
Assumptions

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Assumptions

Complexity, Practice and Values

Edited by

Apollo M. Nkwake

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4.669... Evaluation and Planning, USA

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FOREWORD

Evaluation as a field has long stood on the shoulders of core assumptions—some known, many hidden, and too often unexamined. For decades, we’ve built program theories, designed evaluations, and interpreted findings based on a foundation of beliefs about how the world works, how people behave, and what constitutes success. And yet, the tools we have traditionally employed to probe these assumptions have often been blunt, if not altogether absent. *Assumptions: Complexity, Practice and Values* arrives at a pivotal moment, offering a rich, provocative, and highly practical contribution to a conversation our field urgently needs.

Apollo Nkwake, Jonathan Morell, Katrina Bledsoe, and the contributing authors have assembled a timely volume that brings assumptions—those often-unspoken drivers of our evaluative work—into full view. This book not only asserts the importance of examining assumptions, it provides frameworks, typologies, case studies, and methodological insights for doing so with rigor, creativity, and sensitivity to complexity and values.

What makes this book so timely and important is its grounding in complexity theory, paired with its insistence that values and context are not peripheral, but central to understanding and working with assumptions. Evaluation has evolved from a focus on discrete, linear cause-and-effect relationships toward engaging with dynamic, adaptive systems. This shift demands that we view assumptions not as static statements to be checked off a logic model, but as interdependent, emergent, and evolving elements that shape—and are shaped by—social systems.

In my own work, I have long emphasized the importance of evaluative thinking—the reflective practice of questioning, contextualizing, and critically examining the underlying logic of our work. Assumptions sit at the heart of this. They guide the questions we ask, the data we collect, the methods we choose, and ultimately, the conclusions we draw. As the authors of this volume remind us, making these assumptions visible—especially the implicit ones—enhances both the quality and the ethical grounding of our evaluations.

The authors are clear: there is no one-size-fits-all approach to identifying and working with assumptions. Instead, they offer a palette of tools, frameworks, and reflective questions to help evaluators tailor their approach based on the complexity of the context and the nature of the assumptions in play. Whether you are exploring causal assumptions in a theory of change, grappling with normative tensions in a multicultural setting, or trying to unpack why a seemingly well-designed program failed to achieve impact, you will find guidance in these pages.

Importantly, the book aligns with the evolution of our field toward more values-aware and culturally responsive approaches. It complements and extends seminal work on theory-driven evaluations, complexity-aware developmental, formative, and summative evaluations, and culturally responsive methodologies. By framing assumptions as central to all of these approaches, the authors offer a unifying lens that can bring coherence to our increasingly pluralistic field.

For evaluation theorists, this volume offers fertile ground for deepening our conceptual understanding of assumptions in relation to systems thinking and complexity science. For practitioners, it offers concrete strategies for surfacing and managing assumptions in real-world settings. For students and educators, it provides a roadmap for cultivating the kind of evaluative thinking that is essential for tackling the grand challenges of our time—poverty, inequality, climate change, and beyond.

As we collectively strive toward more equitable, effective, and sustainable solutions, we must acknowledge that many well-intentioned programs falter not because of flawed implementation, but because of flawed assumptions—about people, systems, cultures, and change. This book equips us to do better. It invites us to be more reflective, more critical, and more attuned to the complex realities of the systems we evaluate.

In conclusion, *Assumptions: Complexity, Practice and Values* is a gift to the field. It is ambitious, thoughtful, and deeply grounded in both theory and practice. It challenges us to raise our game, not just as evaluators, but as stewards of change. I commend the editors and contributors for their bold and necessary work, and I encourage all who read this volume to take up its call: to question more deeply, to listen more closely, and to act more wisely in the face of complexity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ASSUMPTIONS: COMPLEXITY, PRACTICE AND VALUES

Apollo M. Nkwake
The Questions Team, USA

INTRODUCTION

Assumptions affect the quality of evaluation. This is true for known assumptions, and it is equally true for implicit assumptions. As assumptions move from the implicit to the known, the greater the likelihood of a successful evaluation.

The purpose of this volume is to strengthen evaluative thinking by discussing the state of theory, methods, and perspectives that help evaluators recognize and manage their assumptions, and by extension, biases and make wise choices about them, as reflective evaluative thinkers in complex systems.

Given that examining and addressing assumptions is a central piece of evaluative thinking, building capacity for evaluative thinking can be strengthened to pay attention to assumption typologies, and tools for examining assumptions. This book volume will be a key reference for evaluation professors, practitioners, and students working on program theories, theory-based evaluation, complexity and values in evaluation. Authors use case studies to provide the reader with examples that can provide guidance on working with and through assumptions.

HOW DOES THE BOOK EXTEND CURRENT KNOWLEDGE IN EVALUATION?

Examining and addressing assumptions is a central piece of evaluative thinking, which has been a mantra for the past decade. Building capacity for evaluative thinking needs to consider processes and strategies, and in some cases, tools that enable evaluators and program stakeholders to examine assumptions. A key part of all this is discovering the assumptions that guide stakeholders' choices and actions (Vo & Archibald, 2018). How those assumptions manifest determine how the evaluation is conducted, and what questions will be asked and answered.

This book discusses the state of theory, methods, and tools that help evaluators recognize, manage their assumptions, and to make wise choices about them. Along with the transition from *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* to *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* has come the recognition that evaluative thinking is a crucial part of evaluation capacity. Examining assumptions is at the core of evaluative thinking. Yet it appears that there is a paucity of tools and models to guide the systematic examination of assumptions.

The title of this book asserts that complexity, Practice, values, and context entwine in ways that obscure implicit assumptions, and that better decisions about evaluation could be made if those values were considered and made visible. Authors aim to strengthen evaluative thinking by discussing the state of theory, methods, and perspectives that help evaluators recognize and manage their assumptions, and make wise choices about them, as evaluative thinkers in complex systems. The authors discuss these in a variety of contexts, using specific cases to illustrate various best practice tools and approaches of working with intersections of assumptions, values, and complexity in program design and evaluation, monitoring and evaluation.

HOW DOES THIS WORK FIT IN WITH THE PUBLISHED LITERATURE?

A major element of program design and evaluation, assumptions are seldom discussed directly as an area of inquiry with its set of tools, frameworks, and theories. Perhaps this omission is not deliberate: the term itself can be interpreted positively or negatively. Besides evaluative thinking, the importance of examining assumptions is often mentioned and alluded to in several evaluation approaches such as theory-based evaluation, culturally responsive evaluation, values aware evaluation, and complexity aware evaluation. In theory-based evaluation, there is emphasis on articulation of assumptions related with the sequence of changes, or

mini-steps, which lead to the longer-term program goal (e.g., [Chen, 2018](#); [Leeuw, 2003](#); [Mayne, 2015](#); [Vogel, 2012](#); [Weiss, 1995](#)). Culturally responsive evaluation emphasizes the examination of assumptions and biases in heuristics, stereotyping and categorizations and implicit or explicit biases against different stakeholder groups (e.g., [Frierson et al., 2010](#); [Kirkhart, 2013](#); [Symonette, 2015](#)). Values aware evaluation alerts evaluators that sometimes the values of how a program should work depends on the values and biases held about behaviors, changes, and outcomes that we think are or should be universally valued (e.g., [Davidson, 2010](#)). Complexity aware evaluation approaches investigate assumptions about the degree of certainty and stakeholder agreement for programs delivered in very dynamic contexts ([Britt et al., 2017](#)).

The book can be a resource to all groups that make up the greater evaluation community. Evaluation theorists will glean insight from the unique and multifaceted treatment of “evaluation assumptions.” Methodologists will come to understand how to shape their designs in a manner that will provide more actionable knowledge for decision makers. Practitioners will be better able to monitor themselves, their teams, and their stakeholders in a manner that will avoid the pernicious effects of unseen assumptions and biases, and to capitalize on the insight provided by a keener understanding of their work. Program funders and designers will be more likely to implement effective programs and to avoid unintended undesirable outcomes.

The authors discuss the state of theory, methods, tools that help evaluators recognize, manage their assumptions, and make wise choices about them. Several authors use specific cases to illustrate various best practice tools and approaches to working with intersections of assumptions, values, and complexity in program design, monitoring, and evaluation.

The first three articles propose theoretical frameworks for dealing with assumptions. Morell discusses *Assumptions Through a Complexity Lens*. He argues that there is value in understanding the structure of the interconnected nature of assumptions, especially when assumptions are treated as entities that comprise a complex system. Patton discusses *Premises and Principles for Working with Assumptions*. He argues that *Premises* express the foundational assumptions that are the basis for principles. Principles convert beliefs (assumptions) into statements offering behavioral guidance. Principles are especially useful for navigating the turbulence and uncertainties of complex dynamic systems. In the third chapter, Feinstein discusses how one approach—*Assumptions Based Evaluation*, can be adapted to deal with *Complexity, Values and Different Perspectives*.

The next two chapters by Senkaba, Nkwake and Lavan present field experiences of examining various program and evaluation assumptions in international development. Senkaba discusses results of a survey of evaluators’ experiences with assumptions. His survey reveals that no approach

or tool for examining program assumptions is a one-size fits all. Different approaches/tools can be used to examine assumptions at different stages of the program management cycle. Additionally, being aware of specific type of program assumptions does not extend to knowledge of tools to examine them. Nkwake and Lavan argue that assumptions are a very essential part of an elaborate program theory. Using a typology of program assumptions, they authors illustrate how examining and articulating normative, diagnostic, prescriptive, causal, and external assumptions improved a program's theory of change. In the next chapter, Min discusses how assumption are impacted by implicit and explicit biases, values, culture and context.

The conclusion summarizes common themes across the diverse set of articles in this volume and present some reflections on the next steps for improving the ways in which evaluators work with assumptions in their work. This volume has widely diverse perspectives. However, we believe that such wide variation in approaches and beliefs among the authors is an important conversation that must be further elevated within the field.

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CHAPTER 2

ASSUMPTIONS THROUGH A COMPLEXITY LENS¹

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ASSUMPTIONS AS COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Imagine that we treated “assumptions” as entities that comprise a complex system. I do not mean that we can identify assumptions, map them to an evaluation, and treat the entire evaluation/assumption arrangement as complex. Rather, I mean that once assumptions have been identified, the assumptions themselves are viewed as entities that relate to each other. Or put differently, imagine that we switched our perspective from “a system comprised of evaluation that has assumptions,” to “a system comprised of the assumptions that are drawn from an evaluation.” That perspective would further our ability to serve our stakeholders, and it would also enrich our epistemological understanding of what “evaluation” means.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION—“COMPLEXITY” AND “ASSUMPTIONS”

Two propositions will guide this discussion. The first pertains to the nature of complexity. The second to assumptions in evaluation.

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Complexity

Applying complexity to a real-world system requires a focus on the *behavior* of a complex system, not on the fact that we are dealing with a complex system. This is because knowing that a system is complex does not provide much guidance for theory development, research, or practical decision making. Knowing the behavior of a complex system does provide such guidance. To illustrate with two simple examples.

1. *Emergence*: Knowing that a program I am evaluating is a complex system does not help me evaluate the program. But what if I knew that my primary outcome was an emergent phenomenon that derived from various prior outcomes? If I knew that, I would know that I needed a metric that was qualitatively different from any of the metrics that described the components. I would need to make the effort to find (or develop) that metric and to devise a way to incorporate it into my evaluation. I would also need to apply that knowledge to whatever program theory and program model I devised, and I would need a way to explain it to stakeholders.
2. *State change*: What does it mean to say that an outcome exhibits non-linear change? One thing it can mean is that the state of a seemingly stable system can suddenly change to another state, with minimal levels of intermediate change. As a methodologist, the possibility of a state change has implications for when I should collect data and the tools I should use to measure change. As an evaluator, it has implications for program theory and for how I should interact with stakeholders to help them understand the concept of “intermediate change.”

In both examples, it does not matter that my program is a complex system. What matters is the behavior of those systems—emergence in the first instance, and state change in the second.

Assumptions

There is much to work with in terms of different *types* of assumptions that characterize evaluation, and the *numbers* of assumptions that fall into each category. Stated in other terms, there is a rich ecosystem of assumptions that is populated with different “species,” and population sizes for each species.² (An ecological framework is not the only way to conceptualize assumptions, but as I will show later, thinking in