SCOPE:
How Much Should a Good Theory Account For?

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Abstract

A key question that comes up when undertaking a theory of change, is how much can, or should, the theory account for? Should it account for factors that are beyond the control of the program? Should it account for how each outcome is brought about? This article builds on the premise that how far the theory should go depends on the purpose of the theory and the availability of resources to pursue it. Therefore, one must know what they want the theory to explain and how they want to use it, to determine the appropriate scope. The scopes in increasing order detail: narrow and shallow, broad and shallow, narrow and deep, broad and deep.

Introduction

A key question that comes up when undertaking a theory of change, is how much can, or should, the theory account for? Should it account for factors that are beyond the control of the program? Should it account for how each outcome is brought about? Should it spell out how each intervention is to be undertaken?

In the first generation of using the theory of change approach, the standards for a good theory were plausibility, feasibility and testability. This quality review looked at the logical connections portrayed by the theory and asked, "Do they make sense?" Then, the review process asked whether the program seemed like something that could be done (feasibility), and if it could be objectively evaluated (testability). What has not been part of quality review until now was whether the scope and specificity of the theory developed was appropriate to the initiative and the purpose of developing the theory.

This article explores the question of scope, which we define as how far the theory goes in explaining what is needed to bring about the long-term goal. How far the theory should go depends on the purpose of the theory. Therefore, one must know what they want the theory to explain and how they want to use it, to determine the appropriate scope. Choosing the right scope for the purpose should also be part of the review of the theory. Participants and reviewers should ask: "Does this theory tell us enough to make the decisions we need to make?"

Theories of Change for Different Purposes

As application of the theory of change approach has expanded to program planning, decisions about scope have become more complicated. The difference is due in part to the difference between developing a theory *prospectively* instead of *retrospectively*. When a theory is developed *for the purposes* of evaluation, it is portraying something that is already designed and being implemented. However, when a group gets together with a goal to bring about a certain type of change, they are starting with more of a blank slate. Of course, it is never a totally blank slate – program designers usually have a certain approach in mind, certain abilities and resources at hand, and may have a mandate from a funder. But they have more latitude than those developing a theory of change retrospectively.

Three General Purposes for Theories of Change

1. Capture an existing initiative, mainly for communication to others.
2. Plan a new initiative
3. Revisit and retool an initiative

These are not the only possible situations under which a developing a theory of change is useful, however. While it has been most common to develop theories of existing programs for evaluation, and increasingly popular to use theory of change to plan new initiatives, there is a middle ground. Many organizations with programs that have been operating for years want to develop a theory of change to help them understand and possibly change, what they do. In this case, they are not trying to only portray what they currently do, nor are they starting from scratch. They want to revisit long-term goals and their beliefs about what is need to change them.

In addition to these three general purposes, there are other reasons that organizations develop theories of change, but the issues about scope raised by the three main purposes described here will be applicable to them as well. I believe that, in fact, other purposes will be sub-categories of these three. For example, some groups want to take an existing strategic plan and move to a theory of change. In that case, they are probably most similar to the revisit and retool an initiative purpose, as they are starting with an existing program, but want to fill in gaps, and revisit goals and interventions.

Different Ways to Account for How Change Happens

There is more than one way to account for all the factors necessary for change to occur. One way is through a detailed outcomes framework. But a less detailed outcomes framework may be accompanied by a lot of assumptions about what it will take for these outcomes to occur. In general, there is a trade-off between the specificity of the outcomes framework and the number of assumptions. An outcomes framework that looks fairly simply may rely on many assumptions that need to be true. On the other hand, one could theoretically identify every precondition for change such that it depends on very few assumptions.

Appropriate Scopes Differ Even Within Types

While what needs to be accounted for differs between the three purposes, it also differs within each purpose, depending on other factors. So for example, a new initiative with a limited and clearly defined and reasonably achievable goal may need less scope than an initiative with a broad goal (e.g. healthy children, economic self-sufficiency, positive youth development). Generally, even very well-funded initiatives can only take on part of bringing about a broad goal, and a key question to be decided is whether it is necessary to identify every precondition for a broad goal in order for initiative to plan realistically and effectively. Unfortunately, the answer is yes – the stakeholders need to understand all the factors that are needed for a child to be healthy, in order to determine where the initiative fits in. Let's say, for example, that an initiative decides that access to medical care is a precondition for health. Then they determine interventions through which they can actually achieve that for all children in their area. They may conclude that their intervention will bring about good health for all children. But what it other things are also important that the initiative does not

address? What if some family's religious beliefs prevent them from using available medical care? What if the medical care provided turns out to be poor in some communities? What if some children have no homes or food? In those cases, access to medical care may not be enough to achieve good health for all children.

Does this mean the initiative needs to address all the other factors? No. But they do need to aware that they may only reach their goals for children where other preconditions, such as housing, nutrition, quality doctors, and parent participation are also met. Therefore, they need to lower their expectations of how many children will achieve good health *as a result* of the intervention. Identifying the other factors may also help the stakeholders think of others to partner with, or can even lead to choosing additional priorities.

This does not mean endless work in identifying preconditions, but it does mean the group working through until it has accounted for external factors that will limit goal achievement.

Realistic Expectations

Preconditions Accounted For
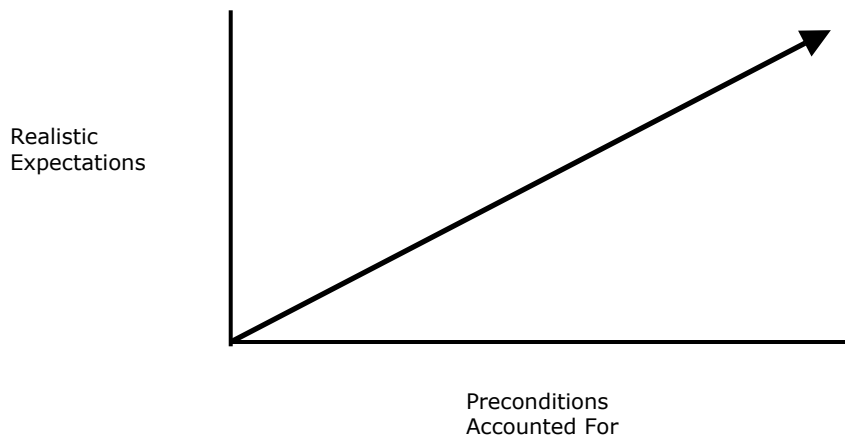
The more thorough an organization is in accounting for all the factors that are needed to bring about an outcome, the more likely they are to be realistic about how much difference their intervention will make. The more specific an organization can be about the precise definition of each term, and the nature of interventions, and the more steps and benchmarks of change that it can identify as preconditions, the easier it will be to identify where something didn't happen as it was predicted.

What are the Choices When it Comes to Scope?

Examples of each of these can be seen elsewhere on this website, but in summary they work as follows:

Narrow and Shallow (least detail)	Broad and Shallow
Narrow and Deep	Broad and Deep (most detail)

Narrow and Shallow: Show the least amount of information. This scope identifies relevant preconditions to the long-term goal, but not all necessary preconditions. Usually it focuses "narrowly" only on those preconditions that the initiative may address. For example if a long-term goal is employment, a narrow scope may only identify the skill-related preconditions to employment and not identify things like available child care, stable lives, or attitudes that may be necessary for people to get and retain jobs, but that are outside the

purview of the initiative. Similarly, the framework is "shallow" in that only the pathways are not worked all the way back to the beginning (where the initiative would start) or multiple outcomes are summarized for simplicity. Strength: Easy to read, simplified summary. Caution: When a scope is too narrow, it may leave out preconditions that need to be recognized for the initiative to have any impact at all. In the case of employment as a long-term goal, if the preconditions only focus on skills but neglect to note that jobs must be available, the initiative may fail due to a lack of available employment despite offering a good training program. This type of framework is really only useful as a simple-to-present summary of a project or an evaluation.

Narrow and Deep: As with "narrow and shallow", in this case all of the preconditions for the long-term goal are not identified, but for those that are, detailed pathways are developed, so that every intermediate outcome is identified. This scope provides enough detail for the initiative to make decisions within the narrow framework it identified. This scope may be most practical for very small- scale initiatives who just want to map out what they need to do. Strength: Allows small initiatives to benefit from rigorous theory of change thinking and provide a blueprint for decision-making and evaluation. Caution: since some preconditions to reaching the long-term goal have not been accounted for, the initiative needs to be realistic about what level of success it can expect, given that it will only change what it has identified.

Broad and Shallow: In this case, all (or as many as can be thought of) of the preconditions for the long-term goal are identified. However, in this framework, the pathways may not go back much further. This type of framework is sometimes used by funders, or intermediaries, to identify a set of outcomes at a high level, and then ask individual grantees to develop the pathways to reach one or more of those higher-level outcomes. Strength: Can demonstrate a basic theory about what is needed, while providing a lot of flexibility for development of how to get to the higher-level outcomes. This type of framework can provide a unifying principle for multi-site, or multi-topic initiatives. Caution: This type of framework does not provide much guidance on how to reach long-term goals.

Broad and Deep: The "cadillac" of theories, this scope identifies all of the preconditions to change, and has a pathway of outcomes needed to bring all the outcomes about. This scope provides a level of detail that allows for the most internal learning, provides a blueprint to make decisions, and a finely honed evaluation that can sort out what is really happening. Strength: a project that has worked out a broad and deep theory is more likely to produce the desired changes and be able to be flexible as they learn by doing. Caution: You can work on this forever! It is important to balance the need for detail with the ability to realize when your theory is good enough for you to begin implementation.

Conclusion

Choosing the right scope for your initiative or organization will help you stay within available resources and meet specific needs. The basic trade-off is: the less detailed your theory, the fewer uses you to which you can put it. The good news is that deciding on a scope is not an irrevocable decision. You may begin with a narrow focus, and realize you need to identify more preconditions and go broader (or deeper). And once you have a broad (and/or deep) level of detail, you can always summarize it down to a simpler version if that will work better for communicating to others.

The important factor once you have decided on a scope is to recognize what you are leaving out and what you are including so that your expectations for success are realistic.