

## Philanthropy's Albatross: Debunking Theories of Change

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If the title of this essay reads like a provocation, I can only plead that I felt provoked when I wrote it. I was provoked by an article titled “The Power of Theories of Change” that appeared in the Spring 2010 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. In it Paul Brest takes several of my colleagues to task for their skepticism about “theories of change,” defined in his article as “the empirical basis underlying any social intervention.”<sup>1</sup> I was moved to respond, first, because I found this an odd way to define a theory of change. The “empirical basis” underlying my social interventions is *the world itself*, which will, according to its own laws, either resist or cooperate with my plans to change it. In all fairness to Mr. Brest, he gives as an example of a theory of change the belief that an adult mentor can alter the course of a young person’s life for the better. This comes closer to what most people understand a theory of change to be, for clearly our beliefs about individual behavior will constitute, in part, our theory of how the world will respond when we attempt to change this or that aspect of it. Understood in this way, theories of change will naturally shape our grantmaking approaches. We will not, for example, attempt to save the Chesapeake Bay by reciting poetry to it; nor will we attempt to reduce a young person’s susceptibility to violence by requiring him to wear Styrofoam shoes.

If we agree with Mr. Brest that a theory of change includes one’s beliefs about the way the world will behave given this or that intervention, we might wonder what there is to be skeptical about. Is it really possible that four well educated men—the skeptics taken to the conceptual woodshed by Mr. Brest in his article—deny that grantees have beliefs about the effects of their social interventions? Clearly not. As I studied Mr. Brest’s article, I came to conclude that he and his interlocutors, the would-be “skeptics” alluded to, understood theories of change in very different ways—that they were largely talking past one another, like cultural polemicists passing in the

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<sup>1</sup> Brest, P. 2010. The Power of Theories of Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Stanford: Stanford Graduate School of Business. P. 49.

night. At the very least, Mr. Brest was concerned that these skeptics felt it was unimportant to *require* grantees to articulate their theories of change:

Schambra and Somerville argue that funders should focus their grantmaking on community-based organizations, and that funders should trust an organization's leaders without *requiring them to articulate* theories of change .... These skeptics are implicitly analogizing grantees to idiots savants—individuals who are able to do complex calculations ... in their heads without knowing, let alone being able to explain, how they do it.<sup>2</sup> [Emphasis mine.]

It should be noted that one of the interesting characteristics of idiots savants is that the complex calculations they perform in their heads are often *correct*. If the nonprofit world harbored the analogues of idiots savants—executive directors, for example, who could correctly intuit the interventions required for lifting whole communities out of poverty—I would strongly encourage them rather than force them to give an account of their methods. Despite their inability to explain how they arrived at their program designs, I would prefer that we went about changing the world the way they did, rather than the way most of us didn't. Mr. Brest's claim that the skeptics alluded to in his article are analogizing grantees to idiots savants also needs to be challenged. An idiot savant cannot explain to you how he is able, in under a second, to calculate the square root of a 55-digit number. A talented nonprofit executive director, by contrast, can draw on a lifetime of experience and whatever research is available to him to give an account of the design of his social interventions. Ask him, for example, why he doesn't use volunteer ESL instructors, and he might explain that, in his experience, uncertified instructors are not generally as effective. This is hardly the *modus operandi* of an idiot savant.

If you've worked with a large number of nonprofit executive directors, or have been one yourself, you know that they generally have good reasons for designing their social interventions the way they do. They have an understanding of the effects they hope to produce and how to produce them. They do not, for example, propose in their grant applications to do *x* and *y* and *z* just for the hell of it. They propose to do these things because they believe these things will

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

likely lead to their articulated goals. We might say in these cases that they are working from “implicit” theories of change. Since these implicit theories of change are ubiquitous, there’s a clear—but vacuous—sense in which theories of change are indeed as “powerful” as Mr. Brest claims. But this is not what’s at issue between him and the skeptics he alludes to in his article. In writing about the evaluation of social interventions, for example, Mr. Brest claims that “Identifying the proper variables and metrics requires that one *articulate* the program’s goals and its underlying theory of change.”<sup>3</sup> But should we really be *requiring* grantees to articulate their theories of change? The simple answer, as I argue below, is that there’s little need for this requirement since most grantees already do a sufficiently good job of describing “the empirical basis underlying their intervention,” as Mr. Brest puts it. Most grantees do this when they write their grant proposals. The more surprising answer is that requiring grantees to produce explicit theories of change—beyond what they usually include in their grant proposals—does little to improve the art or science of grantmaking. Highly elaborated theories of change are generally urged upon grantees by well-meaning people who have a limited understanding of how they function in the social sciences. Because theories of change are generally shrouded in the impenetrable verbiage of philanthropy, it’s also not surprising that most of us have little inkling of their theoretical and practical limits.

Speaking of practical limits, do you, dear reader, know with unerring certainty what a theory of change is? If you do not, you are entirely forgiven and in very good company. Take a little time to review the literature on theories of change and you’ll discover, as I did, that theories of change are everything and they are nothing. Unfortunately, as I argue below, the “power” that Mr. Brest ascribes to them is largely the power to waste enormous amounts of your time.

I begin this essay by addressing the thorny problem of definition.

### **The Radical Polysemy of “Theories of Change”**

In his essay titled *In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speaking in Foundations*, Tony Proscio laments the uncritical importation into philanthropy of words and concepts from other

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 48, emphasis mine.

disciplines. “All these buzz-words,” Proscio writes, “return-on-investment, modeling, constraints, resources, targeting, accountability—are the borrowed cant of other fields: finance and economics, mostly, but also other social sciences, management theory, even ... military strategy. Each word carries so much professional freight that the reader ends up exhausted from hauling the load.”<sup>4</sup> More troubling, perhaps, is the fact that we import these words without also importing the practical and theoretical knowledge that would constrain us in their use.

Such is the case, I believe, for “theory of change,” a term used widely in philanthropy and other fields to describe a family of concepts whose members, upon close inspection, vary significantly in meaning. Not only is the term radically polysemous, but champions of the concept have tended to make unfulfillable promises on its behalf. “Theory of change” is a term of obscure origin, as far I can tell, associated in the minds of many with the culture and language of formal evaluation. A grantmaker or grantee scanning the available literature on theories of change can hardly help but be confused by the exercise. The GrantCraft publication titled *Mapping Change*, for example, opens by telling the reader not what a theory of change *is*, but rather what it *does*:

A theory of change describes a process of planned social change, from the assumptions that guide its design to the long-term goals it seeks to achieve.<sup>5</sup>

From this the reader might conclude that a theory of change is the narrative of some social change process with goals appended. But would any such narrative qualify? After all, “describing a process of planned social change” can mean writing a rambling manifesto, penning the succession plan for a drug cartel, or developing marketing guidelines for a smokeless ashtray. The authors acknowledge this ambiguity when, several paragraphs into their article, they add:

What does “theory of change” really mean, in practice? Grant makers who use the term may be describing anything from a detailed map to a general storyline. What they agree on is that a theory of change is valuable if it helps them and their grantees understand the

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<sup>4</sup> Proscio, Tony 2000. *In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speaking in Foundations*. New York: The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. P. 10.

<sup>5</sup> GrantCraft 2006. *Mapping Change: Using a Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation*. New York: The Ford Foundation. P. 2.

relationship between the problems they're addressing and the strategies they're using to get the work done.<sup>6</sup>

At this stage, the careful reader might have some inkling of what a theory of change does and why it might be useful. He might still have little idea what it *is*. If the essential mark of a theory of change is that it helps us better understand how our efforts do—or do not—lead to our goals, then it's possible that a glass of Merlot can qualify as a theory of change, for as Heraclitus reminds us, “It is better to hide ignorance, but it is hard to do this when we relax over wine.”<sup>7</sup>

On one popular website the authors tell us that a theory of change “defines all the building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal,”<sup>8</sup> while on another we're informed that it's “the product of a series of critical-thinking exercises that provides a comprehensive picture of the early- and intermediate-term changes in a given community that are needed to reach a long-term goal articulated by the community.”<sup>9</sup> In some publications they're equated with so-called “logic models,” in others they're not.

One of the claims frequently made for theories of change is that they're essential for helping us *evaluate* the effects of our social interventions. As Mr. Brest himself informs us, “most evaluations of social interventions require understanding the theories that mediate between inputs, activities, and outcomes.”<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, many of the formal evaluation textbooks I researched didn't use the term “theory of change” at all. The closest cognates I found were the terms “program impact theory,” used, for example, in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* by Peter H. Rossi et al., a popular textbook on evaluation<sup>11</sup>; and the more common “program theory,” used in a significant corpus of books and papers by such authors as Carol Weiss<sup>12</sup> and others. Generally, these scholars understand a program theory to be a sequence of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *On the Universe*, fragment 108.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.theoryofchange.org/background/basics.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/evaluation-methodology/an-introduction-to-theory-of-change>.

<sup>10</sup> p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Rossi, P., Lipsey, M., and Freeman, H. 2004. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach, Seventh Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. P. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Weiss, Carol 1997. “How Can Theory-Based Evaluation Make Greater Headway?” *Evaluation Review*, Vol. 21 No. 4.

causes and effects, in which our interventions function as the instigating causes and certain hoped-for social benefits function as their ultimate effects.

While we might be tempted to equate a “theory of change” with a “program theory,” the latter, defined as a bare sequence of causes and effects, may be a bit too spare. As Carol Weiss points out:

The theory in question is the set of beliefs and assumptions that undergird program activities. Programs are inevitably based on a theory—in fact, often on several theories—about how activities are expected to bring about desired changes. However, the theories are rarely explicit. Programs are usually designed on the basis of experience, practice knowledge, and intuition, and practitioners go about their work without articulating the conceptual foundations of what they do.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond bare cause-and-effect connections, Weiss claims, we need to include in our “program theory” the beliefs and assumptions that motivate a particular social intervention. But which beliefs and assumptions? How do we decide, in advance of our intervention, which of all possible beliefs and assumptions will be critical to the success of our work or to its evaluation? And our challenges don’t end there. The kind of theory that describes how Cause A leads to Effect B is frequently conflated with the steps required for program *implementation*. To take a very simple-minded example, suppose we diagram the program theory for a mentorship program as follows:

- (1) A child’s close relationship with an adult mentor → An increase in the child’s sense of self worth → A reduction in the child’s susceptibility to violence

Here we might read the arrow symbol (→) as “causes” or “leads to.” For this program theory to be put into practice we need to take actions such as the following:

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<sup>13</sup> Weiss, op. cit., p. 503.

- (2) Adult mentors need to be recruited and screened → These mentors need to be carefully matched with children → Mentors and children need to be given a proper orientation → etc.

Here the arrow symbol shifts in meaning. The lines of action represented in both (1) and (2) unfold in time and each is essential to the success of our intervention. According to Weiss, however, conflating these two lines of action frequently leads to “muddy thinking and confusion” in the conduct of theory-based evaluations.

Scan the theories of change produced by professional and amateur evaluators and you’ll find a significant range of choices regarding which types of causal connections to include (those drawn from individual belief-desire psychology, from the psychology of social movements, from rational actor theory, etc.); the necessary conditions one should make explicit (an inclination on the part of subjects to cooperate, a robust economy, favorable weather; etc.); and what unit of analysis to focus on (the individual, the family, the neighborhood)—among many other variations.

### **Borrowing Some Old Ideas**

Given the general lack of consensus about what a theory of change is or what it should include, it’s not surprising that the skeptics alluded to in Mr. Brest’s article might fail to agree over its utility. If we are ever to make any progress in our debates about theories of change, we will need a common language for describing and evaluating them. To this end I borrow some old but still useful ideas from the philosophy of science.

A theory of change, as outlined in (1), above is essentially two linked *explanations*. The first explains the increase in the child’s sense of self-worth on the basis of that child’s close relationship with an adult mentor; the second explains the reduction in the child’s susceptibility to violence on the basis of his increased sense of self-worth. In 1966 the great American philosopher of science Carl Hempel published his masterpiece, *Philosophy of Natural Science*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hempel, Carl 1966. *Philosophy of Natural Science*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

In it, he elucidated the logic of explanation in the natural sciences and proposed a formalism for their study that reduced the most complex explanations to one or more syllogisms that could be evaluated using simple methods borrowed from propositional logic. If we consider the simplistic theory of change outlined in (1) above, for example, we see that we can recast it as two “linked” syllogisms:

(3a) 1. If I provide child A with a close relationship with an adult mentor, then child A’s sense of self-worth will increase.

2. My program provides child A with a close relationship with an adult mentor.

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3. Therefore, child A’s sense of self-worth will increase.

(3b) 1. Child A’s sense of self-worth will increase.

2. If child A’s sense of self-worth increases, his susceptibility to violence will decrease.

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3. Therefore, child A’s susceptibility to violence will decrease.

These two syllogisms, (3a) and (3b), are linked in the sense that the conclusion of the first syllogism (“Child A’s sense of self-worth will increase”) becomes the initial premise of the second syllogism. For the sake of simplicity, let us focus on (3a). Readers who have studied some logic will see immediately that this argument is formally valid, although it might not be a good or “sound” argument (to use the technical jargon) because one or both of its premises might be false. The first premise, for example, might turn out to be false because the adult mentor might not be well trained, or he might not be given enough time to spend mentoring the child, or all of his good efforts might be undone by negative influences in the child’s life—and any of these might prevent child A’s sense of self-worth from increasing. To salvage the syllogism representing our intervention, we must at the very least amend it to something like:

(4) 1. If I provide child A with a close relationship with an adult mentor, and the mentor is well trained, and the mentor has enough time to spend with the child, and the negative



influences in the child's life do not undo the positive effects of the adult mentor, **then** child A's sense of self-worth will increase.

2. My program provides child A with a close relationship with an adult mentor, and the mentor is well trained, and the mentor has enough time to spend with the child, and the negative influences in the child's life do not undo the positive effects of the adult mentor.

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3. Therefore, child A's sense of self-worth will increase.

The syllogism outlined in (4) is an example of what Hempel calls a “deductive-nomological explanation.” Its first premise (“If I provide child A with ...”) has the look and feel of a general law of human psychology: it tells us something about how normally constituted individuals tend to behave under certain ideal conditions. Compare it, for example, with the following statement from physics: “If at time  $t = 0$  we drop a ball from a height  $h$  above the earth, and we drop it in a perfect vacuum, and there is nothing to obstruct its path as it falls, then it will hit the ground at time  $t =$  the square root of  $(2h/g)$ .” The second premise in (4) has a different character. It's an “observation” sentence that makes assertions about certain observable facts—viz., my program provides child A with a close relationship with an adult mentor; the mentor is well trained; etc. Hempel described the general form of an explanation as follows:

(5)  $L_1, L_2, \dots, L_m$   
 $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$   
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E

Here (5) is a deductive argument whose conclusion is the sentence E (the hoped-for effect in our case), and whose premises consist of general laws ( $L_1, L_2, \dots, L_m$ ) and other statements ( $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$ ) that make assertions about matters of fact, just as those we see in the second premise of (4).

Identifying each link in a theory of change with a deductive-nomological explanation as defined by Hempel has several advantages. First, it provides a common language and framework for arguing about the utility of theories of change. No longer need we suspect—as I often have—

that people who disagree about theories of change are arguing past one another, that they understand “theories of change” in very different ways. Second, Hempel’s formalism requires that we make explicit the laws and conditions that need to obtain in order for certain effects to follow from our social interventions. The very schematic theory of change outlined in (1), for example, does not do this. By contrast, the theory of change described in (4) is much richer: it offers the evaluator a number of avenues for exploring the possible failure of a given social intervention. If, for example, the mentored child’s sense of self-worth doesn’t increase, we can examine the reasons for this failure in two places: either adult mentorship (even under the best conditions) doesn’t tend to increase a child’s sense of self-worth—a question that can be explored empirically; or the program we’ve designed simply doesn’t instantiate the conditions necessary for the success of an adult-child mentorship relation. Finally, and as I argue below, using Hempel’s formalism to describe theories of change enables us to lay bare the exaggerated claims we sometimes make for theories of change, and suggests a proper domain for their use.

Hempel’s formalism certainly has its limits, especially when one uses it to describe change processes that are not strictly linear. And as Hempel himself acknowledged, special consideration must be given to so-called “probabilistic explanations.”<sup>15</sup> But these complexities only serve to underscore my point about the questionable utility of theories of change in nonprofit work.

### **Putting Theories of Change to the Test**

Imagine that you are the executive director of an organization whose mission is to put a park within walking distance of every home in America. You’ve done this work successfully in your city and now you’re approaching the XYZ Foundation for funding that will help expand your work to an adjacent town. You send in your proposal confident that the XYZ Foundation will note your track record of success and fund your expansion. You’re surprised when a program officer from the Foundation gives you a call and asks you to produce a theory of change for your program. “You mean like our inputs, outputs, and expected outcomes—that kind of thing?” you

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<sup>15</sup> P. 59

ask. “No, that’s a *logic model*,” he says. “I want to see an articulation of the underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide your service delivery strategy and are believed to be critical for producing change and improvement.”<sup>16</sup> “Well, uh, our beliefs and assumptions are that our program will succeed in creating a park in Neighborhood X of Town Y and that this will induce the residents of Neighborhood X to use and enjoy it. But we told you that in our proposal,” you answer him, somewhat testily. “Do your best,” your program officer insists.

Although you suspect your program officer is deeply in the grip of an ideology, your need for funding drives you to comply. You begin hesitantly:

- (6)
1. Every other time we’ve created a nice park within walking distance of residents’ homes, they have used and enjoyed it.
  2. Our effort in Neighborhood X will succeed in creating a nice park within walking distance of residents’ homes.

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3. Therefore, residents of Neighborhood X will use the park and enjoy it.

You send this to your program officer and after several e-mail exchanges, you agree on this emendation of your original theory of change:

- (7)
1. If we create a park within walking distance of residents’ home, and residents participate in the design of the park, and the city commits to its upkeep, then residents will use and enjoy it.
  2. We will create a park within walking distance of the residents of Neighborhood X, and residents will participate in the design of the park, and we will get the city to commit to its upkeep.

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3. Therefore, the residents of Neighborhood X will use the park and enjoy it.

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<sup>16</sup> This rather tortured language is taken almost verbatim from [http://www.wingsweb.org/download/Theory\\_of\\_Change\\_Tool\\_Manual\\_Full\\_Version.pdf](http://www.wingsweb.org/download/Theory_of_Change_Tool_Manual_Full_Version.pdf)

You receive funding from the XYZ Foundation and build the park in Neighborhood X, just as you described in your proposal, and just as outlined in your theory of change (which to you still appears completely superfluous—but never mind). A year later, when you conduct an evaluation of your program you discover, to your great surprise, that the residents of Neighborhood X are not using the park. After polling the residents, they tell you they feel unsafe in the park because drug dealers have started using it to conduct their business. Soon after, you hear from your program officer. “Your theory of change was wrong,” he e-mails you. “Please refer to the attached document for the correct theory of change.” You open it and find this:

- (7’) 1. If we create a park within walking distance of residents’ home, and residents participate in the design of the park, and the city commits to its upkeep, **and residents feel safe in the park**, then residents will use and enjoy it.
2. We will create a park within walking distance of the residents of Neighborhood X, and residents will participate in the design of the park, and the city will commit to its upkeep, **and we’ll take steps to ensure that residents will feel safe in the park.**
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3. Therefore, the residents of Neighborhood X will use the park and enjoy it.

So, OK, you now convince Town Y’s police department to station a police cruiser next to the park. One year later, same problem: residents aren’t using the park. It turns out that because of the rising levels of violence in Neighborhood X, residents don’t even feel safe walking out of their homes, much less to a nearby park. You wonder if you’ll get another e-mail from your program officer with yet another version of your theory of change:

- (7’’) 1. If we create a park within walking distance of residents’ home, and residents participate in the design of the park, and the city commits to its upkeep, and residents feel safe in the park, **and residents feel safe walking from their homes to the park**, then residents will use and enjoy it.
2. We will create a park within walking distance of the residents of Neighborhood X, etc.
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3. Therefore, the residents of Neighborhood X will use the park and enjoy it.

There are several things to be noted about this simple example:

1. In most cases, the most relevant parts of your theory of change were already implicit in your original grant proposal.
2. Connected with this last point, if your program officer can't "get" what your theory of change is simply by reading your proposal, he or she is probably in the wrong business.
3. Even in a very simple example like this one, articulating the "underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide your service delivery strategy and are believed to be critical for producing change and improvement" can get ridiculously complicated. In general, you cannot know ahead of time what the "relevant" beliefs and assumptions will be.
4. Your theory of change is not working for you: you are working for *it*. It's like a dead albatross around your neck that you occasionally remove and dip in formaldehyde to keep your funders happy.

Our problems are compounded when we look at more complicated examples. In her article, "How Can Theory-Based Evaluation Make Greater Headway?" Carol Weiss describes a program that gives tenants representation on the management board of their public housing project:

This program espouses multiple goals, such as improving the maintenance of the property, decreasing crime in and around the housing project, and encouraging residents to take greater responsibility for their lives in such areas as work and education. These are ambitious goals and, to some, inflated hopes, but let us take the most realistic objective, improved maintenance of the project ...<sup>17</sup>

What's interesting about the description that Ms. Weiss gives of this project is that many of us immediately share her intuition about which of its goals is the most realistic. Even without seeing a detailed proposal, *or a theory of change*, we can imagine ways that tenant representation

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<sup>17</sup> Weiss, op. cit., p. 503.

on the management board of a public housing project might lead to improved maintenance of the property. Ms. Weiss points out that there are multiple causal paths that can lead to this goal, and she sketches a program theory that I reproduce below as Figure 1:

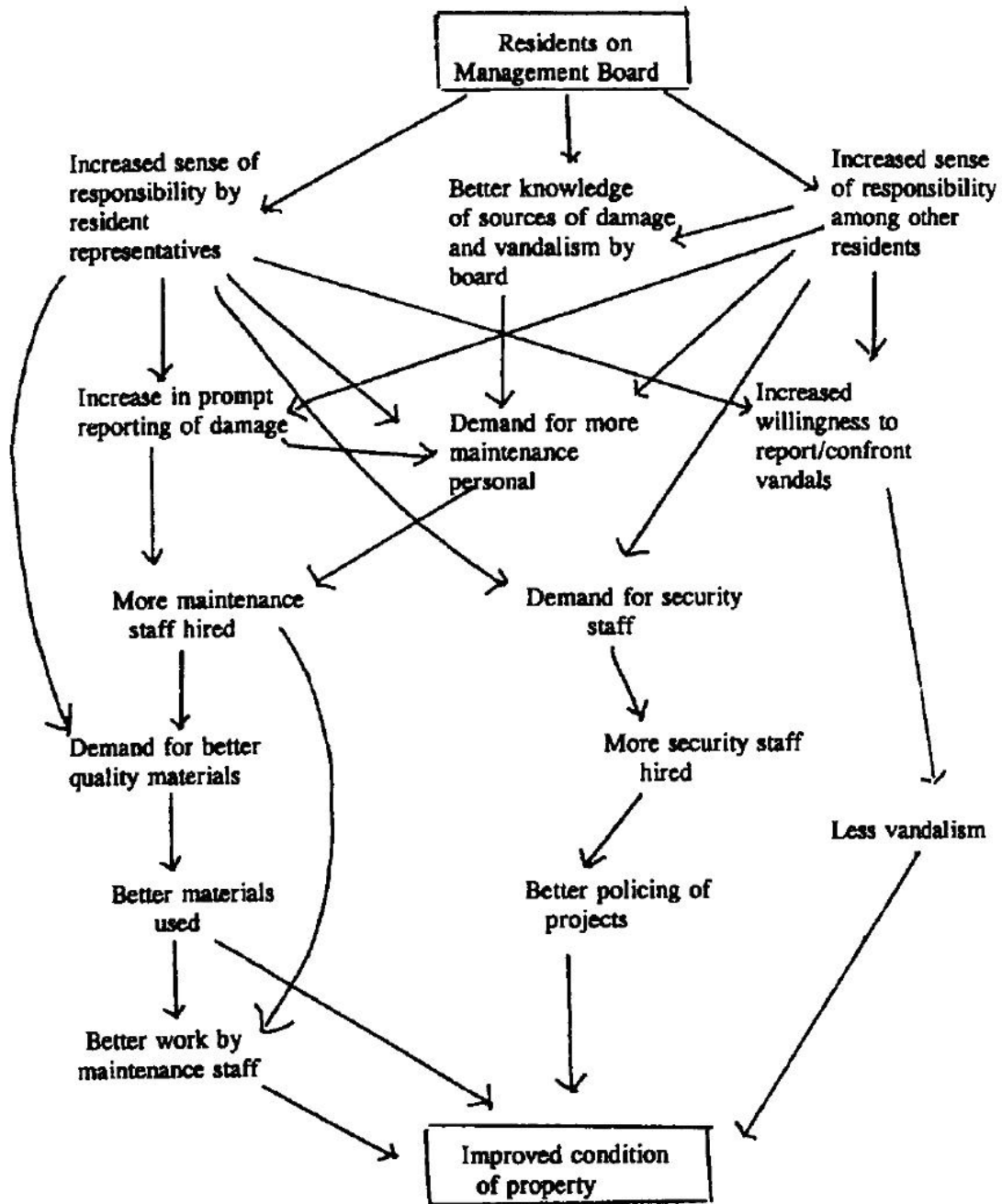


Figure 1

What's striking about this theory of change is its overwhelming complexity—and this in spite of the fact that it doesn't begin to articulate all the underlying beliefs and assumptions that might be critical to the success of the project—e.g., How much power do residents wield on the management board compared with non-resident managers? How constrained is the board by a lack of funding? How much time can residents reasonably dedicate to the management of a complex property? etc. Weiss argues that:

The small everyday steps in Figure 1 can be couched in social science language, such as sense of communal responsibility, access to authority, local knowledge, bureaucratic responsiveness, and so on. In the conduct of the evaluation, the evaluator will need to operationalize these concepts and develop specific indicators that capture their essential meaning.<sup>18</sup>

This sounds like an enormous undertaking for what starts out as a fairly simple project. If, after a year, the condition of the property doesn't improve, is it really practical to ask our evaluator to do as Weiss suggests? How much would such an evaluation cost? Would he or she test each of the branches in Figure 1? And just as with our previous example, we can imagine a thousand reasons, not pictured in Figure 1, why the program might have failed. How, in this case, would the theory of change we've so carefully crafted guide our evaluation efforts?

By the way, we can also imagine scenarios in which the property improves *but for none of the reasons outlined in Figure 1!* One of the resident managers, for example, might have a brother-in-law whose contracting company does excellent work for half the price; or one of the resident-managers might be very successful at organizing resident work crews who dedicate one Saturday each month to repairs and upkeep; or the very presence of residents on the management board might inspire a local donor to endow and thereby double the public housing project's maintenance budget; etc. Real life is extremely complicated. When human actors are involved, its twists and turns are almost always unpredictable.

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<sup>18</sup> Weiss, op. cit., p. 506.

It takes enormous effort to dream up a program theory like that pictured in Figure 1. And as we've seen, it can easily turn out to be a completely fiction. At this point we need to ask, whom does it serve and to what end?

## Adding It All Up

To summarize:

1. An airtight, explicit theory of change, even for the simplest intervention, might be beyond the powers of any mortal known. If you're a funder, think twice before you require it.
2. What typically passes for a theory of change is a narrative of how certain causes can plausibly lead to certain effects. If this is all you're really after, then *read the proposal*. Everything you might want to know is already there.
3. Because a theory of change is more like a narrative than a scientific theory, it will be more compelling if it's written by a good story teller on your staff. This moves you from the domain of good scientific practice to the realm of compelling literature.<sup>19</sup>
4. Funders who do not require highly articulated, explicit theories of change from their grantees are not treating them as idiots savants. They're treating them as fully rational human beings who have had enough experience of the world to know which effects generally follow from which causes.

I am not here denying that theories of change, and the process of constructing them, have helped many people in the nonprofit world. But while I myself have found it enormously useful to discuss my plans with my Jack Russell Terrier, I would never dream of requiring this of my grantees.

Returning for a moment to Mr. Brest's criticism of Mssrs. Schambra and Somerville, recall that he took issue with them because they argued funders should trust nonprofit leaders to make smart choices, without requiring these leaders.<sup>20</sup> We can

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<sup>19</sup> I'll leave a discussion of this point to another day.

<sup>20</sup> Brest, *op. cit.*, p. 48.



assume, of course, that Schambra and Somerville didn't mean just *any* old leaders, but only those who had proven by their past choices and careful stewardship of resources that they could be trusted. Ironically, Schambra and Somerville are supported in their views by a fairly simple and, in my opinion, *compelling* theory of change:

- (8)
1. Every time I've given nonprofit leader X a grant and simply asked her to spend it wisely to make the world a better place, she has succeeded beyond my expectations.
  2. I will give nonprofit leader X a grant and ask her to spend it wisely to make the world a better place.
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3. Therefore, nonprofit leader X will likely succeed beyond my expectations.

There's clearly something about nonprofit leader X that inspires our trust: her talent, her intelligence, her ability to marshal resources and be a good leader, etc. These qualities abide with her and lead to her consistently good performance. It's not irrational to invest in people with qualities like these—without also weighing them down with detailed instructions. Foundation investment committees do this all the time. After providing top flight investment managers with some general guidelines (“Maximize returns,” “Don't invest in mortgage-backed securities,” etc.), they do not, given the vicissitudes of the market, demand from these managers detailed theories of change.

Finally, take a very close look at your theory of change: Does it really tell you anything beyond what you've already included in your grant proposal? Does it suggest to you ways that you might improve your work? Given all the factors we've considered in this article, are you confident of its accuracy? Is it absolutely required by your funders? No? Then, borrowing a suggestion from David Hume, commit it to the flames! For it can do nothing but confound you and waste untold hours of your time.