3 Theory

Learning objectives

- ☐ Understand the meanings of 'theory' and 'theory development'
- ☐ Know how evaluation contributes to theory development
- ☐ Be familiar with how theorists view and conduct evaluations:
  - ■ How evaluators must understand the nature of what is being evaluated
  - ■ How evaluators should practice in the real world
  - ■ How to assign value to events, tourism and their outcomes
  - ■ How to construct knowledge
  - ■ How to use knowledge gained through evaluation
- ☐ Understand the purposes and difficulties involved with theory-driven evaluation
- ☐ Understand that evaluations can be viewed in a continuum of complexity linked to increasing technical, theoretical and political complexity
- ☐ Be able to describe the nature of evidence and proof an how this affects evaluations
- ☐ Know how to obtain and use 'data' and 'facts' in evidence
- ☐ Understand the basics of systems theory and the event as a system
- ☐ Know how internal and external evaluations are both essential and are interdependent
- ☐ Understand different stakeholder perspectives on events and event tourism and how these affect evaluation

3.1 Introduction

Several theoretical perspectives are covered in this chapter, but first it is necessary to understand what is meant by 'theory'. Here are two standard dictionary definitions:

A system of ideas intended to explain something, based on general principles.

A set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based.

A good scientific theory can both explain and predict with certainty, but these kinds of theories are not found in management or social studies. Instead, we have systems of ideas, and sometimes these ideas are best described as 'theory frag-

ments' and not a coherent whole. We can also talk about principles or proposi-
tions, based on thought and research, that can guide management. Sometimes in
concluding a research paper I will put forward a set of propositions that I believe
are warranted, and these propositions can either be used to guide management
or further research.

You can also think of theory as a construct, model, or a conceptual frame-
work that helps us understand the real world. This chapter starts with 'theories
of evaluation', meaning organised thought and propositions or principles about
the conduct of evaluation. My own contribution to theory development follows,
being a model to illustrate a 'continuum of complexity' with specific reference to
event and tourism evaluation. Then consideration is given to evidence and proof,
what they mean and how evaluators might want one or the other depending on
circumstances; this is an important elaboration of theories of evaluation. Systems
theory is introduced in order to highlight internal and external perspectives on
event evaluation and the importance of stakeholders.

3.2 Theories of evaluation

There are theories that can *guide* evaluation (i.e., theory-driven) and theories
of evaluation. Evaluation theorists Alkin and Christie (2004) and Christie and
Alkin (2008) argued that evaluation theory has its roots in both 'systematic social
inquiry' and the need for 'social accountability and fiscal control'. They distin-
guish between theorists who emphasize one of three branches: 1) methods (largely
concerned with validity and hence control groups, experiments and quasi-exper-
iments, statistical analysis, and the generalizability of results that helps create
knowledge); 2) how evaluation is used and by whom; and 3) the concept and
practice of valuing. The following quotations from Christie and Alkin (2008) dem-
onstrate how they view evaluation theories:

> (p. 131) *Our view is that there are three basic elements in considering evaluation
> theories: use, methods, and valuing. All theorists are concerned with the methods that
> will be employed in conducting the evaluation. All theorists recognize that evaluation
> is an enterprise that involves valuing (distinguishing it from most research). All theo-
> rists recognize that evaluations will be used in ways that affect programmes.*

> (p. 132) *While the term theory is conventionally used in the evaluation literature, it
> is more appropriate to use the terms approaches, models, or even frameworks.*

Here is what evaluation theory does, in a nutshell, in the context of events. Note
the specific references to methods, uses and valuing.

♦ Advises on how to construct knowledge about events and event tourism.

♦ Advises on how to assign value to events, event tourism, and related
performance issues.

♦ Informs about the nature of what we evaluate (paradigms, purposes, objects
of evaluation).

♦ Suggests how to use the knowledge gained by evaluation for practice (i.e., problem-solving and decision-making) and theory development about events and event tourism.

♦ Sets standards for how evaluators should practice and for valid evaluations.

3.2.1 Methods

Looking specifically at methods in evaluation theory, there are some terms that need to be explained.

Theory-driven evaluations start with theory about how interventions should produce desired results, then usually employ experiments and quasi-experiments to prove cause and effect. In turn, the evaluations aid in theory development, as we can never have a perfect understanding of how humans and organisations behave. We do occasionally see event and tourism evaluations based on theories (e.g., to test the hypothesis that event production, attendance or volunteering generates social capital), but we see little or no effort to utilize experimental designs or even field experiments to prove cause and effect.

Evaluation theorists stress randomization in sampling and control groups for experimental designs, but these are not generally found in event impact assessments or other evaluations. Random sampling is desired for any visitor survey, but seldom achieved, so a reliance on systematic sampling is the norm, and often that level of reliability is not achieved.

Goals (or objectives) oriented evaluations attempt to demonstrate that goals were attained. The goals might be political, theory-based, or just based on wishful thinking. This is the most common model, and the one favoured in this book as reflected in the Event Compass and the overall emphasis on goals and key performance indicators. But it comes with an important caveat: for evaluations impact assessments of all kinds, it is necessary to avoid tunnel vision.

Goals-free evaluation is done by external experts, without knowledge or reference to stated organisational goals. The aim is to be completely objective in determining what a policy, programme or event actually does and the outcomes – not merely looking at the question of whether or not stated goals were attained. This has the advantage of potentially uncovering externalities and undesired outcomes. Far too many evaluations and impact assessments are narrowly focused (i.e., tunnel vision) and therefore miss important costs and negative impacts, or ignore distributional effects.

Realist evaluation: this approach derives from critical theory or critical realism, is in deliberate opposition to most forms of empirical evaluation methods, and has been advocated for complex social interventions. Social and political context must be considered in evaluating programme, policy or event effectiveness. For example, events might lead to desired social integration and community development, but for some, not all. This quotation is from the website Better Evaluation (http://www.betterevaluation.org):