



## Why are There Unintended Consequences, and What are the Implications for Doing Evaluation?

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## Planning and Evaluation Perspectives on Unintended Consequences

- Evaluators need to worry about unintended consequences because they limit our ability to apply strong methodology and assess outcome
- Planners know why there are unintended consequences
  - Multiple interacting processes
  - Nonlinear interactions
  - Long feedback loops
  - Sensitive dependence on initial conditions
  - Inability to completely specify all relevant program elements
  - Adaptations of programs to environmental changes
  - *Decision making based on less incomplete information*
  - *Miss early indications of relevant changes*
  - *Ability to make change happens intermittently along the policy or program life cycle*
- But how can evaluators contend with these dynamics?
  - Provide a sense of possibilities
  - Light treatment of a long article soon to be published in AJE

## Unforeseen and Unforeseeable Consequences

- Unforeseeable:
  - Anticipation is not difficult, it is *impossible* because of non-linear and adaptive behavior
  - Example: Automobile's impact on the environment
    - Long feedback loop between implementation and consequence
    - Complex trajectory of implementation (gas costs and distribution, highway system, suburban development, mass production, purchase costs, aftermarket support, etc. )
    - Theory (CO2 impact on environment) unknown
    - Measurement (remote sensing and computing power) non-existent
- Unforeseen:
  - A reasonable amount of surprise could be anticipated if we looked in the right way
  - Example: NCLB/high stakes testing
    - We know what happens to systems that reward only a single outcome metric
    - We know about teachers' classroom behavior
    - We know the resources and student mix of school systems
- Evaluation Tactics Differ Depending on the Mix of Unforeseen and Unforeseeable Consequences

## Evaluation Tactics Differ Depending on the Mix of Unforeseen and Unforeseeable Consequences

<b>Unforeseen Consequences</b>	
Life cycle dynamics	Use developmental processes to identify relevant variables. E.g. Technology change rate in technical education
Interdisciplinary teams	Under the right circumstances, groups make better decisions than individuals. Combine diverse perspectives with views core of stakeholders.
Building on the already known	Few programs are unique. Exploit the history of similar programs, and knowledge from outside the evaluation
Planning methodologies	Many techniques from planning can be adapted e.g. multiple scenario planning, assumption based planning, and backcasting.
Temporal, causal distance	Design for shorter distance between innovation and outcome in order to decrease surprise.
Group process	Manageable group size can be expanded by using special methods to handle large groups and to defuse conflict (e.g. Delphi, Dannemiller Tyson).

## Unforeseeable Consequences

Extend internal monitoring	Evolving logic models and qualitative methods to monitor changes as well as conformance to design intent
Environmental scanning	Low cost monitoring methods can identify likely sources of change.
Futures markets	Aggregating <i>independent</i> knowledge, belief, and intuition, without centralized direction, can provide strong indicators of trends and outcomes.
Retrospective logic modeling	Backwards looking logic modeling can link unfolding events to program activity.
Data	Flexible, multi-purpose data sources insure against being locked into irrelevance due to changing circumstances. Not always possible, e.g. need for specialized health status measures, difficulties of using data from existing IT systems
Knowledgeable pool of advice	Advisory boards can provide informed expertise that can be rapidly deployed at low cost.