THE INFLUENCE OF PROGRAM THEORY-BASED EVALUATION ON THE USE OF EVALUATION INFORMATION:
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Murdoch University
2008
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

____________________________
Sheri Lee Hudson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In particular, I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr. Ralph Straton, for his gentle guidance, patience, perseverance and understanding throughout this journey. Your encouragement, knowledge-sharing and dedicated mentoring is greatly appreciated.

My grateful thanks are extended to Dr. Richard Cummings, my associate supervisor, who has been central in moving this research along to completion. His continual assistance, support, and critical comments have been very much appreciated.

This study would not have been possible without the co-operation of those connected with the evaluation studies which were the focus of the investigation. Many people made themselves available for lengthy interviews in which they provided thoughtful responses. They were tolerant of the detailed questioning involved in the conduct of this investigation, and willingly gave of their time. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

I would like to thank Mr. Steven Newman for proof-reading the entire thesis not once, but twice.

My deep appreciation is extended to my many friends who accompanied me in this journey. It would have been a very lonely road without their support and encouragement to light my way.

I am sincerely and deeply grateful for my three sons, Christian, Cole and Connor, for keeping me grounded and insisting I complete this journey.

Lastly, I will pay tribute to my Gramma, who passed away during this work, for teaching me everything she was suppose to.
ABSTRACT

Theory-based evaluation approaches have been promoted by program evaluators as enhancing program-related knowledge and decision-making. Although a substantial amount of conceptual work related to theory-based evaluation studies has been undertaken in the past thirty years, little empirical research has been completed to investigate the influence of a theory-based program evaluation on utilisation of the evaluation’s information. The research reported here investigated the relationship between the degree to which program theory was used as the basis for an evaluation study, and the nature and extent of the utilisation of the information resulting from the study.

A model of factors thought to influence the use of program evaluation studies and the information they yield was developed and investigated. The ‘program theory’ factor was concerned with the influence of the use of both ‘causative’ program theory and ‘implementation’ program theory in an evaluation on the use of the evaluation information, the primary variable considered by this study. The model also includes the main factors found to facilitate the utilisation of evaluation information, identified in earlier empirical research by Alkin and Associates (1985), Cousins and Leithwood (1986, 1993), Cummings (1997), Leviton and Hughes (1981), Hudson-Mabbs (1993), Pawson and Tilley (1997) and Preskill and Torres (1997). The other factors include the characteristics of the learning environment present in the organisation responsible for the delivery of the program, the stakeholders of the evaluation, the evaluation team responsible for undertaking the evaluation, the evaluation study and its processes, stakeholder involvement in the study, stakeholder commitment to the study (pre- and post-study), stakeholder involvement in the program theory elaboration process, and program theory use in the final report. The logic of the conceptual model underpinned and guided the design, methods, instrument development, data analysis and structural model development for this research.
Concurrent empirical case studies of three program evaluation studies were undertaken with a view to identifying the extent of theory use and the utilisation of the information from each evaluation. The study adopted a longitudinal design and used structural equation modelling to analyse the model. Qualitative data were used to gain further insight into the study findings.

Although this investigation has not been able to confirm that a greater use of information is associated with a greater use of program theory in an evaluation study, interesting interactions between program theory and other predictor variables, such as the characteristics of the evaluation study have been identified. Furthermore, this research provides insight into the vulnerability of an evaluation study to contextual factors, which are often outside the control of the evaluation team. It also provides further evidence of the importance of stakeholder involvement in an evaluation study and the extent to which stakeholders are influenced by the evaluation information.
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