Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting is a methodology ideal for retrospective evaluation of complex systems change efforts.

Those who are constructively dissatisfied with the current state of a program or system often strive for broader change. A mix of opportunity, resources, ideas, relationships, and other factors contribute to guiding broader change efforts that reach beyond improving programmatic practice or procedure. These system change efforts also are fluid, with direction and success dependent on environmental conditions as much as strategy. Adjusting strategy on such efforts is often done intuitively, but tools are available to support progress monitoring and evaluation of such efforts.

> "Outcome Harvesting is arguably the most important evaluation methodology to emerge in the field of social changes and innovation in the last 20 years."
>
> Mark Cabaj, President, Here to There Consulting

Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting (OH) is an evaluation approach in which evaluators, grant makers, and/or program managers and staff identify, formulate, verify, analyze and interpret 'outcomes' in programming contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood[i]. OH starts with user-focused principles, developing agreement with the people who will use the results of the Harvest on a priority OH question to guide the harvest. Users and harvesters also agree on the process; what information is to be collected, how, from whom, when, and with what resources in order to credibly answer the questions[ii]. The information collected is often qualitative and quantitative, from primary and secondary sources, exploring the factors that have contributed to the outcome. OH is particularly useful when outcomes, and even, inputs, activities and outputs, are not sufficiently specific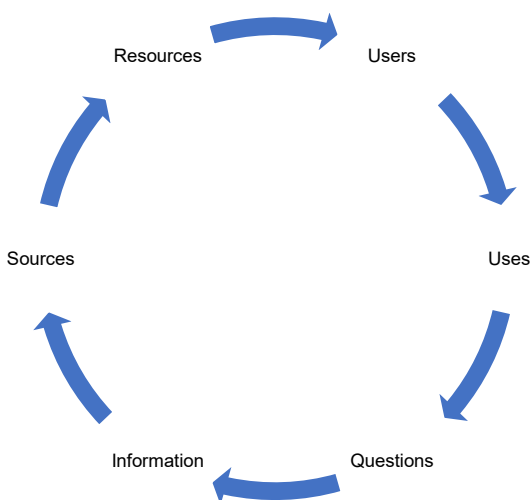 or measurable at the time of planning an intervention. This makes OH well-suited for evaluation in dynamic, uncertain; (i.e., complex) situations[iii]. OH is an iterative process (see figure 1), feedback can spark decisions to redesign a next step, or return to or modify an earlier step[iv].

Outcome Harvesting can be customized as a tool for monitoring, tracking, and adjusting strategy and impact in system change efforts. OH supports moving away from the "what is planned needs to be achieved" mode, and towards learning from what is emerging in order to continue developing[v].

FIGURE 1: OUTCOME HARVEST DESIGN PROCESS

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OH can be relevant in monitoring for a variety of reasons[vi]:

- It allows for planning to adapt for continual change and takes into account unexpected results.

- OH focuses on contribution, not attribution, which can be beneficial with multitudes of actors that interact to achieve change.

- The focus of OH is on outcomes resulting from actions of key actors that they helped PREVENT from happening, as well as those that are influenced to happen.

How the ICFW is using Outcome Harvesting

Children's ICFW team has been working to integrate evidence-based practice into child welfare programming since 2014, as part of our implementation of core concepts from the 2012 Administration on Children, Youth and Families memo 'Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being for Children and Youth Receiving Child Welfare Services[vii]. This work started with implementing Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), education of child welfare case managers about the impact of trauma and toxic stress on child development, and later including supporting policy advocacy on the Family First Preservation Services Act. These and other activities, which have evolved into our Clinical Services Integration (CSI) initiative, all were part of changing the child welfare system and its approach to improving the well-being of children and youth. These efforts were not planned in advance, but rather guided by a set of principles focused on bringing evidence into child welfare practice, shaped by environmental opportunities and challenges.

OH was used as a way to assess how CSI has contributed to system change, not for a full evaluation of impact, but to provide necessary reflection and input to inform our strategic direction. Our early experience with OH has yielded these lessons learned so far:

- The idea of looking at a system change effort's *contribution* to, as opposed to the more traditional evaluative act of looking at causation of, an outcome was a powerful principle from OH.
- The iterative nature of OH allows the users and harvesters to start the process knowing adjustments can be made as learning occurs.
- OH relies heavily on review of qualitative information. Our efforts, which developed over time, didn't have a significant amount of qualitative information available that reflected the evolution of our efforts. To generate this content, we relied heavily on tools from our Strategic Learning process, specifically After-Action Reviews (AARs). Having staff complete individual AARs on specific topics, doing facilitated group AARs, in addition to reviewing existing written material added significant depth to our harvest.

Outcome Harvesting Principles

1. Facilitate usefulness throughout the harvest
2. Nurture appropriate participation
3. Coach human sources to formulate outcomes statements
4. Strive for less because it will be more useful
5. Learn OH experientially
6. Harvest social change outcomes
7. Formulate an outcome as an observable change
8. Establish plausible influence of the intervention
9. Ensure credible-enough outcomes

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- Using OH for monitoring and strategy development yielded reflections, team discussions, and insights that challenged our assumptions of what past activities contributed positively to the outcome, and which didn't.
- The focus on how the harvest will be used was also a key principle that kept the harvest focused. Our efforts were not a formal evaluation, but rather program monitoring to inform strategic direction, and the efforts and results aligned with that purpose.

If you're interested in learning more about Outcome Harvesting, please explore these resources:

- Ricardo Wilson-Grau has been the lead author on several article and books on Outcome Harvesting.
  - Better Evaluation: Overview of Outcome Harvesting
  - Outcome Harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications (book)
- The ICFW first learned about Outcome Harvesting at the Tamarack Institute's 2018 Community Change Festival from Mark Cabaj, an expert in systems change evaluation, who also has a review of Outcome Harvesting.
- Tamarack Institute's Duncan Field also produced a brief overview of OH.

Citations

[i] Wilson-Grau, R. (2015) *Outcome Harvesting.* Better Evaluation. Retrieved from http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting
[ii] Wilson-Grau, R. (2019). *Outcome Harvesting.* Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

[iii] Wilson-Grau, R. (2015) *Outcome Harvesting.* Better Evaluation. Retrieved from http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting
[iv] Ibid
[v] Wilson-Grau, R., Kosternik, P., & Scheers, G. (2016). Outcome Harvesting: A developmental evaluation inquiry framework supporting the development of an international social change network. In M. Q. Patton, K. McKegg, & N. Wehipeihana (Eds.), *Developmental Evaluation Exemplars* (pp. 192–215). New York: The Guilford Press.
[vi] Ibid
[vii] Administration for Children, Youth, and F. (2012). *Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being for Children and Youth Receiving Child Welfare Services.*

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