



The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation Thursday Talks

“Seeking Evidence of Causal Linkages: Alternative Approaches”

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Part One: Overview

Carlisle Levine opened the talk with a discussion on the difficulties of finding and reporting causal linkages. She shed light on the issue of finding whether interventions are having an effect when they are designed to change on a generational time scale. Do we have time to wait and see? Do our donors? We also must be aware of the fact that our work can be undone in the same time frame, so how do we effectively evaluate to insure feedback reaches the interveners in a timely manner?

During the discussion, Carlisle focused on two evaluation approaches for finding the causal links between the interventions and both intended and unintended changes: Contribution Analysis and Most Significant Change.

Contribution Analysis

Developed by John Mayne

Key steps:

1. Set out the attribution problem to be addressed
2. Develop a theory of change and risks to it
3. Gather the existing evidence on the theory of change
4. Assemble and assess the contribution story, and challenges to it
5. Seek out additional evidence
6. Revise and strengthen the contribution story

Carlisle discussed the importance of developing the questions for participants by starting with the outcome. By asking about the outcomes, you allow the participant to make the link to the intervention, creating more accurate data. If you began the questioning with the intervention, the participant may change their answers to reflect the question and not their experiences.

Additionally gaining access to the external stakeholders can be difficult but they are the key to developing the theory of change you are evaluating. However, as the evaluator you must be cognizant of the external stakeholders' biases when working with them.

Most Significant Change

Developed by Davies and Dart





The technique includes ten steps, however Carlisle lists only the first seven:

1. How to start and raise interest
2. Defining the domains of change (family, community, etc.)
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting Significant Change stories
5. Selecting the most significant of the stories
6. Feeding back the results of the selection process
7. Verification of stories



The most important qualification to the Most Significant Change technique is that it is inductive and should be used along with another method. As with Contribution Analysis, Carlisle discussed the importance of not leading the participant by mentioning the intervention when asking about their most significant change.

So what do you do after you have collected the most significant stories? One can form panels and discuss stories further creating more detailed portraits of change to feedback into the intervention for learning. One can also look into larger meta-themes that cross between stories as a way to find new areas of exploration.



Part Two: Question-Answer Section

Participants in the Thursday Talk posed many questions. The following includes the questions posed, and a summary of the answers. For Carlisle's full responses, please listen to the [recording](#).

1. **Strength of Evaluation:** How strong are these evaluations, how do they compare the RCTs for example?

Carlisle Levine: The quality of the evaluation determines its strength. With Contribution Analysis, it is important to follow up findings with a deductive analysis. Additionally a valid theory of change with lots of external input strengthens the method. Finally specificity and follow-up questions allow for finer accuracy and a stronger understanding of the process. Randomized Control Trials (RCT), are used for experimental and quasi-experimental design. These approaches answer question framed around 'Does A cause B?' and have various issues due to the need for control groups.

2. **Weight or degree of contribution:** How do you look at weight or degree of contribution when you do contribution analysis?

Carlisle Levine: By asking the participants and external stakeholders.

3. **Collection of MSC stories:** Could you talk more about the collection of MSC stories? How do you ensure detailed, accurate stories of change and not simply "success stories"?





Carlisle Levine: The key is trust, and follow up questions. Details about the participants' answers help ensure accuracy and fine grain detail. Also having evaluators, who are from outside the organization, can help create trust between the participant and the evaluator. Finally, follow up with validation, asking others in the community who may have seen the change to confirm the story.

4. **Resource Issues:** Can you speak to the question of resources in Contribution Analysis and MSC?

Carlisle Levine: The methods take significant time, human resources and financial costs. Doing them well is more important that scaling back to fit a budget so choose the method that fits the questions you're asking but don't skimp on resources either. If you can't afford a method, look into other methods.

5. **Trust:** How much does the interviewer's trustworthiness matter?

Carlisle Levine: The trustworthiness of the interviewer comes out in the evaluation because the participants know when you are from the intervention's organization. The trustworthiness of the intervention's organization has a direct impact on your evaluation as the responses will be affected.

6. **Time:** Can you give an example of the time it took for one process?

Carlisle Levine: The general time line is several weeks, but is dependent on the location and accessibility of the program.

However, usually it is one day of questions, then the evaluator reflects for a day, before returning for another day of clarification questions. After this begins the validation process which could take up to a week.

7. **Applicable Tools:** Are there applicable tools with which to structure and conduct an assessment of a Theory of Change?

Carlisle Levine: Just google 'theories of change.' They key questions to ask your self are, "why did we think this?" and "did that assumption hold?"

8. **Lack of Change:** What about the most significant LACK of change that was intended? Isn't there important learning that might be missed by focusing just on the positive?

Carlisle Levine: Yes! Keep evaluators from asking about positive change alone.

