External validity and the portability of findings from there to here

Clues on what to look for and how in development

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Agenda

• What is it?

• Why worry?

• Illustrative example using a theory of change
Punchlines

• External validity is about more than external replications, multi-site studies
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• Theory (of Change) is what allows empirical findings grounded ‘here’ to be potentially useful to those making decisions ‘there’
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• Theory (of Change) is what allows empirical findings grounded ‘here’ to be potentially useful to those making decisions ‘there’

• Research designs (both monitoring and evaluation) and reporting guided by a Theory of Change and “pre-mortem” thinking
  – Allows others to better make assessments of whether what worked ‘there’ can work ‘here’2009
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Where’s ‘here’ and ‘there’?

• Many facets of ‘context’ or ‘setting’

• Need to think about which variations are ‘critical’ in allowing a programme to move forward
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  – Scale

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What’s impact evaluation?

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  – How do I know my programme \textit{caused} observed changes in outcomes?
What’s impact evaluation?

• An attempt to answer a *causal* question:
  – How do I know my programme *caused* observed changes in outcomes?
  – To what extent can I *attribute* observed changes in outcomes to my programme?
What’s impact evaluation?

• An attempt to answer a causal question:
  – How do I know my programme caused observed changes in outcomes?
  – To what extent can I attribute observed changes in outcomes to my programme?
  – Would the changes I observed in outcomes have occurred in the absence of my programme?
But what is external validity? (and what’s internal?)

Programme P  →  Outcome O
But what is external validity?

Programme P  Outcome O

- External applicability
- External assessability
Agenda

• What is it?

• **Why worry?**

• Illustrative example using a theory of change
Why care about there if we’re here?

- Increasing focus on using rigorous evidence (IE, SR), ‘best practices’ to inform decision-making ‘here’ about programs and policies
  - (continue, modify, expand, terminate... or rename)
  - Evidence-informed decision-making calls for evidence that is both internally and externally rigorous
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- But:
  - Often don’t have rigorous evidence from ‘here.’
  - What does it mean to be rigorous about external validity?
Issues

• Discussions on internal validity, rigor often crowd out discussion of ‘setting,’ ‘external validity’
  – Relegated to discussion sections, critique of last-resort
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• Quest for internal validity may undermine ability to make claims about transportability, applicability

• We lack counterpart tools to make assessments about external validity, applicability, assessability
  – We lack a ‘a coherent, system-level imperative’ to take external validity and claim-making seriously (Woolcock 2013)
Agenda

• What is it?
• Why worry?
• Illustrative example
Theory of change and pre-mortem

• Logframe components.

• Assumptions about why and under what conditions *implementing agents* will implement.

• Assumptions about what and under what conditions *intended beneficiaries* will participate, benefit

• Assumptions about features of the context may enable *or* block links between different logframe components.

• Assumptions about the time horizon over which outcomes should be realised.

• Expectations about the magnitude (size) of change expected and what will be considered “successful.”
Example: Twaweza (Lieberman et al)

Implicit theory of change:

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group
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Implicit theory of change:

- Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group
- Provide information about child’s school performance
- Provide information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group → Provide information about child’s school performance → Provide information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning.
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- Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group
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- Civic action to improve teachers, schools, such as meeting with teachers, organizing school activities, pressure campaigns
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Implicit theory of change:

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

Provide information about child’s school performance

Provide information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Civic action to improve teachers, schools, such as meeting with teachers, organizing school activities, pressure campaigns

Improvement in public service provision
Example: Twaweza (Lieberman et al)

- Find no treatment effect
- Engage in post-mortem thinking to create an *ex post* Theory of Change
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

Information about child’s school performance

Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Intention to take civic action

Individual civic action

Collective / community civic action

Improved public services
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

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Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

Information about child’s school performance

1 Implementers accurately transmit the intended information, materials (fidelity to protocol and/or message).

Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

1. Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

2. Information about child’s school performance

Information suggests the situation is worse than recipient’s prior perceptions.

Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

1. Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

2. Information about child’s school performance

3. Personal values and social norms of recipient lead to a sense that the problem is an important one / one worth caring about.

Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

1. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

2. Information about child’s school performance

3. Information is new to recipient.

4. Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

1. Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

2. Information about child's school performance

3. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children's learning

4. Information prescribes behaviour that recipient feels is a reasonable and appropriate response to the identified problem.

5. Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

1. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children's learning
2. Information about child’s school performance
3. Intention to take civic action

5. Information prescribes behaviour that differs from what the recipient is already doing.
6.
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

1. Information about child’s school performance
2. Intention to take civic action
3. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning
4. Personal values and social norms of recipient lead to a sense of responsibility / pressure to do something about the problem.
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

Information about child’s school performance

Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Intention to take civic action

Recipient has models of action on which to draw (for example, community history of civic (successful) civic action).
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

1. Information about child’s school performance
2. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Community has existing means, fora, infrastructure, media for organising.

Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

Information about child’s school performance

Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

Implementation capacity

Implementers accurately transmit the intended information, materials (fidelity to protocol and/or message).

Intention to take civic action
Twaweza (Lieberman et al): modified

1. Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

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3. Information about value of education, strategies for parents to improve children’s learning

4. Implementation capacity

5. 6. 7. 8. 9.

Seems like there is more going on than just concerns about implementers, implementation capacity and fidelity

Intention to take civic action
Punchline 1: onus for portability

• Woolcock (2013) says: “Burden of proof should lie with those claiming that the result is, in fact, generalizable”

• But, those making such claims require good understanding of the settings and processes that produced the evidence of interest
  – This puts some onus on researchers to systematically monitor and measure settings and processes – and to report on it
Punchline 2: multi-site studies

- External replication (trying Program P ‘here’ and a multitude of ‘there’s) will achieve external validity
- Just replicating, without learning and adapting, is probably not sufficient for those trying to make decisions in yet-unstudied “there”s
Punchlines 3 & 4: theory rocks

• Theory is what guides generalization from the specific and grounded to the more abstract and portable

• “Pre-mortem” thinking and construction of ToC – which then guides research questions, monitoring plans, questionnaire items, etc – is requisite for producing evidence ‘here’ that those ‘there’ can reasonably use for decision-making