding the mechanisms underlying the relationship between partnership and knowledge co-construction for several reasons. First of all, Cousins, who initiated the PE movement, refers to organizational learning as a cornerstone of the PE approach in one of his seminal articles (Cousins & Earl, 1992). He conceptualized organizational learning as a way of generating common representative maps of organizational processes, events, and perspectives of individuals in an organization. As individuals act according to their own maps rather than rational events, the collective action in an organization is facilitated through the development of common maps. This development arises through a process of learning. Cousins refers to Argyris' sociocognitive learning theory, which holds that either minor adjustments of existing images can be made or maps can be altered (Argyris, 1998). One possible action in an organization is PE and, just like any other action, it would proceed through learning processes.

We also decided to examine learning processes because other work on evaluation has found it to be useful. Preskill refers to them implicitly (Preskill et al., 2003), Taut refers to learning theories in general (Taut & Brauns, 2003), Preskill mentions transformative and constructivist learning theories (Preskill & Torres, 2000), and others refer to capacity building (Beere, 2005; King, 2007).

It is useful to identify the mechanisms generating co-constructed knowledge because varying levels of PPE implementation could be explained by these mechanisms and because we could perhaps improve PPE by taking actions that target these mechanisms. For explanatory and improvement purposes, the mechanisms are worth identifying.

In PE, it is common for PE frameworks and theoretical discussions about learning theories or learning concepts to not mention knowledge utilization, knowledge transfer, or research transfer theories. Preskill, in her discussion on reconceptualizing what "use" means, writes: "We are interested in the use of evaluation to facilitate learning" (Preskill & Torres, 2000, p. 25).

However, knowledge utilization/use theories have been chosen when assessing the mechanisms underlying co-constructed knowledge and decision making for several reasons. First, learning is not the ultimate goal, especially in the case of PPE; rather, the approach addresses problem solving and informs further decisions (Weaver & Cousins, 2004). Second, although the first chronological step during partnership may be to generate knowledge through learning, the knowledge acquired needs to be translated into action if a decision on a project or program is to result.

In general, then, a combination of learning theories and knowledge utilization theories seems appropriate when trying to explain the mechanisms underlying PPE. Learning theories are numerous and include the following: cognitive, humanist, behavioral, and constructivist theories (Raby & Viola, 2007). So too are knowledge utilization theories, for example, problem-solving, enlightenment, knowledge-driven, strategic, and deliberative theories (Lemieux-Charles & Champagne, 2004). The field of knowledge utilization is still in its infancy, focused on empirical research into conditions (National Information Agency Society,

Figure 2
Hypothetical Model of PPE Rationales
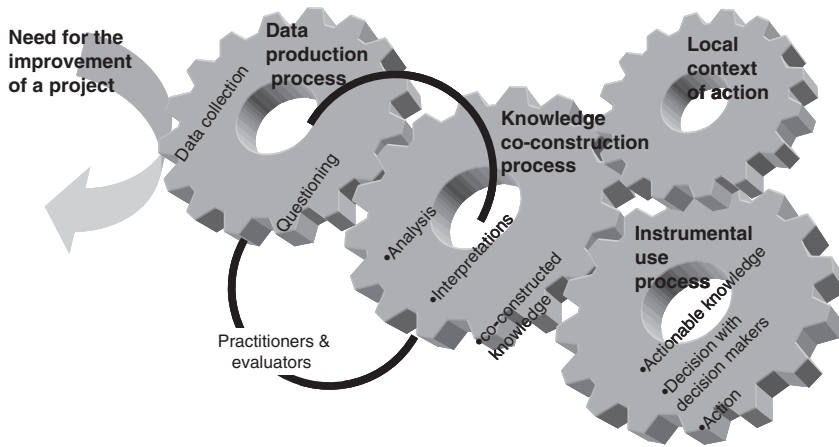
Note: The model is pictured as having wheels because we believe that the strength of one step reinforces the next step, whereas the absence of one step precludes advancement (rolling) to the next one. It also effectively captures the idea that a process need not be completed before the next one is started.

2004), and consisting of fragmented frameworks (Landry, Amara, & Lamari, 2001). To explain some of the mechanisms underlying PPE, we need to select the theories that best explain and integrate the specificities of the PPE approach.

We have built a hypothetical model of the mechanisms underpinning the relationships between partnership and consequences. After presenting this model, we will examine the conceptual and empirical evidence for this model.

Description of the Proposed Theory

The model representing the theory is presented in Figure 2.

General Points

PPE involves responding to a particular trigger: the need to find a solution for a problem that has not yet been resolved (Figure 1). To tackle the problem, external as well as internal expertise is required: Evaluators and practitioners collaborate in an interactive and reflexive dialogue throughout the data production process. While data are collected, questions emerge and are answered by both actors when necessary (hence the ring around "data collection process"). The data collected are then discussed, analyzed, and interpreted in light of the practitioners' knowledge of the field and the evaluators' knowledge of scientific design limitations (hence the ring around "knowledge co-construction process").

During the discussion of evaluation results, the co-constructed knowledge can be translated into decisions relevant to the specific context. External constraints will condition the scope of the co-constructed knowledge that is proposed as actionable knowledge. Decisions are then made about which actionable knowledge should be carried through into an actual action targeting the initial problem.

This process of knowledge co-construction is supported by the literature on learning theories. The process by which co-constructed knowledge is transformed into actionable knowledge and decision making is supported by the literature on knowledge utilization.

Central Concepts

The framework consists of four key concepts.

1. Interactive data production. This is the process by which data are collected in collaboration with evaluators and practitioners, taking into account the values of each actor, including scientific rigor, relevance, and feasibility within the given the context. This concept parallels the first steps of the knowledge value chain (Landry, Amara, Pablos-Mendes, Shademani, & Gold, 2006) and the initial process of the critical inquiry circle (Rossman & Rallis, 2000).
2. Knowledge co-construction. This is the process by which data are transformed into co-constructed knowledge in a reflexive and dialogic way. This concept parallels the know-how step (Landry et al., 2006) and the steps of data analysis and interpretation by evaluator and program leaders in the critical inquiry cycle (Rossman & Rallis, 2000). We prefer the term *co-construction* to *knowledge sharing* or *collective knowledge building*. These latter terms refer to the identical knowledge that emerges when actors share a process. However, it is not obvious that shared activities lead to common knowledge (Caracelli, 2000). We prefer the concept of constructed knowledge where practitioners and evaluators each contribute a piece to the puzzle and generate co-constructed knowledge.
3. Local context of action. This involves the environmental conditions that affect the action. These conditions are external to the PE process and are interacting variables during the process. They refer to some of the initial conditions that could affect the PPE process (Figure 1) as well as other emergent factors such as the arrival of a new stakeholder.
4. Instrumental use. This is the process by which potential knowledge is used to make decisions on action. This knowledge is called actionable knowledge. The goal of the decision is to solve part of the initial problem that triggered the PPE.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Interactive communication between evaluators and practitioners during the data collection process favors the knowledge co-construction process.
Hypothesis 2: The knowledge co-construction process reinforces the use of results.
Hypothesis 3: The knowledge co-construction process and the local context of action act in concert to generate instrumental use.

Support for the Proposed Theory

In this section, we will present, for each hypothesis, theoretical and empirical evidence from the literature that supports our theory. We obtained our empirical studies by searching the ISI Web of Science and Sage databases for the following keywords related to PPE in titles or abstracts: participation, participatory evaluation, participatory approach, process use, evaluation use, evaluation utilization, organizational learning, and derivatives. We selected articles in the field of health, and in the field of research when they referred to use of results, knowledge, evidence, and derivatives in the title or results. Google searches were also made. Five empirical articles related to learning or knowledge transfer theories met our criteria.

Hypothesis 1: Interactive communication between evaluators and practitioners during the data production process favors the knowledge co-construction process.

Theoretical Support

Hypothesis 1 is supported by socio-constructivist learning theories that assume active learners proceed through the construction of their knowledge through interactions with other individuals and the environment during a reflexive process (Vygotsky, 1978). Interactions with others as well as reflection are core components of socio-constructivism and are factors that explain the construction of knowledge. Cooperation to produce socio-constructed knowledge is advocated by fourth-generation evaluation approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In the conceptual literature on evaluation, the concepts of interaction and reflexivity are invoked when authors consider learning to be a process of interpreting and making sense within a social context (Preskill & Torres, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000).

Empirical Evidence

Two empirical studies reinforce the link between interaction and knowledge co-construction. In one case study of PE involving a community economic development organization, interviews with participating stakeholders revealed the following characteristics: the democratic and collective nature of the process, increased value pluralism, individual and collective reflection, and the generation of critical thinking through a process of evaluation (Papineau & Kiely, 1996). The advantages perceived by the stakeholders centered on the open dialogue and interactive communication. The study also pointed to changes in knowledge and skills. Although collective reflection and knowledge acquisition were mentioned, no direct link between interactions and knowledge was established.

Forss et al. (2002), in their study of process use in two Nordic case studies, suggested that evaluation, including PPE, creates shared understanding or what we refer to, in part, as co-constructed knowledge. This shared understanding is significantly influenced by the quality of communication.

Although empirical support for the mechanisms we propose is emerging, there is currently little support for Hypothesis 1 in the theoretical literature.

Hypothesis 2: The knowledge co-construction process reinforces the use of results.

Theoretical Support

Knowledge can be transformed into potential actionable knowledge if it makes sense to users after having been analyzed and interpreted. First of all, sense is made out of data collected via discussion between evaluators and practitioners. Then, using the practitioner's knowledge of the field, knowledge produced is integrated into the context to generate actionable knowledge (Landry et al., 2006). Hypothesis 2 is supported by knowledge utilization theories, especially deliberative knowledge utilization models (Lemieux-Charles & Champagne, 2004). Deliberative theory assumes that knowledge co-produced by scientists and practitioners is used. The use of knowledge emerges from cooperation and interaction. Open debate characterizes the deliberative process during which co-production can emerge and results can be used.

The conceptual literature on evaluation supports the link between knowledge coconstruction and the use of results. Cousins and Leithwood (1993) described a knowledge utilization conceptual framework that contains an arrow running from ongoing contact as an interactive process to knowledge utilization, whereas other researchers see the specific link between knowledge and use as a natural shift in the inquiry cycle (Rossman & Rallis, 2000).

Empirical Evidence

Cousins and Leithwood (1993) tested their framework by asking school principals who participated in the project to fill out a questionnaire on the implementation of recommendations. They found that ongoing contacts explained a modest but significant amount of variation in use.

To date, there is very little empirical evidence to support Hypothesis 2.

> *Hypothesis 3:* The knowledge co-construction process and the local context of action act in concert to generate instrumental use.

Theoretical Support

The local context of action for an evaluation usually includes such elements as the initial contingencies, monetary resources, and time (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006). Hypothesis 3 is supported by knowledge utilization theories, especially the work of Backer. Backer stated: "Utilization occurs as a by-product of what potential adopters are already doing" (1991, p. 234). Utilization is not an entirely new addition, but it should follow a stream that is already in place (including the existing context) to reinforce utilization.

The conceptual literature on evaluation, particularly performance measurement, conceptualizes resources as a factor that enhances policy implementation (de Lancer Julnes & Holzer, 2001). Researchers also recommend that we focus on the decision contexts of potential users (Leviton, 2003) and on recognizing the influence of macrosystems on use (Conner, 1998). Boggs (1992) warned that knowledge transfer research should not rely on bipolar models involving just scientists and practitioners. He believes that models must include a third actor in the decision-making process: the decision maker. All three parties may be viewed as producers or users of knowledge. Our proposed model, therefore, introduces a decision step with the involvement of a third actor, which we have termed *decision with decision makers*.

Empirical Evidence

De Lancer Julnes and Holzer (2001) tested their theoretical assumptions with a questionnaire sent to employees; their results confirmed the links between resources and utilization of results on policy implementation. Health policy makers perceived use as determined by timely relevance (a contextual factor belonging to our category, that is, local context of action) and personal contact (Innvaer, Vist, Trommald, & Oxman, 2002), which can refer to interactions during the coconstructed knowledge process.

We found no study of PPE that could support or contradict Hypothesis 3, although the policy literature (de Lancer Julnes & Holzer, 2001) supports Hypothesis 3.

In general, our model of the underpinnings of PPE (Figure 2) is supported to a greater degree by theoretical work than it is by empirical research.

Our overall model for PPE (Figure 3) was inspired by our literature review (Figure 1) and the proposed theories underpinning PPE (Figure 2).

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed a theory for PPE that is based on the existing literature and tries to partially remedy the gaps in our understanding of PPE. We have created a model to represent this new theory. The mechanisms underpinning PPE were extracted from learning

**Figure 3
A Proposed Model for PPE**
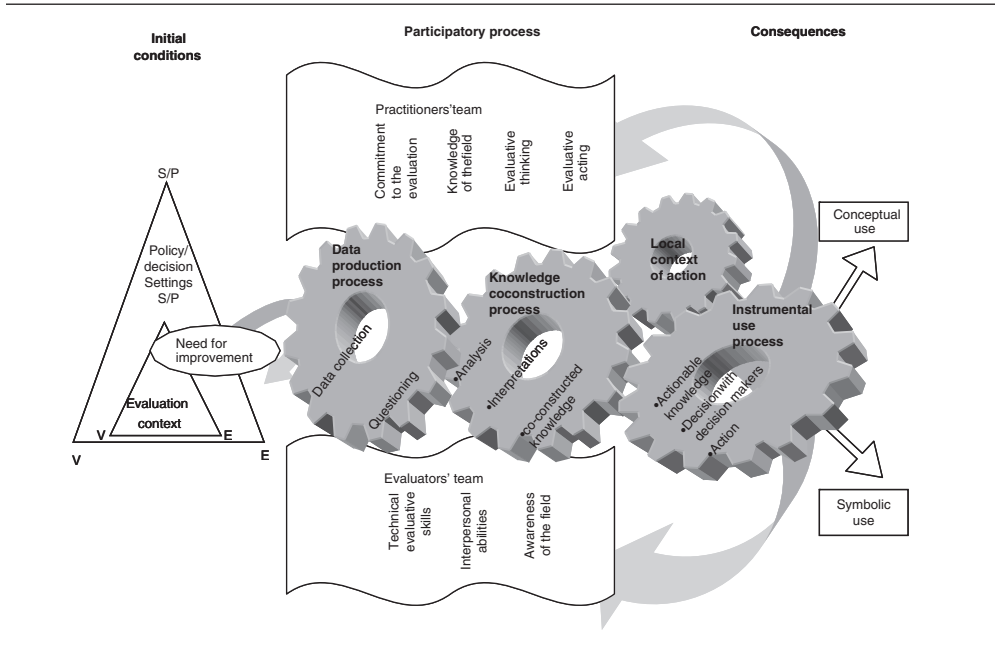
theories and knowledge utilization theories. Conceptual work in the field of evaluation and policy making corroborate our theory. Further empirical work is needed to test and adjust the theory.

Limits of the Proposed Theory

One could argue that the model is not about PPE in general, but rather about one type of PPE with a specific level of participation. However, we believe that we have borrowed from learning and knowledge utilization theories that can apply to varying amounts of participation within PPE.

Apart from examining the mechanisms of PPE, this article provides empirical evidence extracted mainly from structured organizations such as government agencies, social work agencies, and private companies. There is little in the literature referring to PPE with communities and smaller groups. This is understandable because the topic is PPE and not empowerment evaluation approaches.

One could also argue that PPE does not focus solely on instrumental use and that it could trigger symbolic and conceptual use too. Refining the proposed model could address this issue. Our choice was guided by the primary aim stated for PPE: improving decision making rather than empowering minority groups. We do not deny the existence of other aims.

As is the case with any graphical modeling, simplifications have been made and important elements may not have been given their full place. For example, feedback loops are essential components of interactive and dialogic PPE even though they may not appear so central in our graphic representation. Moreover, PPE processes are not linear. They change over time and, therefore, cannot be fully represented with a linear representation (Williams & Iman, 2006). In complex situations, such elements as feedback loops and emergent components are

integral to the model. We decided not to overwhelm the model with signs representing emergent situations; this follows the recommendations of some system-thinking theories. However, we included feedback loops to and from both group of actors. For clarity, only one arrow exits or enters each group of actors. However, we believe that throughout the process, the entry-exit dynamic is continuously at work.

Our theory is based on selected theories and mechanisms that are currently only slightly supported by empirical studies. The explanatory power of this theory needs to be strengthened. One way would be to study PPE over time to unveil proposed chains of action. Another way would be to predict and investigate alternative chains of action.

Importance of the Proposed Theory

Work is currently underway to develop indicators to assess the effectiveness of PE (Morrissey, 2000). It would be interesting to relate these indicators to the concepts that we propose in our theory of PPE.

Moreover, we believe the proposed theory can help with the following:

- To help explain the variability in the use of evaluation results (Cousins, Clark, Goh, & Lee, 2005): The identified components and mechanisms of PPE can be followed in detail during the implementation of PPE, allowing for the improvement of PPE in real time. More difficult steps such as data collection could, therefore, receive particular attention thus strengthening PPE.
- To identify gaps in the developing research field on PPE: For example, few empirical research works have examined PPE from the point of view of the evaluator even though the evaluator or the evaluator team is a key component in PE (Figure 1).
- To guide the design of additional research: Specific research on components of mechanisms could be worth pursuing to strengthen and/or modify the theory.
- To guide efforts to synthesize research on evaluation: The theory could provide a framework for integrating new findings and identifying concepts worth pursuing.
- To serve a knowledge management function through generating modifications, additions, and subtractions to the framework as new knowledge emerges: The theory could provide an initial template for future research and support reflection on what elements to retain versus remove, thereby generating reflexive knowledge on PPE.

Proposals for Future Research to Strengthen the Proposed Theory

The empirical evidence that we present was mainly taken from the few studies that have used surveys or questionnaires and focused on people's perceptions. More empirical studies are required to delve in detail about these perceptions. Further systematic studies as well as other types of empirical proof would be useful. The PPE process could be studied by focusing on one component at a time, such as the dynamics of practitioner commitment, or changes in the evaluative knowledge of practitioners throughout the process. Phenomenon related to the evaluators' team would also be worth investigating. How does an evaluator's knowledge of the field fluctuate throughout the PPE process? Does the evaluator's acquired knowledge impact the recommendations?

Another interesting line of research could focus on what variables explain the varying success of PPE in different contexts. As the interacting variables may be different for practitioners and evaluators' teams, we suggest studying variables at the team level: What variables influence evaluators' awareness of the field? What factors influence practitioners' evaluative thinking? Evaluative acting?

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