

Facilitating Recommendation Uptake:  
The Role of Feasibility, Stakeholder Involvement, and Stakeholder Commitment

by

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### Abstract

A central goal of program evaluation is to provide recommendations that will inform programming decisions. Yet, recommendations often do not translate into practice; wasting precious resources and thwarting evaluators' ultimate goal of social betterment. Despite identifying numerous variables related to evaluation use in general and recommendation uptake in particular, the literature on this topic derives almost exclusively from evaluators' practice-based observations. Moving beyond a 'shopping list' approach, with this research I sought to identify, empirically, the relative importance of facilitators of recommendation uptake. Moreover, this work draws on reports from those actually responsible for implementing evaluation recommendations, adding an important perspective to the use and recommendation uptake literature.

Two studies were conducted with recommendation implementers; one using a structured Q-sort task, and the other using an open-ended interview method. The research questions were: i) are there different perspectives among implementers about the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake?; and ii) is there a subset of variables that reliably facilitate uptake regardless of the implementers' specific point of view?

Together the results suggest that there are indeed four unique implementer points of view regarding important facilitators of recommendation uptake. The results also suggest that stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process, stakeholder commitment to evaluation use, and the feasibility of the recommendation are reliable facilitators of uptake. This research has important theoretical and practical implications, and also reveals important avenues for future research on evaluation use.

### Acknowledgments

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## Recommendation Uptake

### Facilitating Recommendation Uptake:

#### The Role of Feasibility, Stakeholder Involvement, and Stakeholder Commitment

Imagine you are an applied researcher. You have been hired to evaluate a social program, and provide recommendations to inform future programming. In order to increase the odds that your recommendations will be implemented, you follow a variety of guidelines from the evaluation literature. You collect credible data, conduct careful data analyses, and construct evidence-based and actionable recommendations. You present your recommendations to decision makers in a clear and professional written report. Years later, you learn that your recommendations were never implemented, and the program was terminated due to ineffectiveness.

Evaluators have long lamented the non-use of evaluation findings (Alkin & Daillak, 1979; Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Fleischer & Christie, 2009; King, Thompson, & Pechman, 1981; Patton et al, 1977; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Sridharan, 2003; Weiss, 1988; 1998). When evaluation findings are not used to improve programs, evaluation resources are wasted, and evaluators' goal of social betterment is thwarted. Speculations about the factors that affect recommendation uptake abound. Yet, empirical questions about the facilitators of uptake remain. As an evaluation practitioner and a post-positivist, I undertook this research in an attempt to answer some of those questions.

### **Paper Outline**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore whether there are variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake. Two studies were conducted with decision makers to explore their views about the facilitators of recommendation uptake.

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Specifically, I investigated whether there are different points of view regarding the important facilitators of uptake, and if so, whether there are areas of consensus among them. I hope that the results will contribute to empirically-based evaluation theory, and help inform evaluation practice.

Before presenting the studies, I will provide an overview of the evaluation literature on recommendations as well as the literature on the factors that influence the use of evaluation findings. I will make some observations about the existing literature, and suggest that a synthesis of the two literatures as well as an empirical examination into decision makers' views on the topic is warranted. Each study will be presented in turn. The final sections will discuss the studies, observe the contributions and implications of this research, and suggest some areas for future investigations. But first, I will set the stage by defining key terms, and introducing essential concepts.

### **Defining Key Terms**

I use the term evaluation broadly to refer to the evaluation of social, health, or education programs, interventions, policies, or organizations. Recommendations are defined as proposals for action that are derived from the evaluation effort, and proposed by the evaluator to decision makers (Marsh & Glassick, 1988). Recommendation uptake and implementation are defined instrumentally as the tangible implementation of the evaluators' recommendation into practice. Stakeholder is defined broadly to mean anyone who has a "stake" in the program or a vested interest in the evaluation findings (Posovac & Carey, 2003). The more specific terms of evaluation user, decision maker, and recommendation implementer are used interchangeably to refer to people who have been responsible for implementing, or making decisions about implementing,

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recommendations (Azzam, 2010). Involvement is broadly defined as any level of involvement that any stakeholder has with the evaluation. Commitment is defined as the stakeholder being either dedicated or delegated to the implementation of the recommendations. Feasibility refers to an implementers' perception of whether a recommendation is doable. Having clarified those terms, allow me to introduce the concepts of program evaluation and the role of recommendations.

### **Program Evaluation**

"Program evaluation" is the systematic collection and analysis of data to answer questions about social programs. The discipline formally arose in the 1960s when governments spent unprecedented dollars on large-scale social programs. Accompanying that funding was a mandate for accountability. Program evaluation was the response to legislators' need for systematic information about program performance. In fact, the Government of Canada has had a formal evaluation policy since the 1970s (Shepherd, 2011). The most recent incarnation of that policy mandates that all federally funded programs undergo a formal evaluation every five years (Government of Canada, 2009). Thus, evaluation activities and funds are on the rise in Canada. Understanding how to facilitate evaluation use helps ensure those resources are not wasted.

### **The Purpose and Process of Evaluation**

The general purpose of any program evaluation is to inform program decision making (Posavac & Carey, 2003; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Ultimately, through the evaluation of human service programs, evaluators aim to alleviate human suffering by improving the services offered to people in need (Henry, 2000; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000; Posovac & Carey, 2003). Proximally, evaluations are conducted to either make

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final decisions about, or improve programs (Scriven, 1991). Regardless of the practical purpose though, the process of conducting an evaluation is the same. First the evaluator identifies the evaluation question(s), and then collects and analyzes data to answer those questions. Eventually, evaluation findings are presented to program decision makers; often in the form of recommendations (Iriti, Bickel, & Nelson, 2005; Posovac & Carey, 2003). It is those recommendations that are the focus of this research.

### **The Role of Recommendations**

Recommendations are statements that go beyond evaluation findings and conclusions; they are made to suggest actions for future programming (Scriven, 1991). For example, an evaluator might recommend that a remedial education program be continued as is, expanded to more sites, or be discontinued altogether. Focused more on program improvement, an evaluator may recommend that the program should emphasize socialization more than mathematics, or that the location be changed to better accommodate program participants.

Recommendations are not an incidental part of evaluation. They are offered with the intent of fostering social betterment, and they are meant to be used. Yet, we know that offering recommendations is no guarantee that they will be used (Ayers, 1987; Iriti et al., 2005; Peck & Gorzalski, 2009). When recommendations are not implemented, resources are wasted, and the ultimate goal of social betterment is thwarted. It is important then, to understand the factors that facilitate recommendation use.

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### **Use: A Fundamental Topic in Program Evaluation**

#### **Defining Evaluation Use**

There is general agreement that evaluation use is the effect that the evaluation has on the "thing" (e.g., program) being evaluated (Christie, 2007, p. 8). Recommendation uptake is one instance of what is now called *instrumental use*. Instrumental use was the earliest definition of use; meaning the use of evaluation results for tangible decision making purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to a literature around the definitions of use, there is a literature about the factors that are related to use. A small subsection of that literature pertains specifically to recommendations. I will review that literature first.

#### **Factors Related to Use**

#### **Increasing the Use of Recommendations**

Widely cited in the evaluation literature are the guidelines of Hendricks and his colleagues (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990). Based on their extensive experience, these evaluators offer several tips on how to develop, present, and follow up on evaluation recommendations. In terms of developing recommendations, they suggest that recommendations should be empirically-based, and that evaluators should work closely with agency personnel throughout the process, and be sure to consider the larger context into which the recommendations must fit. Regarding the presentation of recommendations, they advocate that evaluators should offer only realistic recommendations, and refrain from recommending fundamental program changes.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of use have since expanded to include other types of use (i.e., conceptual, symbolic, and process use). However, since this research focused on one particular type of instrumental use, these other types of use are not reviewed here.

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Finally, they suggest that evaluators might want to stay involved after offering recommendations to help with implementing them.

The importance of the communication of the recommendations has also been stressed (Alkin, Christie, & Rose, 2006; Hendricks, 1994; Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990; Rossi et al., 2004). Recommendations need to be clear and action oriented, with the implications of uptake clearly specified (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990; Vanlandingham, 2011). It is also stressed that evaluation findings should be communicated in a timely, clear, and concise manner (Alkin et al., 2006; Posovac & Carey, 2003; Rossi et al., 2004).

Thus, there is small prescriptive literature on how to construct and communicate recommendations in ways that foster their use. There are also a few conceptual frameworks that have been proposed to understand recommendations and their uptake.

### **Conceptual frameworks: Recommendation uptake.**

*Micro and macro factors.* Oman and Chitwood (1984) classify the factors affecting recommendation uptake as either "micro" or "macro". Micro factors are, at least partially, under the evaluator's influence (e.g., the evaluation methodology and how the recommendations are developed). Macro factors, on the other hand, are those that are in the larger political or organizational environment, and are outside of the evaluator's influence (e.g., personnel changes and budget cuts). While these classifications are intuitively appealing, their relative importance to uptake has not been empirically examined.<sup>2</sup>

*Levels of recommendations.* Other evaluators have noted that recommendations vary in their level of specificity, with some being very general and open-ended, and

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<sup>2</sup> In their case studies, Oman and Chitwood focused only on micro factors.

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others being more detailed and prescriptive (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Iriti et al., 2009; Marsh & Glassick, 1988). While there is some evidence that more detailed recommendations are more likely to be implemented (Marsh & Glasick, 1988), it is also recognized, that the relationship between recommendation specificity and uptake is probably context dependent; with general recommendations being more influential in some settings (Hendricks & Handly, 1990; Iriti et al., 2009; Marsh & Glasick, 1988).

*An integrated framework.* Peck and Gorzalski (2009) developed an integrated framework to study recommendation use. To do so, they combined existing frameworks on: (1) categories of use, (2) typologies of recommendations, and (3) factors affecting evaluation use. The latter two frameworks are most relevant to the research proposed here.<sup>3</sup>

The typology of recommendations refers to the type of change that is suggested. There are four types of changes that could be recommended: changes to behaviour, rules, structure, or purposes of the organization (Johnston, 1988). Both theory and research suggest that recommendations that suggest behaviour changes are more likely to be implemented than those that recommend changes related to organizational rules, structure, or purpose (Johnston, 1988; Peck & Gorzalski, 2009).

The second framework incorporated into Peck and Gorzalski's is Alkin's typology of the factors that affect evaluation use (Alkin, 1985; Taut & Alkin, 2003). Alkin proposes three general factors that can influence evaluation use: human, evaluation, and contextual factors. Human factors refer to characteristics of the evaluator and evaluation users (e.g., communication skills, social competence, prior experience with evaluation,

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<sup>3</sup> The first framework, categories of evaluation use, is not directly relevant here because the proposed research focuses solely on instrumental use. Peck and Gorzalski looked at types of use in addition to instrumental use (i.e., conceptual, symbolic, and process use), in their assessments.

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and extent of trust in the evaluator). Evaluation factors refer to how the evaluation is conducted (e.g., the methods used, the extent of stakeholder involvement in the evaluation, timeliness of the evaluation, reporting procedures). Context factors refer to those that are external to the evaluation itself (e.g., program characteristics, political structures, staff turnover). There is some empirical support for this framework in that human and evaluation factors were frequently cited as influencing use in two recent studies (Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Taut & Alkin, 2003).

*Summary: Factors that influence recommendation uptake.* There is a widely cited list of prescriptive guidelines on how to develop and communicate effective recommendations (e.g., involve stakeholders in the process, offer only feasible recommendations, etc.). There are also a few conceptual frameworks that suggest that certain elements of the recommendations themselves as well as various "human", "evaluation", and "contextual" factors influence uptake. While that literature is informative, it is also quite small, and there is room to build the literature on recommendation uptake in particular. Actually, given the central role that recommendations play in evaluation, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to them (Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990; Marsh & Glassick, 1988; Patton, 1988; Peck & Gorzalski, 2009). Perhaps that is because recommendation uptake is only one type and indicator of use. To be sure, much more attention has been paid to instrumental use in general. By zooming out to look at instrumental use more generally, we may be able to learn something useful about the more specific issue of recommendation uptake. Indeed, a few general classifications have been presented.

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**Conceptual frameworks: Classifications of factors affecting use.** Three comprehensive reviews of the evaluation use literature have attempted to classify the factors that potentially affect evaluation use. In an early narrative review of the conceptual and empirical literature, it was concluded that there are five "clusters" of variables that affect whether evaluation findings are used (Leviton & Hughes, 1981). Those clusters are: the relevance of the evaluation to the needs of the evaluation users; the extent of communication between the evaluators and evaluation users; the perceived credibility of the evaluation; the commitment to use by the evaluation users, and the translation of evaluation findings into implications.

In a subsequent review of the empirical literature, Cousins and Leithwood (1986) proposed that there are two higher-order categories of factors related to evaluation use: characteristics of the evaluation and characteristics of the decision making setting. Within each higher-order category there are six factors that influence evaluation use. The "evaluation" factors are: evaluation quality (e.g., method type); perceived credibility of the evaluator and evaluation process; communication quality; nature of the evaluation findings (e.g., positive versus negative findings); relevance of the information to the decision makers' needs; and timeliness of the dissemination of evaluation findings. The "decision making setting" factors are: the information needs of evaluation clients; the political climate of the evaluation context; decision characteristics related to the evaluation questions (e.g., type of decision, significance of the decision); the presence of competing information; the personal characteristics of the evaluation clients; and their commitment and/or receptiveness to evaluation as influencing whether evaluation findings were used. The reviewers concluded that the quality and intensity of the

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evaluation methods (i.e., frequency of observation and measurement) seemed to be the most significant factors related to use (Cousins & Leithwood, 1986).

Finally, Johnson and colleagues (2009) conducted a review of the more recent empirical literature on evaluation use. They used Cousins and Leithwood's classification system to structure their review, but found that one new category and one new factor had to be added in order to accurately classify the more recent research. The new category (stakeholder involvement) was added to account for a number of studies that addressed stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process. The new factor (evaluator competence), was added to the evaluation implementation category to account for the studies that addressed the characteristics of the evaluator that go beyond professional credibility (which is accounted for in the original framework), and focus more on the evaluator's social competence (Johnson et al., 2009). This review highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement in facilitating evaluation use. Specifically engagement, interaction, and communication between evaluation users and evaluators seems important to maximizing evaluation use (Johnson et al., 2009).

***Summary: Factors that influence evaluation use.*** Spanning the last five decades much has been written about the factors related to evaluation use. Three reviews have attempted to classify the myriad of factors purportedly related to evaluation use. Leviton and Hughes (1981) explain that use is influenced by the relevance and credibility of the evaluation, the translation of findings into implications, the extent of communication between evaluators and users, as well as the users' level of commitment to using the evaluation. Cousins and Leithwood (1986) explain that use is influenced by the two higher order categories of characteristics of the evaluation itself or characteristics of the

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decision making setting. To account for more recent literature on use, a third higher-order category “stakeholder involvement” has been added to the Cousins & Leithwood framework (Johnson et al., 2009).

### **Moving Forward with Research on Recommendation Uptake**

There is a considerable amount written about the factors that affect evaluation use. However, that literature can be overwhelming, and is often not directly relevant to the question of recommendation uptake. Practitioners need an empirical ground from which to inform how they might facilitate the uptake of their recommendations. While the use literature "provides considerable insight on the utilization of evaluations", little attention is given to the use of recommendations per se (Marsh & Glasick, 1988). It is important though to expand the recommendation uptake literature as recommendation uptake is one particular instance of use. Practitioners interested in facilitating the implementation of their recommendations need directly relevant empirically-based theories that they can use to guide their evaluation work (Smith, 1993).

Indeed, most of the recommendations literature is conceptual in nature. For example, the oft-cited guidelines of Hendricks and his colleagues (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990) are based on practice wisdom; not systematic empirical examination. To be sure, there is value in professional judgement (Schwandt, 2009; Tourmen, 2009), and one should be careful not to inflate the practice theory divide (Hopkins, 2013). But if coupled with empirical results, the guidelines derived from practice wisdom can be strengthened. Actually, there have been repeated calls for more research on evaluation so that the practice can be better understood and more empirically-based (Alkin, 2003; Brandon & Signh, 2009; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark,

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2009; 2011; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991; Smith, 1993; Weiss, 1998; Weiss et al., 2005). Furthermore, a recent survey revealed that evaluators consider research on evaluation to be "very important", and that they are especially in need of more research on evaluation impact and use (Szanyi, Azzam, & Galen, 2012).

Another problem with the current literature is that it is based mostly on evaluators' views; decision makers' views on the factors related to use in general and recommendation uptake in particular have not been examined extensively (Alkin, 2003; Leviton, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004; Weiss, 1998). It is important, though, to explore decision makers' views as they are the ones actually responsible for recommendation implementation. For example, if given a list of all the variables mentioned in the literature as affecting use, how would decision makers "make sense" of that list? In their opinions, what are the most important variables influencing recommendation uptake? Is there a prototypical point of view about the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake, or are there different points of view among decision makers as to what importantly facilitates uptake? And if different points of view do emerge, would there be areas of consensus among them? In other words, are there certain variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake?

Indeed, the question of reliable facilitators highlights another important gap in the literature: the need to move beyond the "shopping list" of factors that influence use (Shulha & Cousins, 1997, p. 196). Knowing about the relative importance of the variables related to use as well as whether there are "sure bets" (i.e., variables reliably related to uptake) would be of value to practitioners looking to increase the odds that their

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recommendations will be implemented. This is not a new idea though, as many years ago Patton and his colleagues (1977) poignantly noted that:

The issue at this time is not the search for a single formula of utilization success, nor the generation of ever-longer lists of possible factors affecting utilization. The task for the present is to identify and define a few key variables that may make a major difference in a significant number of evaluation cases (p. 142).

Thus, there is a need to move away from too much data proliferation into more of a data-reduction type approach. In partial answer to that call, this research begins to explore whether there are reliable relationships between the myriad of variables proposed to affect use and the outcome of recommendation uptake, and it sought to do so from the implementer's- not the evaluator's - perspective. In order to do that however, the vast literature on evaluation use and recommendation uptake needed to be reduced to its component parts. With this in mind, I undertook to synthesize the “shopping lists” from the recommendation uptake and use in general literature into a comprehensive framework.

### **A Synthesis**

In Table 1, I present the recommendation uptake and use in general literature in a more condensed format. As shown, the categorizing frameworks discussed in the literature can be organized according to whether they arose in the context of discussing use in general (rows 1 through 3), or recommendation uptake in particular (rows 4 through 7). Frameworks specific to recommendations can be further divided according to whether they discuss attributes of the evaluation context (rows 4 and 5), or attributes of the recommendation itself (rows 6 and 7).

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Table 1. *Frameworks used to organize the factors related to evaluation use*

Factors	Description	Reference
<i>Factors Discussed in the Context of General Evaluation Use</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance of evaluation to users' needs</li> <li>• Extent of communication between evaluators &amp; users</li> <li>• Perceived credibility of the evaluation</li> <li>• Commitment to use by evaluation users</li> <li>• Translation of findings into implications</li> </ul>	Based on a review of the conceptual & empirical literature, concluded there are 5 clusters of variables affecting whether evaluation findings are used	Leviton & Hughes (1981)
<p><i>Evaluation Implementation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance of the information to users' needs</li> <li>• Communication quality</li> <li>• Perceived credibility of evaluator/evaluation process</li> <li>• Evaluation quality</li> <li>• Nature of evaluation findings (positive vs. negative)</li> <li>• Timeliness of dissemination</li> </ul> <p><i>Decision Making Setting</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment/receptiveness to evaluation as influencing whether evaluation findings are used</li> <li>• Personal characteristics of the evaluation clients</li> <li>• Information needs of users</li> <li>• Political Climate</li> <li>• Decision characteristics related to evaluation questions</li> <li>• Presence of competing information</li> </ul>	Based on a review of the empirical literature, concluded there are 2 higher order categories of factors related to evaluation use with six factors within each overall category	Cousins & Leithwood (1986)
<p><i>Evaluation Implementation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived social competence of evaluator</li> </ul> <p><i>Stakeholder Involvement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement creates commitment/receptiveness to evaluation</li> <li>• Involvement promotes improved communication</li> <li>• Involvement leads to increased credibility of evaluation/evaluator</li> <li>• Involvement related to findings is important to evaluation use</li> <li>• Involvement fostered increased relevance</li> <li>• Involvement of stakeholders at different organizational levels affects use</li> </ul>	Based on the most recent review of the empirical literature, the factors from above row (Cousins & Leithwood) were supported. But the more recent research on use warranted the addition of one new category (involvement) and one new factor under the initial implementation category (social competence).	Johnson et al. (2009)

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Factors	Description	Reference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involving a range of stakeholders in different settings</li> <li>Involvement facilitated the introduction of stakeholders information needs</li> <li>Direct relationship between involvement and use</li> </ul>		
<b><i>Factors Discussed in the Context of Explaining the Uptake of Recommendations</i></b>		
<i>Factors Pertaining to Elements of the Evaluation and Evaluation Context</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Micro factors (small scale which evaluators can influence e.g., methodology, data collection decisions, process of developing recommendations.)</li> <li>Macro factors (large scale factors which are outside of evaluators' influence; e.g., budget cuts/increases, hiring freezes, personnel changes).</li> </ul>	<p>In introducing their case studies, Oman and Chitwood noted that the various variables purported to be associated with the acceptance of recommendations can be categorized into factors that are either within the influence of evaluators, or structural and beyond their influence.</p>	<p>Oman &amp; Chitwood (1984)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human factors (characteristics of the evaluator and evaluation users; e.g., stakeholder openness to and prior experiences with evaluation, and the technical competence of the evaluator and extent to which (s)he understands the program context)</li> <li>Evaluation factors (factors pertaining to the way the evaluation is conducted, e.g., methods used, type of data, and "utility" of the findings. )</li> <li>Context factors (factors external to the evaluation itself; e.g., resources, staff turnover, and program characteristics)</li> </ul>	<p>Alkin (1985) summarized the factors that influence evaluation use into three clusters. More recent work has empirically supported those categories with the human factor seeming to be particularly important (Peck &amp; Gorzalski).</p>	<p>Alkin (1985) Peck &amp; Gorzalski (2009)</p>
<i>Factors Pertaining to Elements of the Recommendations</i>		
<p>Level of change recommended by the recommendation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changes to behaviour</li> <li>Changes to rules</li> <li>Changes to organizational structure</li> <li>Changes to organizational purpose</li> </ul>	<p>In a retrospective case study Johnston adapted Doves (1967) conceptual typology of change to explain the uptake of recommendations he made in evaluations. There are four types of changes a recommendation can suggest: changes to behaviour, rules, structure, or purposes of the organization. Recommendations focusing on changing behaviour are most likely to be implemented while those focusing on changes to organizational structure &amp; purpose are least likely.</p>	<p>Johnston (1988) Peck &amp; Gorzalski (2009)</p>
<p>Specificity of the recommendation:</p>	<p>In a case study into the use of</p>	<p>Marsh &amp;</p>

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Factors	Description	Reference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommend an issue be addressed</li> <li>• Recommend an issue be addressed, and several options on how to address it</li> <li>• Recommend an issue be addressed, and one option on how it be addressed</li> <li>• Recommend an issue be addressed, one option on how to address it and how to implement that option.</li> </ul>	<p>recommendations, Marsh &amp; Glassick developed a coding scheme to classify the specificity of recommendations in evaluation reports. Independently, Iriti and colleagues developed a conceptual framework specifying the level of specificity that recommendations can take.</p>	<p>Glassick (1988)</p> <p>Iriti et al (2009)</p>

An analysis of Table 1 reveals that there is significant overlap among the conceptual frameworks. For example, Oman and Chitwood's "micro" factors correspond to Alkin's "human" and "evaluation" factors; both of which correspond to the more detailed category of "evaluation implementation characteristics" proposed by Cousins and Leithwood. Actually, the Cousins and Leithwood framework has been considered the most "comprehensive, well defined, and concrete" (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 379). Thus, that framework, along with the recent additions by Johnson and colleagues, and a few factors specific to recommendations provide a good organizing framework to empirically examine recommendation uptake.

Thus, synthesizing the various frameworks put forth to describe recommendation uptake in particular and evaluation use in general, an alternative, more inclusive, categorizing framework is proposed (See Figure 1). From the variety of existing frameworks, the categories of factors affecting use can be sorted according to whether they are attributes of the evaluation or evaluation context, or whether they are attributes of the recommendations themselves. The attributes of the evaluation and evaluation context can be subdivided into macro and micro level factors.

Those factors that are micro in nature (i.e., potentially influenced by the evaluator) can be further subdivided into the following categories: communication

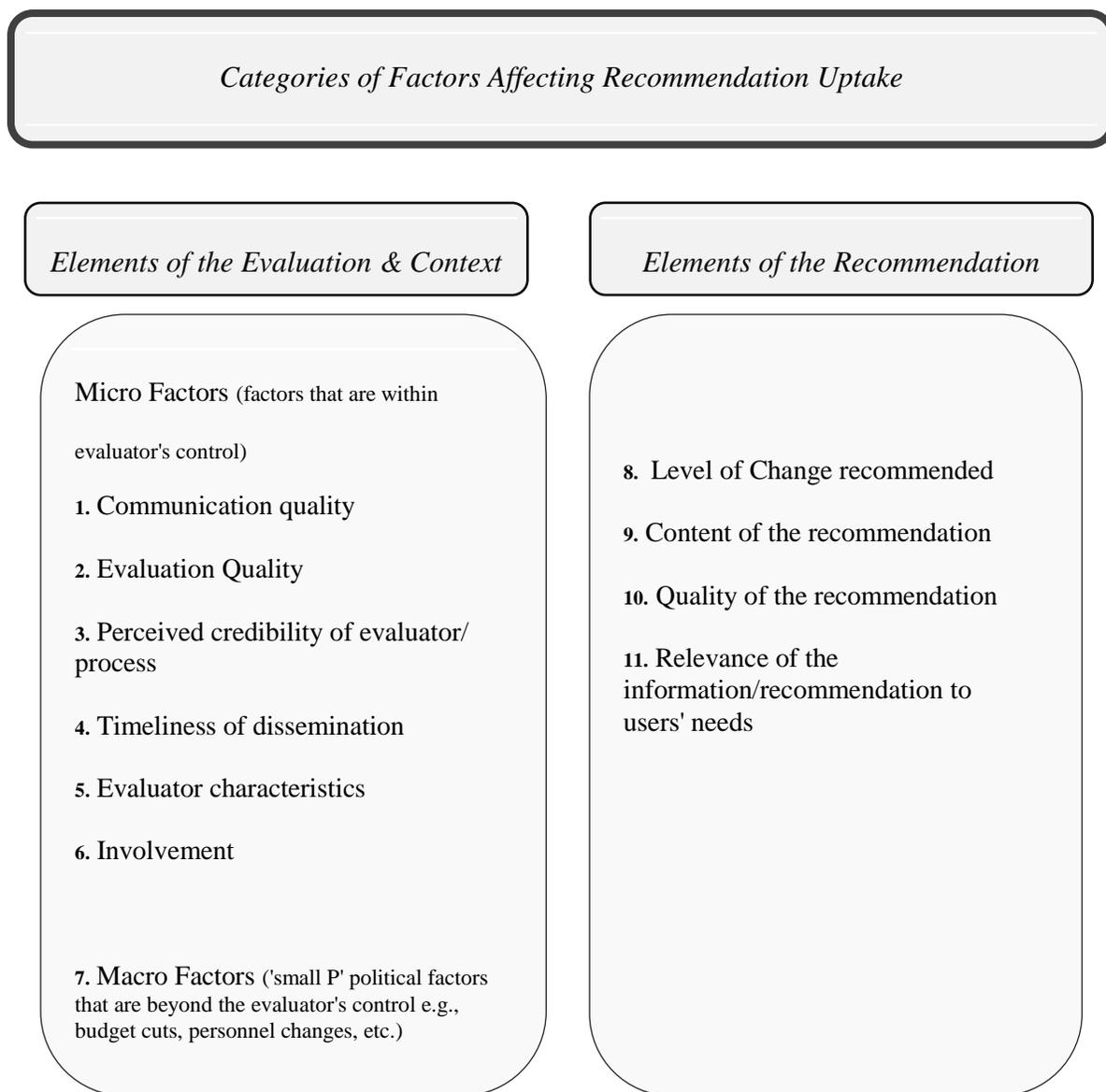
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quality, evaluation quality, perceived credibility of evaluator/evaluation process, timeliness of dissemination, evaluator characteristics, and involvement. Finally, there are also factors pertaining to the recommendations. That category can be further subdivided into the level of change suggested by the recommendation, the content of the recommendation, the quality of the recommendation, and the relevance of the recommendation to the users' needs. Thus, as detailed in Figure 1, we are left with eleven categories of factors that may potentially influence recommendation uptake.

This synthesis makes an important contribution to the literature as it incorporates both the general (use in general) and the very specific (recommendation uptake) aspects of instrumental use. That is important because, to date, no framework has encompassed all of the factors that are potentially related to recommendation uptake. What is more is that, while the synthesized framework is comprehensive, it is also concise. Motivated by the need for data-reduction, this new framework captures all the relevant information from the instrumental use and recommendation uptake literature, and it does so with as few categories as possible. As such, in addition to the important conceptual contribution it offers, this new framework also provides a useful platform from which to launch research on recommendation uptake that is more comprehensive than previous research has been. Before describing how this framework was used in the present research though, allow me to summarize the main points so far.

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Figure 1. A synthesized framework for categorizing the factors that influence recommendation uptake.



### **Summary**

Program evaluation aims to improve programs so that they can better serve people in need (Preskill & Caracelli, 1997). However, evaluation findings and recommendations are not always translated into practice (Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Taut & Alkin, 2003). While many variables have been identified as potentially important in influencing evaluation use, very little of the use literature focuses on the facilitators of recommendation uptake in particular, and only a small portion of it examines the opinions of actual users of evaluation. It is important though to study recommendation uptake specifically, as one instance of evaluation use, so that evaluation practitioners can better understand how to facilitate the implementation of their recommendations in particular. It is also important to explore users' views on the topic as they are the ones who actually make decisions about whether to implement recommendations. Furthermore, it is time that research on evaluation use began to move beyond identifying the variety of variables related to use to identifying variables that are reliably related to it (Patton et al., 1977). This research sought to address those gaps.

### **The Present Research**

Two studies were conducted with recommendation implementers to explore what they think are the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Motivated by the field's need for data reduction, the emphasis of this research was on identifying variables that are consistently agreed to be important facilitators of uptake.

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### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of recommendation implementers about what factors importantly facilitate recommendation uptake, and to explore whether there might be a subset of variables that reliably facilitate uptake. The research was guided by the newly developed synthesis framework that was presented in Figure 1.

The guiding research questions were:

- 1) Are there different perspectives among implementers about the *most important* facilitators of recommendation uptake?
- 2) If there are different points of view, is there a subset of variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake regardless of the implementers' point of view? And, if so, what are they?

The findings will be useful in informing evaluators about what to emphasize in their evaluation practice to help facilitate the implementation of their recommendations, and will contribute to the development of empirically-based evaluation theories.

### **Study 1**

This study explored the perceptions of recommendation implementers as to what importantly influences recommendation uptake. The aim of the research was to explore how the perspectives of implementers configure empirically, with an emphasis on identifying areas of consensus among the perspectives. The specific research questions were:

- 1) Are there different perspectives held by recommendation implementers as to what importantly influences recommendation uptake?

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2) Are there areas of consensus amongst the different perspectives around what importantly influences recommendation uptake? And if so, what are they?

### **Method**

**Q Methodology.** Q-methodology was used to address the research questions (Brown, 1993; Stephenson, 1953). Q-method allows participants to represent their individual viewpoints by ranking a set of statements provided by the researcher. It is a useful tool for revealing different social perspectives and understanding how people think about a particular issue (Van Excel & de Graaf, 2005; Webler, Danielson, & Tuler, 2009).

Each Q study proceeds in a similar fashion. First, the researcher identifies a variety of statements about a particular topic (i.e., the *concourse*). From that *concourse*, a sample of statements is selected to represent a given topic (the Q-set). That Q-set is then given to a group of participants (the P-set), who are instructed to rank order the statements according to their views (the Q-sort). The Q-sorts are then factor analyzed and interpreted to express different social perspectives on the issue at hand (Brown, 1993; Van Excel & de Graaf, 2005; Webler, et al., 2009). The result is different perspectives on, in this case, the factors that importantly influence recommendation uptake. I turn now to a discussion of each step of Q-method, and how each was tackled in this research.

***Developing the concourse.*** The *concourse* is essentially the universe of statements about a particular issue (Brown, 1993). At this step, the researcher collects the variety of statements that reflect existing views about the topic of interest. In the present study, the generation of the *concourse* was based on an in-depth review of the program evaluation literature pertaining to use in general and recommendation uptake in particular.

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Specifically, 32 publications were selected to represent the variety of views in the evaluation literature about the factors that influence recommendation uptake in particular, and use in general. The publications included conceptual and empirical writings in government publications, scholarly journals, and evaluation handbooks and textbooks ranging from 1981 - 2011. The sources were selected because they are articulate and commonly cited references in the evaluation use/recommendation uptake literature, and represent the ongoing dialog among evaluators on this topic. These sources are marked with an asterisk in the reference list.

Each source was carefully read, and explicit statements about the factors that facilitate instrumental use in general or recommendation uptake in particular were extracted, resulting in a 'concourse' of over 200 statements. As is customary in Q-method, a framework was used to categorize the concourse. Categorizing the concourse ensures that the small set of statements ultimately selected will accurately represent the multitude of ideas that exist about a topic (Brown, 1993; Weblar et al., 2009). The newly-developed synthesis framework (See Figure 1) was used to categorize the concourse in this study. That is, the eleven categories obtained based on my synthesis of the evaluation use and recommendation uptake literature were used to ensure that each element of the framework is represented in the Q-sample (See Figure 1).

*Selecting the Q-sample.* In order to get from the unwieldy concourse (population of ideas about a topic) to a more manageable set of statements for respondents to sort, the researcher employs some strategic sampling procedures. Typically, this involves choosing a diverse set of statements from each theoretical category represented in the concourse. Specifically, the researcher chooses a few of the "best" diverse statements

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from each category to comprise the Q-sample. The "best" is determined by the researcher following these guidelines: Good Q statements are ones that people are likely to have a view about (Webler et al., 2009). They are understandable, but not necessarily narrow (Webler et al., 2009).

By applying these guidelines, a representative sample of 30 statements was selected from the concourse of 200 statements. Since the synthesis framework (Figure 1) was used to structure the concourse, the statements were selected to reflect elements of the evaluation and evaluation context, and elements of the recommendations themselves (the three highest order categories of the framework). Within the *elements of the evaluation and context* category are statements to represent the subcategories of micro (i.e., communication quality, evaluation quality, credibility, timeliness, evaluator characteristics, and involvement) and macro (i.e., small 'p' political) factors. Within the *elements of the recommendation* category are statements to represent the subcategories of: level of change, content of the recommendation, quality of the recommendation, and relevance.

These Q-items were piloted on a small sample of friends and colleagues ( $n = 7$ ) who had varying levels of education and experience with program evaluation. Pilot participants were asked to provide feedback on the readability, relevance, and meaningfulness of the statements. Based on pilot participant feedback, minor grammatical changes were made to the statements. The final set of Q-items, organized by theoretical category, can be seen in Table 2.

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Table 2. *Q Statements Organized by Conceptual Category*

Category	Definition of the Category	Q statements
<b>Elements of the Evaluation &amp; Context</b>		
Communication Quality	The quality and amount of communication throughout evaluation process and the quality and appropriateness of the disseminated knowledge.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is....</i></p> <p>2. The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report.</p> <p>29. Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.</p> <p>11. Effective &amp; ongoing communication between you and the evaluator throughout the evaluation process.</p>
Evaluation Quality	Implementers' perceptions about the quality and appropriateness of the methods used, and the data upon which the recommendations are based.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is....</i></p> <p>1. The appropriateness of the evaluation methods (e.g., methodological quality, sophistication, rigour, etc.).</p> <p>14. Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.</p> <p>18. The competence and qualifications of the evaluator.</p>
Perceived Credibility of the evaluator or evaluation process	Implementers' perceptions about the technical credibility of the evaluation process (i.e., how the evaluation was planned and conducted) as well as the professional and technical credibility of the evaluator.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is....</i></p> <p>9. The objectivity of the evaluation/evaluator.</p> <p>16. The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.).</p>
Timeliness of Dissemination	The timeliness of the recommendation being presented to implementers.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is....</i></p> <p>6. Whether the recommendation is provided in a timely fashion.</p>
Evaluator Characteristics	The evaluator's ability to form relationships with stakeholders and understand the specific context of the program being evaluated.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is....</i></p> <p>21. Having an evaluator with good people skills (i.e., social competence).</p> <p>25. Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them.</p> <p>28. Whether the evaluator understands the</p>

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Category	Definition of the Category	Q statements
		unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.
Involvement	Extent to which stakeholders were involved in the evaluation process, and the evaluator involved with uptake.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>19. Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.</p> <p>27. Active promotion by and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.</p> <p>30. Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.</p>
"Small P" Political Factors	Macro factors outside of the evaluator's control.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>3. Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.)</p> <p>17. Forces outside of the evaluation (e.g., political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.).</p> <p>26. Personal characteristics of stakeholders, such as personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc.</p>
<b>Elements of the Recommendation</b>		
Level of change recommended	The level of change recommended and the feasibility of the suggestion.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>13. Whether the recommendation focuses on gradual change that occurs within an existing framework and/or builds on current activities.</p> <p>23. Focusing on micro-level (i.e., changes to behaviours &amp; rules) as opposed to macro-level changes (i.e., changes to organizational structure and purpose).</p> <p>24. Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.</p>
Content of the Recommendation	The extent to which findings and recommendations are positive and congruent with stakeholders' beliefs.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>4. A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change.</p> <p>10. The nature of the recommendation (i.e., whether it's positive/favourable to the agency/program).</p> <p>15. Whether recommendations are consistent</p>

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Category	Definition of the Category	Q statements
		with yours (or other stakeholders') expectations, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours.
Quality of the Recommendation	The specificity with which the recommendation was stated.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>5. Whether the recommendation is general (e.g., non-prescriptive suggestions for change, presents several possible actions/options to address a problem, etc.).</p> <p>20. Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.</p> <p>22. Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.</p>
Relevance	The relevance of the recommendation to the implementer's information/programming needs.	<p><i>In your view, how important to uptake is...</i></p> <p>7. Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context.</p> <p>8. Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified.</p> <p>12. Whether the recommendation reflects your (or other stakeholders) concerns and needs.</p>

***Recruiting the P-set (participants).*** The maximum variation sampling technique was used in that participants were selected to represent various potentially different views in the target population (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Sandleowski, 1995; Webler et al., 2009). Regarding the number of participants, it is important in Q-studies to have no more participants than there are Q-statements. The rationale is similar to why you would not want to have more variables than respondents in survey research. Often ratios of 3:1 or 2:1 are used. Thus, for a study with 30 statements, the ideal number of Q participants is between ten and fifteen (Webler et al., 2009).

A convenience sample of 15 recommendation implementers was recruited through the researcher's community contacts (a 100% response rate). In keeping with the

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maximum variance sampling tradition, an effort was made to recruit implementers who worked in a variety of capacities, in a variety of fields, and had a varied amount of experience with evaluation. See Table 3 for the participant characteristics.

Table 3. *Participant Characteristics*

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>
Experience with Evaluation (years)	1-4	5
	5-10	3
	11-20	5
	More than 20	2
Organization Type	Government	8
	Nonprofit	7
Position	Staff	3
	Program Manager	8
	Senior Admin.	4
Field	Education	4
	Health	5
	Social Services	6

**Conducting the Q-sort.** Participants conducted the Q-sort via the Internet using the "Q Assessor" program (available at <http://q-assessor.com/>); a valid and reliable way of conducting Q-sorts (Reber, Kaufman, & Crop, 2000). Participants were sent an invitation email by the researcher with a link to the study site. Once they entered the study site and consented to participate, they read the following preamble:

As you know, program evaluators offer recommendations. But, those recommendations are not always implemented into practice. To understand why, we are exploring opinions about the factors that facilitate recommendation implementation.

There are a number of reasons why recommendations made by program evaluators might not get implemented. Here, we ask your opinions about what factors make a difference.

You will be presented with, and asked to "sort", 30 statements about factors that might influence whether recommendations get implemented. When evaluating the statements, please provide us with YOUR view of what importantly influences whether

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recommendations get implemented. Try to think about your experiences with evaluation, and what made the difference for YOU.

Participants were presented with the set of 30 randomly numbered statements, and instructed to sort the statements twice. In the first sort, they indicated whether they thought each statement was "more important", "neutral", or "less important" to recommendation uptake. In the second, more detailed, sort, participants' responses were forced to confine to a quasi-normal distribution (See Figure 2). This is typical practice in Q-Methodology, and is meant to ensure that respondents thoughtfully consider each statement and its *relative* importance (Brown, 1993). The result is that there are a few statements toward the tails of the distributions (i.e., participants' strongest views), and the bulk of the statements cluster in the middle of the distribution (Brown, 1993).

Once the sorting was complete, the participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, and submitted their responses electronically. Participants were compensated a \$10.00 Chapters/Indigo gift card for their participation.

Figure 2. *Q sort grid*

Least important to uptake -4	-3	-2	-1	Neutral 0	1	2	3	Most important to uptake 4

*Note:* One unique statement is placed in each box during the Q sorting process.

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### Analysis and Results

The analysis of Q-sorts involves conducting a factor analysis which is used to determine both the number of unique perspectives present in the data, and whether there are areas of consensus among them. These data were analyzed using Q-Assessor's data analysis functions (Reber, et al., 2000; Schmolck, 2011).

**Factor analysis.** Unlike standard factor analysis where one attempts to group scale items to an underlying theoretical construct, Q-method factor analysis attempts to group together *participants* who have sorted the Q-items similarly. First, each person's rating for each item is correlated with every other person's rating for the same item. This identifies the level of agreement among the individual Q-sorters (Brown, 1980). Next, the correlation matrix is factor analyzed to identify how many "basically different Q-sorts are in evidence" (Brown, 1993, p.107). Thus, the resultant factors represent groups of sorters with similar views (Brown, 1980). In the present research, each "factor" represents a distinct *perspective* about what importantly influences uptake. This unique perspective is held in common by the persons who load onto each factor.

**Factor extraction, rotation, and retention.** The data were subjected to centroid factor analysis and varimax rotation. The criteria for factor retention were: 1) that the factor had an eigenvalue greater than one, and 2) at least two Q-sorts loaded significantly and uniquely on the factor (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2005). Factor loadings were calculated at the  $p < 0.01$  significance level using the following formula,  $2.58(1/\sqrt{n})$ , where  $n$  equals the number of statements in the Q Set (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2005). With 30 items in the Q-set, the factor loading criterion was calculated to be .464 [i.e.,  $2.58(1/\sqrt{30})$ ]. However, to minimize confounding sorts and to maximize the number

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of significantly loading participants, the more stringent criterion of .50 was used (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The application of the above criteria led to the retention of four factors. The four factors accounted for 44% of the total variance in the correlation matrix. Thirteen of the fifteen participants loaded significantly on a factor, and there were no cross-loadings.

Before presenting the different points of view and areas of consensus, allow me to summarize what has occurred to this point. Fifteen separate perspectives on the factors that importantly influence recommendation uptake were analyzed. Those fifteen perspectives were reduced to four operant types (factors). These four "factors" are actually distinct points of view about what importantly influences recommendation uptake; the structures of which can be found in Appendix B.

***The Different Points of View.*** In presenting the different perspectives, I focus on the top ranked statements (i.e., those statements ranked +4 and +3), as those are the elements that are thought to be the most important facilitators of uptake for each perspective (Donner, 2001). In describing the perspectives, I will focus not only on the specific statements, but also on their corresponding higher order and subcategories from the synthesized framework (see Figure 1), as that allows for analysis at both the operational and conceptual levels.

***Perspective A:*** Five participants loaded on this factor which accounted for 13% of the variance in the correlation matrix. The people who constitute this perspective were primarily program managers; although one person was a program staff. They worked in the fields of social services ( $n = 3$ ) and education ( $n = 2$ ); in both the non-profit ( $n = 3$ ) and government ( $n = 2$ ) sectors, and had varying levels of experience with evaluation.

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As can be seen in Table 4, this view seems to have equal recognition of the important role of elements of the recommendation, and elements of the evaluation in the uptake of recommendations. In terms of the subcategories, five of them are reflected in this point of view. Specifically, this perspective emphasizes the important roles of the relevance of the recommendation (i.e., whether it focuses on relevant issues), and the level of change it suggests (i.e., whether it's feasible) in the uptake of recommendations (Statements 7 and 24). In terms of elements of the evaluation, they see communication quality (report clarity), credibility (a transparent evaluation process), and involvement (committed personnel) as important facilitators of uptake (Statements 29, 16, and 30). Thus, this is a view that wants to see recommendations that are feasible, relevant, clearly presented and stem from a transparent and collaborative process.

Table 4. *Perspective A Compared to the Other Views*

Higher Order Category (Subcategory)	Q - Statement	Factors			
		FA	FB	FC	FD
Relevance (Element of the Recommendation)	7. Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context.	4	-1	2	-1
Communication Quality (Element of the Evaluation)	29. Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.	4	1	-3	3
Perceived Credibility (Element of the Evaluation)	16. The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.).	3	0	1	1
Level of Change (Element of the Recommendation)	24. Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.	3	1	1	2
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	30. Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.	3	2	4	2

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*Perspective B.* Three participants loaded significantly on this factor which accounted for 12% of the variance in the correlation matrix. These people were either program managers ( $n = 2$ ) or executive directors ( $n = 1$ ). They worked in the non-profit sector, in the fields of social services ( $n = 2$ ) and education ( $n = 1$ ), and had varying levels of experience with evaluation.

As can be seen in Table 5, this view is similar to perspective A in that it draws on five subcategories (although not exactly the same ones) and emphasizes elements of both the recommendation, and the evaluation as facilitators of recommendation uptake. From this point of view, most of the onus appears to be on the recommendation side of things as recommendation content (whether it's thought to be an honest suggestion), recommendation quality (whether it's linked to the evaluation findings), and relevance (whether the implications of uptake are clarified) are seen to be important facilitators of uptake (Statements 4, 20, and 8). Though, they also emphasize involvement (involving stakeholders in the evaluation process) and evaluation quality (the competence of the evaluator) in the uptake of recommendations (Statements 19 and 18). Thus, this is a point of view that values honest, relevant, and empirically-supported recommendations that stem from a collaborative process and a credible source.

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Table 5. *Perspective B compared to the other views*

Subcategory (Higher order Category)	Q - Statement	Factors			
		FB	FA	FC	FD
Recommendation Content (Element of the Recommendation)	4. A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change.	4	-3	-4	2
Recommendation Quality (Element of the Recommendation)	20. Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.	4	1	2	4
Relevance (Element of the Recommendation)	8. Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified.	3	-1	2	3
Evaluation Quality (Element of the Evaluation)	18. The competence and qualifications of the evaluator.	3	0	2	-3
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	19. Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.	3	2	3	1

**Perspective C.** Three participants loaded on this factor which accounted for 10% of the variance in the correlation matrix. They were program managers ( $n = 2$ ) and staff ( $n = 1$ ), who worked in both non-profit ( $n = 2$ ) and government ( $n = 1$ ) agencies. They worked in the fields of health ( $n = 2$ ) and social services ( $n = 1$ ), and had varying levels of experience with evaluation.

As can be seen in Table 6, only three subcategories are reflected in this perspective. Indeed, this perspective is different from views A and B in that it does not emphasize the recommendations themselves as being important to uptake. Instead, they emphasize elements of the evaluation and evaluation context as being the most important facilitators of uptake.

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Table 6. *Perspective C Compared to the Other Views*

Conceptual Category (Overarching Category)	Q - Statement	Factors			
		FC	FA	FB	FD
Macro Factors (Element of Evaluation Context)	3. Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.).	4	2	-1	4
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	30. Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.	4	3	2	2
Macro Factors (Element of Evaluation Context)	17. Forces outside of the evaluation (eg. political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.).	3	-1	2	1
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	19. Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.	3	2	3	1
Evaluator Characteristics (Element of the Evaluation)	25. Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them.	3	-1	0	-4

Specifically, small 'p' factors (program constraints and political climate) and involvement factors (stakeholder involvement, and committed personnel) are very influential to uptake from this point of view (Statements 3, 17, 30, and 19). Although they do emphasize the importance of the evaluator-stakeholder relationship as well (Statement 25). Thus, this perspective wants to see recommendations that are doable, and stem from a collaborative process.

**Perspective D.** Two participants loaded significantly on this factor, which accounted for 9% of the variance in the correlation matrix. Both participants worked in government-based organizations, and had little experience with evaluation. One participant was a manager in a social service agency, and the other was a program staff in

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a public health agency.

As can be seen in Table 7, all three higher order categories, and four subcategories are reflected in this viewpoint. Similar to perspective B, this view seems to be very focused on aspects of the recommendations themselves. Specifically, they emphasize the quality of the recommendation in that they value very specific recommendations that are clearly linked to the evaluation findings (Statements 22 and 20), and the relevance of the recommendation in that they want the implications of implementation clarified (Statement 8).

Similar to perspective A, this view also values communication quality, specifically the clarity of the evaluation report (Statement 29). And, similar to perspective C, they also recognize the power of small 'p' macro factors such as program constraints in the uptake of recommendations (Statement 3). Thus, this is a view that is looking for recommendations that are logically linked to the findings, specific in how to proceed, clear about the implications of implementation, and are presented in a clear manner, and doable.

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Table 7. *Perspective D Compared to the Other Views*

Conceptual Category (Overarching Category)	Q- Statement	Factors			
		FD	FA	FC	FB
Macro Factors (Element of the Evaluation Context)	3. Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, etc).	4	-2	4	-1
Recommendation Quality (Element of the Recommendation)	20. Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.	4	1	2	4
Relevance (Element of the Recommendation)	8. Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified.	3	-1	2	3
Recommendation Quality (Element of the Recommendation)	22. Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.	3	1	0	-3
Communication Quality (Element of the Evaluation)	29. Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.	3	4	-3	1

Having identified the different points of view and the facilitators that they consider to be of most importance, I will now focus on areas of consensus among the views.

**Areas of consensus.** Despite holding four distinct views about the facilitators of recommendation uptake, there is some common ground among them. In fact, some level of consensus was found on 7 of the 30 statements about recommendation uptake (See Table 8).

As can be seen in the top half of Table 8, the perspectives unanimously agree that two elements of *the evaluation* and two elements of *the recommendations themselves* are important to uptake. In terms of the evaluation, the views agree that involvement is important in facilitating recommendation uptake; in particular whether personnel are committed to the evaluation and its use, and whether stakeholders are involved in the

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evaluation process (Statements 30 and 19). In terms of the recommendations themselves, the views agree that the quality of the recommendation (whether it's linked to the findings) is important to uptake (Statement 20). They also agree that the level of change that the recommendation suggests is important to uptake; specifically, they agree that recommendations need to be realistic and feasible (Statement 24).

Table 8. *Consensus Items (by most/least important to uptake)*

Conceptual Category (Overarching Category)	Q - Statement	Factor Scores			
		A	B	C	D
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	30. Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.	3	2	4	2
Recommendation Quality (Element of the Recommendation)	20. Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.	1	4	2	4
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	19*. Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.	2	3	3	1
Level of Change (Element of the Recommendation)	24. Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.	3	1	1	2
Involvement (Element of the Evaluation)	27. Active promotion and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.	-4	-2	-1	-1
Macro (Element of the Evaluation Context)	26. Personal characteristics of stakeholders (e.g., personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc.).	-4	-2	-1	-2
Communication Quality (Element of the Evaluation)	2. The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report.	-3	-3	-4	-4

\*Q-Defined consensus statements (i.e., items do not statistically differentiate between any two pairs of factors,  $p < .05$ ).

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Thus, the top half of Table 8 reveals four variables that can be thought to be important facilitators of uptake, regardless of the specific view of the evaluation user. On the other hand, the bottom half of Table 8 reveals three variables that the views agree to be of lesser importance to uptake. Two of those refer to aspects of the evaluation; while the third is an element of the evaluation context.

In terms of the evaluation context, the views do not see small 'p' factors such as the personal characteristics of the stakeholders to be a very important variable influencing recommendation uptake (Statement 26). In terms of the aspects of the evaluation, the views agree that one element of involvement is relatively less important in facilitating uptake; namely, whether the evaluator promotes or assists with recommendation implementation (Statement 27). The other aspect of the evaluation that the views agree on is communication quality. Specifically the views unanimously agreed that the quality and format of the evaluation report was one of the least important facilitators of uptake (Statement 2).

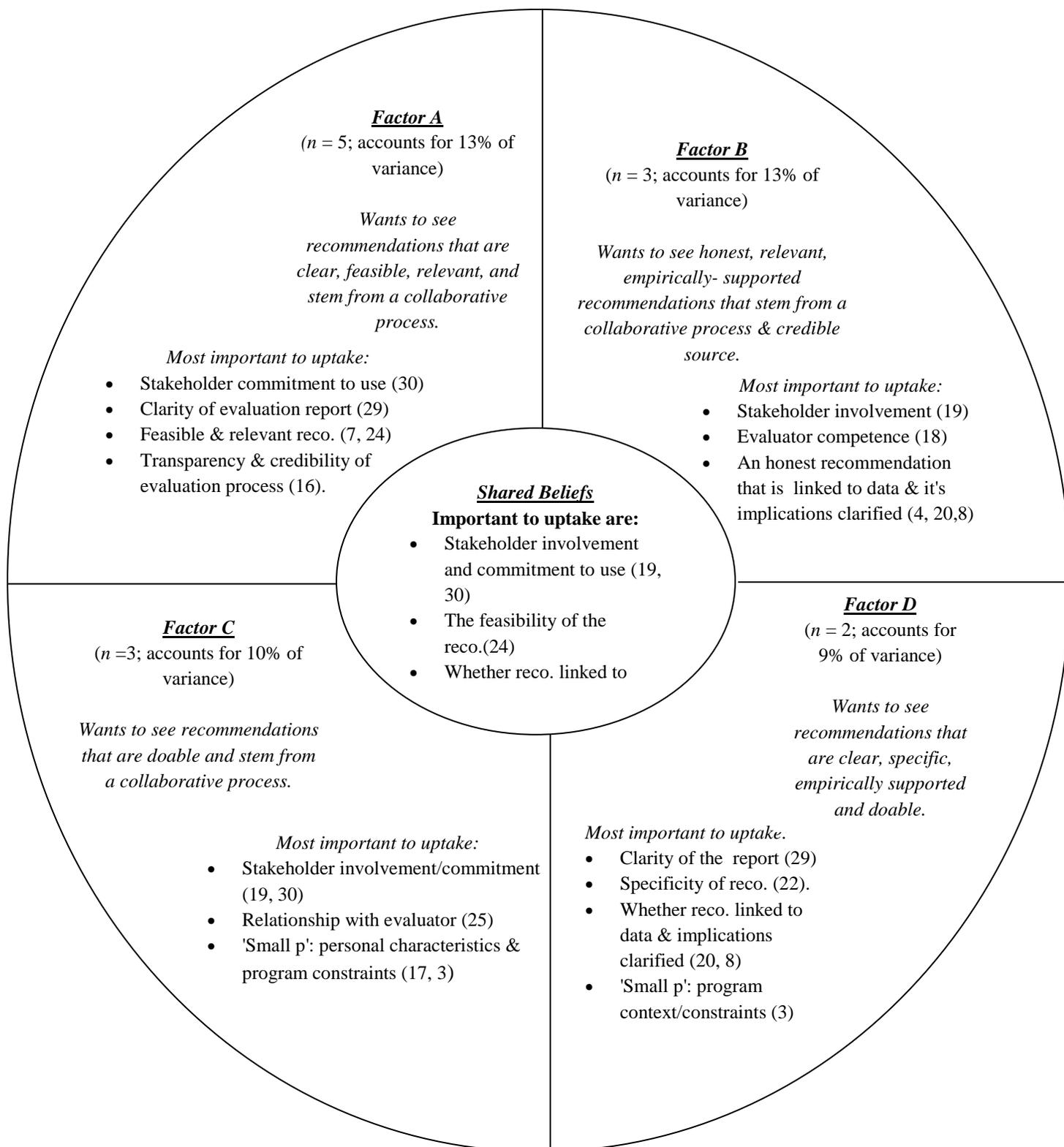
**Summary.** The results of the Q-Method analysis revealed that four distinct views exist within this sample of recommendation implementers as to the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Each view emphasized different elements of the evaluation, evaluation context, and the recommendations themselves as being the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Despite their differences though, there was consensus on the importance of certain elements of the evaluation, and certain elements of the recommendations to uptake. In terms of the evaluation, involvement was agreed to be an important facilitator; specifically having stakeholders involved in the evaluation process and committed to its use. It was also generally agreed that the quality

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of the recommendation is important, in that recommendations should be logically linked to the evaluation finding. Finally, the views agreed that the level of change is also important in that the implementation of the recommendation must be feasible. By way of a visual summary, Figure 3 shows the distinctions among the perspectives as well as areas of consensus about important facilitators of uptake.

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Figure 3. *Perspectives of factors importantly related to recommendation uptake among evaluation implementers (Numbers in parentheses correspond to statement numbers).*



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### **Discussion**

As an empirical investigation into implementers' views about recommendation uptake, this study aimed to explore whether there are different viewpoints among decision makers about what importantly influences recommendation uptake, and more importantly, to explore whether there are areas of consensus around the important facilitators of uptake. The research questions were:

1) Are there different perspectives held by recommendation implementers as to what importantly influences recommendation uptake?

2) Are there areas of consensus amongst the different perspectives around what importantly facilitates recommendation uptake? And if so, what are they?

In answer to research question 1, it seems there are indeed different points of view among implementers. These results suggest that there are at least four distinct perspectives among implementers as to what importantly influences recommendation uptake. This aspect of this research makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the field of evaluation.

Theoretically, this is the first study to attempt to classify the perspectives of evaluation implementers. As a classification study, this research is an important addition to the mostly descriptive research on evaluation, and therefore contributes to the methodological heterogeneity of research on evaluation use (Mark, 2008). Practically this study offers empirical evidence to strengthen claims that evaluators have made for years about evaluation use. That is: "context matters" (Rog, 2012, p. 25). When trying to understand what facilitates evaluation use or recommendation uptake, one should consider the evaluation context (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Iriti et al., 2005; Smith & Chircop,

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1989). These results suggest that the implementers' point of view about the most important facilitators of uptake is an important context to consider. Evaluators should try to identify the type of evaluation user they are working with, be familiar with what importantly influences use for them, and tailor their evaluation practice accordingly.

But context assessments can be tough (Conner, Fitzpatrick & Rog, 2012). And, what if it is impractical to know the type of user one is working with? Are there some variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake regardless of the specific viewpoint held by a particular user? That was the essence of the second research question which explored whether there are areas of consensus among the views.

In answer to research question 2, this study suggests that there are indeed areas of consensus among implementers about important facilitators of uptake. Specifically, of the variety of variables purported to be related to recommendation uptake, two elements of the evaluation and two elements of the recommendations themselves are consistently thought to be rather important facilitators of uptake; regardless of the point of view held. This is an important finding and highlights the contribution of the synthesis framework developed as part of this dissertation. Specifically the recommendation uptake and use in general literatures were synthesized to summarize the myriad of variables that potentially influence recommendation uptake. Then, a representative list of those variables was presented to decision makers who were asked to prioritize the variables based on their experiences with recommendation uptake. The findings revealed that four of those variables are consistently agreed to be important facilitators of recommendation uptake.

That is a considerable contribution as no single study had assessed all variables purported to influence evaluation use; nor had anyone asked participants to prioritize any

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variables related to use. Doing so though, allows us to sketch out some of the possibilities about the relative importance of variables in the "shopping list", and whether there are variables that reliably facilitate use. Indeed, determining that there are a few variables that implementers, regardless of their specific viewpoint, agree to be important to uptake is a step toward moving beyond "shopping lists" to identifying a few key variables that might reliably be related to uptake.

Identifying a subset of variables that are reliably related to use has important practical applications. For example these findings suggest that, regardless of evaluation context, it could be safe to assume that stakeholder involvement and commitment to use, as well as the feasibility of the recommendation and whether it is linked to the evaluation findings are important facilitators of uptake (the consensus items on the top half of Table 8). Thus, these suggest good places for evaluators to focus their limited resources when attempting to facilitate recommendation uptake.

The consensus items on the "least important" side are also practically informative. For example, the results suggest that regardless of their perspective, implementers agree that the format of the report and whether evaluators promote or assist with recommendation uptake are less important with respect to uptake. Thus, given limited resources an evaluator may choose to abandon the practice of promoting and/or assisting with uptake. Looking at both ends of the distribution, one practical implication might be that evaluators could dedicate fewer resources on the style of the report, and more on the act of engaging stakeholders in the evaluation and its use.

In addition to these noteworthy contributions, a few other observations of the study results are worth mentioning. One important observation to make about the

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"consensus" findings is how they correspond to current evaluation theory. The consensus around the importance of stakeholder involvement and engagement is not surprising.

These findings are consistent with evaluation theory, and have been a burgeoning area of discussion, theory building, and research in evaluation (Ayers, 1987; Cousins & Shulha, 2008; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Johnson et al., 2009; Patton, 1997, 2003, 2010). Thus, these results provide empirically-based justifications for the emphasis on stakeholder involvement as an important facilitator of evaluation use, and endorse this variable as an important focus of future research and theory development.

While some of the findings are consistent with theory, others are somewhat surprising. One example is in the opinions about the importance of report style. All perspectives rated this item either a -3 or -4, meaning that report style has been of least importance to uptake in their experiences. This "consensus" finding is surprising as it goes against much of evaluation literature that is dedicated to how to write an effective evaluation report, and evaluators dedicate a lot of resources to this aspect of evaluation (Hendricks, 1994; Posavac & Carey, 2003; Sonnichsen, 2000; Torres, Preskill & Pointek, 1997).

It is also interesting to note that the perspectives unanimously rated evaluator assistance with uptake on the "least important to uptake" side of the Q-distribution. This is surprising given that it is one of the guidelines offered by Hendricks and his colleagues (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990). Moreover, the idea that evaluators should promote evaluation use is one that extends beyond the notion of recommendations, and is prevalent in the general use literature (Greene, 1988; Patton, 1997). These surprising findings warrant some further exploration.

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To be sure, one limitation of this Q-study is that participants were not given the opportunity to discuss their opinions with the researcher; thus, there was no opportunity to ask about some of these surprising findings. For example, if specifically asked about the importance of the evaluation report or the importance of evaluator assistance to uptake, what would implementers say? Follow up research addressing this limitation would be informative.

Another important area for follow up research is in the assessment of the reliability of these consensual facilitators of recommendation uptake. Are these four variables actually reliably related to uptake? Indeed, it is possible that these findings are an artifact of the method used which may have placed constraints on participants' thought process. Perhaps a more open-ended approach might tell us something different than what was obtained through this more structured, and perhaps restrictive, Q-sort task. For example, if asked to spontaneously identify the factors that importantly influence recommendation uptake, what would implementers say? Would their answers align with the results of this Q study?

Certainly if the goal is to identify a few key variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake, then the question should be addressed via multiple methodologies to examine whether the findings converge. Thus, in an attempt to assess the reliability of the consensual facilitators of uptake, and to explore some of the surprising findings about the "least important" facilitators, a follow up study was conducted.

## Study 2

Motivated by the results of Study 1 and the overall purpose of this dissertation (i.e., to explore whether there might be a subset of variables that reliably facilitate recommendation uptake), a follow up study was conducted with implementers to take a closer look at the consensus items. Thus, while Study 1 explored differences and similarities among implementers' points of view, Study 2 focused on the similarities.

The main purpose of this study was to assess the reliability of the consensus findings on the “most important” side of the Q-distribution by exploring whether there are agreed upon facilitators of uptake, and if so, whether they correspond to those found in Study 1. A secondary purpose was to explore some of the more surprising findings from Study 1.

The overarching research question was:

**1)** Are there certain variables that implementers consistently nominate as being important facilitators of uptake? And, if so, what are they?

Subsidiary research questions were:

**i)** What factors do implementers spontaneously identify as affecting recommendation uptake, and how do those factors compare to the consensus items from Study 1?

**ii)** When prompted about the consensus items from Study 1, what are implementers' reactions regarding the importance of those factors to facilitating recommendation uptake?

**ii)** What factors do implementers nominate as the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake, and how do those factors compare to the consensus items from Study 1?

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### **Method**

In order to address potential limitations of the more structured Q-task, and to approach the topic with another methodology, a qualitative open-ended approach was taken. Specifically, interviews were conducted with 12 recommendation implementers. This was a convenience sample recruited through the researcher's community contacts (a 71% response rate). Five of the participants were from Study 1 (i.e., had agreed to be contacted for a follow up study). In keeping with the maximum variance sampling tradition, an effort was made to recruit implementers who worked in a variety of capacities, in a variety of fields, and had varying levels of experience with evaluation (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Sandleowski, 1995). As can be seen in Table 9, this sample was similar to that of Study 1 in that the participants had varying levels of experience with evaluation, and worked in a variety of capacities in a variety of fields.

Interviewing continued until saturation was reached (i.e., variables were consistently mentioned as facilitators of uptake). All interviews were conducted by myself, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participants were told that the purpose of the research was to explore the factors that facilitate recommendation uptake. To make the discussion more concrete, interviewees were asked to think about one particular evaluation experience, and to answer the interview questions in reference to that experience.

Table 9. *Participant Characteristics*

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>
Experience with Evaluation (years)	1-4	5
	5-10	4
	11-20	4
Organization Type	Government	5
	Nonprofit	7
Position	Staff	3
	Program Manager	5
	Senior Admin.	4
Field	Education	4
	Health	4
	Social Services	4

The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of three sections each with a slightly different purpose. First, participants were asked to identify the factors that influenced whether the recommendations from their chosen evaluation were implemented. The purpose of this section of the interview was to explore what participants would spontaneously nominate as facilitators of uptake. The assumption is that any variables nominated here are rather important because they are “top of mind” to respondents. This question was very open-ended as this section of the interview sought to uncover participants' spontaneous, unprompted, perceptions about the variables that influenced whether they implemented recommendations. Respondents were given time to think of and list all of the factors they thought were influential (i.e., the interviewer encouraged participants to think of multiple factors by using exploratory probes such as “any other factors you think influenced whether the recommendations got implemented?”). Once participants' ideas about the variables that influenced uptake were exhausted, the second section of the interview began.

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The second section sought to probe any of the consensus items from Study 1 that the participants did not spontaneously mention in the first section of the interview. Thus, for each consensus item (from Study 1) that the respondent did not mention, they were explicitly prompted on.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this section of the interview was to shed some light on some of the more surprising findings from Study 1, and also to assess opinions on any of the consensus factors that were not spontaneously offered.

The final section of the interview sought to explore what implementers, after being prompted, would nominate as the *most* important facilitators of uptake. Thus, in this section participants were asked "what do you think are the most important variables influencing recommendation uptake"? (See Appendix C for the interview guide). With permission, the interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim to aid in data analysis.<sup>5</sup> Participants were compensated a \$10.00 Chapters/Indigo gift card for their participation.

## Analysis

In an effort to identify patterns among respondents, the transcripts were content analyzed using a process of deductive analysis (Patton, 2002). A coding scheme was developed in a top-down manner using the synthesis framework developed as part of this dissertation (See Figure 1). Specifically, the structure and the items from the Q-study were used as the initial codes (See Table 3). Thus, there were 30 specific codes which represented various elements of the evaluation, the evaluation context, and the recommendations themselves. However, a code of "other" was reserved for those responses that did not correspond to any of the existing codes. Coding of the interviews

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<sup>4</sup> Respondents were only asked about the consensus items at the two ends of the Q sort distribution (i.e., consensus factors about items most and least important to uptake).

<sup>5</sup> Two participants asked that their interview not be recorded. In those cases, detailed hand written field notes were taken.

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was done in three parts: Spontaneous comments about facilitators of recommendation uptake (i.e., responses to question: what factors do you think were important in influencing your decision to implement a given recommendation); Prompted Questions (responses to prompts about any consensus items from Study 1 which the respondent did not mention); and Take-home message (response to the final question about the most important facilitators of uptake).

For the "spontaneous" and "take-home message" parts of the interviews, the responses were coded using the coding scheme. As in Study 1, the specific code as well as its corresponding higher order and subcategory are presented to allow for analysis at both the conceptual and operational levels.

For section two of the interview, a simple coding scheme of: "agree", "disagree", "no answer" was used to classify respondents' general agreement with the prompted consensus factors. In addition, to try to shed light on some of the surprising findings from Study 1, attention was paid to the content and meaning of participants' comments in reflection of the Study 1 findings. Once each interview section was coded, the codes were tallied, and frequencies obtained. Thus, this analysis integrated both qualitative and quantitative components by quantifying qualitative codings.

### *Criterion for "Consistency"*

Given the overarching research question (i.e., "Are there certain variables that implementers consistently nominate as being important facilitators of uptake?"), a criterion for consistency had to be set. Guided by consensus criteria used in the Delphi technique (Cramer, Klasser, Epstein, & Sheps, 2008; Hasson, Keeney, McKenna, 2000), a criterion of 66% was chosen. In other words, if two thirds (at least 8 out of 12) of

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respondents nominated a given variable, it was concluded to be a consensus item in this study.

### **Rigour**

The criterion for rigour in this research is "dependability" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Koch, 2006). To ensure rigour in the data collection and analysis process, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The written verbatim transcripts were verified against the original audio recordings. The illustrative quotes or segments that are drawn from the dataset are drawn from different participants, and are presented verbatim with the exception of minor editing that increases clarity, for example, removing "uhm" or repetitions. In addition, the analysis process was audited by keeping a decision trail (Koch, 2006).

### **Results**

#### *Spontaneous Perceptions of Factors Influencing Uptake*

After some introductory remarks and establishing the specific evaluation experience that respondents would use to answer the questions, the interviewer asked the following question: "What factors influenced the decision to implement the recommendations stemming from that evaluation?". The interviewer provided no further prompting, as this part of the interview was intended to explore participants' spontaneous remarks and explanations of important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Respondents provided a total of 36 ideas about the factors that influenced uptake, which were assigned a total of 10 different codes from the coding scheme. Thus, the 36 responses fit into 10 categories (See Table 10).

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Table 10. *Spontaneous perceptions of factors that influence recommendation uptake*

<b>Factor</b> (Q-Item)	Overarching Category: Subcategory	<b>Frequency</b> (# of respondents)
Stakeholders were committed to the evaluation and its use (#30)	Element of the Evaluation: Involvement	8*
The recommendation was consistent with implementer beliefs/opinions. (#15)	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Content	7
The recommendation was realistic and feasible (#24)	Element of the Recommendation: Level of Change	6
Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.) (#3).	Element of the Evaluation Context: Small 'p' political factors	3
Stakeholders were involved in the evaluation process (#19)	Element of the Evaluation: Involvement	3
The evaluator understood the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context (#28).	Element of the Evaluation: Evaluation Characteristics	2
The recommendation was linked to evaluation findings (#20).	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Quality	2
The recommendation was specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem (#22).	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Quality	2
Forces outside of the evaluation – e.g., administrative mandate that conflicted with the recommendation (#17)	Element of the Evaluation Context: Small 'p' political factors	1
The evaluation report was clear and easy to understand (#29).	Element of the Evaluation: Communication Quality	1

\* Consensus item

As can be seen in Table 10, the most commonly-mentioned facilitators had to do with elements of the evaluation and elements of the recommendations themselves. Consistent with the findings of Study 1, stakeholder commitment to evaluation use emerged as a consensus item. That is, without any prompts most participants mentioned

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the importance of involvement (i.e., stakeholder commitment to the use of the evaluation) as importantly influencing uptake ( $n = 8$ ). The following quotes are illustrative:

"A huge thing was being open. Open to the feedback coming back to say we need to move forward with this. It isn't about finding fault, it's about finding out where we are at, and where we need to go to get where we said we want to be. And I think that that was key, because if you don't have the support of people who have to implement the change, then none of those recommendations would go." (Program Manager, Social services sector)

"I think because key stakeholders were genuinely interested in helping to improve the program, there wasn't really an issue with uptake." (Director, Education sector)

Another popular factor mentioned, that was not reflected strongly in Study 1, was the content of the recommendation; specifically whether it was consistent with the implementers beliefs ( $n = 7$ ). Participants explained that it was important that they "agreed with" the recommendation, or that "it made sense" to them. The following quotes are illustrative.

"Well, if it's something that we also thought was a good idea, we had no problems with, then we were quite happy to start implementing them." (Director, Health sector)

"Well for us it was a no brainer, of course we'll implement [that recommendation]. If they say it's not clear, then yes, we need to make it more clear. So it was just a realization that we weren't doing what we thought, so, it made sense to make it more explicit." (Director, Education sector)

In addition to stakeholders' commitment to the evaluation and their level of agreement with the recommendation, the level of change suggested by the recommendation (i.e., its feasibility) was also a commonly mentioned facilitator ( $n = 6$ ); a finding that is also consistent with Study 1. The following quotes are illustrative:

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"Recommendations need to be feasible in order to be implemented."  
(Manager, Health Sector)

"We have to look at the recommendations and say, ok, how much time and energy are we going to require to put these changes in place, and what will we be having out of it at the end of the day. So I think it's you know, some of the consideration in terms of how practical it is, time consuming it is, and what other priorities we have on our plates at the time, or what other recommendations may be more practical for us to implement." (Manager, Social Services sector)

As can be seen in Table 10, other elements of the evaluation, evaluation context and recommendations themselves were also mentioned by respondents; although with much less frequency. In terms of the evaluation and evaluation context, participants offered 'small P' political factors such as program constraints ( $n = 3$ ), whether stakeholders were involved in the evaluation ( $n = 3$ ), as well as whether the evaluator understood their specific program context ( $n = 2$ ) as influencing the uptake of recommendations. Finally, in terms of elements of the recommendation itself, a couple participants thought that its specificity and whether it was linked to evaluation findings was important to uptake ( $n = 2$ ).

Finally, while not reflected in Table 10, it is interesting to note that a few respondents remarked on the links among these variables, and how they influence the feasibility of the recommendations, and whether they are consistent with stakeholder beliefs. The following quotes are illustrative.

"It was really a fluid process, in terms of myself and the other manager were really involved in the whole process. So, you know, because you had somebody evaluating the program who didn't know a lot about [service area]...You know, so they were sometimes making recommendations that were not feasible...You know, perhaps unless you're actually working in the unit, you didn't have an understanding of that. Because I do remember one in particular that she had made, and we just said, no - That's going to conflict with our annual audit." (Program Manager, Social Services sector)

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"Money, dollars, resources, whatever the resources... If there's no psychologist in town to do a psych assessment, we can't get it done. You know, it's as simple as that. We're not going to be transferring children down to Toronto for these assessments. Um, so, yeah, it's a resource issue including money. And then it is about feasibility for sure. You know, sometimes things make sense to people who don't really know, more than it would for us." (Program Manager, Social Services sector)

In summary, from this part of the interview it can be highlighted that:

1. Without any prompting from the researcher, these decision makers consistently mentioned a certain element of the evaluation emerged as a consensus facilitator of uptake; namely, involvement (i.e. stakeholder commitment to evaluation use). Consistent with Study 1, this item was found to be a consensus item.
2. They also commonly mentioned certain elements of the recommendation itself as important facilitators of uptake. Namely, recommendation content (i.e., whether stakeholders agree with the recommendation,  $n = 7$ ); and the level of change recommended (i.e., recommendation feasibility,  $n = 6$ ).
3. Participants drew explicit connections among stakeholder involvement, whether the evaluator understands the program context, whether stakeholders agree with the recommendations, and the feasibility of the recommendation and suggested that these variables are interconnected in facilitating recommendation uptake.

### *Prompted Perceptions of Factors Influencing Uptake*

This part of the interview dealt with the consensus factors from the Q-study, and explicitly asked those participants who did not spontaneously offer them. For example, if respondents did not mention "stakeholder involvement" (a consensus item from Study 1) in their unprompted responses, they were explicitly asked about the extent to which stakeholders were involved in that particular evaluation, and the importance that

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involvement had to recommendation uptake. As can be seen in Table 11, a few interesting patterns emerged.

Table 11. *Summary of unprompted and prompted responses to the consensus items from Study 1.*

<b>Factor</b> (Q Sort Item #)	<b>Mentioned factor when unprompted</b>	<b>Agreed (when prompted)</b>	<b>Disagreed (when prompted)</b>	<b>No Answer*</b>
<i>Factors that were agreed to be of greater importance to uptake (Study 1)</i>				
Whether stakeholders are committed to the evaluation and its use. (30)	7	5	--	--
Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings. (20)	2	9	--	1
Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process. (19)	3	9	--	--
Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible. (24)	6	6	--	--
<i>Factors that were agreed to be of lesser importance to recommendation uptake (Study 1)</i>				
Whether the evaluator promotes/assists with uptake. (27)	0	2	9	1
The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report .(2)	0	9	3	--
Personal characteristics of stakeholders. (26)	0	9	1	2

\*No Answer refers to instances where either the respondent was “unsure”, or where the respondent did not answer the question because the interview terminated before the question was asked.

One pattern is that every consensus factor on the "most important to uptake" side of the Q-distribution was spontaneously offered by at least some participants as being important to uptake, while none of the "least important to uptake" factors were spontaneously offered (See Table 11, column 2). This suggests that the consensus findings about the consistent facilitators from Study 1 are more than just an artifact of the

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method used, as even using a drastically different methodology, these variables spontaneously emerge as important facilitators of uptake.

Another interesting pattern is in the prompted responses to the consensus items about the "most important" facilitators of uptake. Specifically, when prompted, participants consistently agreed that stakeholder involvement and commitment to use, whether the results are empirically linked to the findings, as well as the feasibility of the recommendation importantly influence uptake (See third column in top half of Table 11). Thus, participants unanimously agreed that the consensus facilitators from Study 1 are important facilitators of uptake, showing even more convergence with the findings of Study 1.

Moving on to look at the consensus items on the "least important" side of the distribution, convergence with Study 1 as well as clarification of some of the more surprising findings was revealed. First, when asked about the evaluators' role in uptake, most participants thought that having the evaluator assist with implementation was not an important facilitator of uptake (See 4th column, 3rd last row of Table 11). That is consistent with the finding of Study 1, and the comments given by Study 2 participants helps explain why this is not seen as an important facilitator. For one thing, some participants simply explained that the evaluator was "not involved at all" after the evaluation; that they "were strictly done once they produced the report". Some further explained that they did not see assisting with recommendation uptake as the evaluator's "job"; that it was up to the implementers themselves to decide how to effect change. The following quote is illustrative:

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After we had the recommendations, it was really more up to the two managers, which was myself and another manager, as well as the senior manager. (Program Manager, Social Services sector)

I would not go back to the people who are recommending in terms of finding out [how to implement]. In order to clarify, Yes, but not to go from there. (Program Manager, Social Services sector)

These comments help explain the somewhat surprising finding from the Q-study by illuminating why evaluator promotion of is not a reliable facilitator of recommendation uptake. Specifically, the Study 2 implementers suggest that while it may be helpful for the evaluator to assist with uptake, it is not a consistent facilitator in that it is not a necessary requirement for uptake. Most of these participants implemented recommendations without help of the evaluator. In other words, while guiding stakeholders in the uptake of recommendations may facilitate uptake in some cases, many stakeholders do not expect it from evaluators, and see implementation as the "job" of the stakeholders.

As for the second consensus item, the quality, format, and attractiveness of the evaluation report, when asked, most participants ( $n = 9$ ) reported that is important to uptake (See third column, second last row of Table 11). At first glance this finding may seem to diverge from Study 1 where the views unanimously agreed this variable was of least importance to recommendation uptake (rated either -3 or -4). However, when the content of the responses is examined, it becomes clear that these participants interpreted this question to mean clarity of the report. The following quotes are illustrative:

"It is important to be able to quickly find the recommendations, that they're summarized, you know, in an easy-to-follow kind of fashion".  
(Director, Education sector)

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"The report was hard to follow, I mean it's this thick; that's a lot of stuff for me to...so what I do is I just ignore it; I just skip it and I go to where there's a recommendation." (Manager, Social services Sector)

Given that these participants interpreted report format and quality to mean clarity, these findings are actually consistent with Study 1. Report clarity was actually a separate q-statement (item 29) which two of the views (A and D) ranked as one of the most important facilitators of uptake.

Moving on to look at the responses of those who disagreed with the idea that report format is important is additionally illuminating. Those respondents who disagreed with the idea that the format of the report was important to uptake ( $n = 3$ ), did so because they were more concerned with the content of the report:

"What I found was more important was the content of it" (Manager, Social Services sector)

"It was very professional looking, but I don't think that influenced [recommendation uptake]" (Manager, Health sector)

Thus, these participants interpreted this statement more in line with the how Study 1 participants read the statement. For example: when asked to explain why they ranked this item of the least important to one Study 1 participant explained: "Not sure that what the report looks like is of any importance. As long as the content has clear recommendations."

Together these responses about clarity and format help shed light on some of the seemingly surprising findings from the q-study that implied that the quality and format of the report is of least importance to recommendation uptake. Specifically, it seems as though as long as the report is clear and concise, the attractiveness and particular format of it is of relatively less importance to the uptake of recommendations.

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Finally, when asked about the personal characteristics of the stakeholders, most, though not all ( $n = 9$ ), participants felt they do facilitate uptake (See 3rd column, last row of Table 11). Moreover, they explained that there is a certain subset of characteristics that importantly facilitate uptake. Specifically, they described that the decision makers need to be "open-minded" and "able to accept criticism". These comments help flesh out the findings of the Q-study by highlighting what characteristics of stakeholders are seen to importantly matter.

In addition, the fact that most participants agreed that this is an important facilitator of uptake illuminates an important point that perhaps gets lost in the discussion of the Study 1 findings. That is, all 30 items are facilitators of uptake; with some simply being *more* important than others. The fact that these implementers agree that certain personal characteristics *are* important, but that none spontaneously offered this factor as an important facilitator suggests that it is important, but just less so than some of the other variables.

In summary, from this part of the interview it can be highlighted that:

1. Participants unanimously agreed with the consensus statements of important facilitators of uptake from Study 1. Specifically, they agreed that: having stakeholders involved in the evaluation, having stakeholders committed to evaluation use, and having feasible recommendations that are linked to evaluation findings are important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Indeed half of the participants spontaneously offered the feasibility of the recommendation and commitment to use as important variables influencing uptake.

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2. None of the consensus items on the "least important to uptake side of the distribution" (i.e., personal characteristics of stakeholders, the format of the report, and whether evaluators assist with uptake) were spontaneously offered by participants as important facilitators of uptake; thereby suggesting that they are not reliably important facilitators.

### *Perceptions of the Most Important Facilitators of Uptake*

When concluding the interview, participants were asked what I called a "Take home message" or "summary" question. They were asked: "What are the most important factors that facilitate uptake? In other words, "What should evaluators be sure to focus on in order to help ensure their recommendations are implemented"? Respondents provided a total of 33 ideas when answering this question. Those responses were assigned a total of 9 codes from the coding scheme (See Table 12).

Similar to the first section of the interview, the most commonly mentioned facilitators had to do with elements of the evaluation and the recommendation itself (See Table 12). In terms of the evaluation, participants frequently nominated stakeholder involvement ( $n = 8$ ), and this item was deemed a consensus item. The following quotes illustrate participants' emphasis on the importance of involving stakeholders in the evaluation in facilitating uptake:

"It would be helpful to review the recommendations informally with stakeholders as part of the project. You know, before they receive the document in the mail." (Director, Education sector).

"Ask questions of the people who it's going to impact. Ask for their input and not in the way that we see it happening, where you've already made the decisions and you're asking for input to make it look like you care." (Program staff, Health sector).

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Nominated with the same frequency as stakeholder involvement, and also deemed a consensus item, was an element of the recommendation itself - specifically the feasibility of implementing it ( $n = 8$ ). The following quotes illustrate participants' emphasis on the importance of offering feasible recommendations in facilitating uptake:

"If they don't think it's easy to apply, they won't do it". (Manager, Health sector)

"They were realistic, the report that they gave back to us really did provide us with suggestions that we thought we could do. It wasn't onerous." (Director, Education sector)

While not deemed a "consensus" item, participants also frequently nominated another element of the evaluation as an important facilitator - this one had to do with characteristics of the evaluation ( $n = 6$ ). Specifically, they explained that having an evaluator who understands the program and its unique context is important in facilitating uptake. The following quote is illustrative:

"Well I think if the evaluator has done a good job in assessing the system by whatever standards, the recommendations should be appropriate to the context in which that particular organization exists. And, I think that those recommendations should enhance, give greater meaning, bring greater quality, to that particular program." (Director, Education sector)

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Table 12. *Factors Respondents Nominated as being the Most Important in Influencing Recommendation Uptake*

<b>Factor</b> (Corresponding Q Sort Item)	<b>Overarching Category: Subcategory</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Whether stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process (#19)	Element of the Evaluation: Involvement	8*
Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible (#24)	Element of the Recommendation: Level of Change	8*
Whether the evaluator understands the context of the program/context (#28).	Element of the Evaluation: Evaluation Characteristics	6
Whether the recommendation was specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem (#22).	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Quality	3
Whether the report emphasizes what the program does well		3
Whether the recommendation makes sense to the implementers. (#15)	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Content	2
Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.) (#3).	Element of the Evaluation Context: Small 'p' political factors	2
Whether the recommendation is linked to evaluation findings (#20).	Element of the Recommendation: Recommendation Quality	2
Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand (#29).	Element of the Evaluation: Communication Quality	2

\* Consensus item

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Just as they did in the first section of the interview, many participants ( $n = 6$ ) made explicit links among the three most frequently cited variables (i.e., stakeholder involvement, recommendation feasibility, and evaluators' understanding of program context). The following quotes are illustrative:

"Yeah, I think before they make a recommendation and they have an idea of what that recommendation may be, they should query with either the frontline workers or the manager about whether its' been tried, about whether it's feasible, and what it would take to make it work, and then make those recommendations." (Program Manager, Social service sector)

"Make sure you have a close relationship with the program or organization to make sure you have a really good understanding of the constraints surrounding the organization and program. That will also feed in to the feasibility of the recommendations you propose". (Program Manager, Health Sector)

It is noted that the "Other" Code was applied in this analysis to account for three responses which emphasized the importance of evaluators recognizing the positive aspects of the programs as well as the negative. As one participant stated:

"[Evaluators] have to be appreciative of the good stuff as well, they can't go in with too critical of an eye that they're just in there to critique everything, but they are also there to acknowledge when you are doing things right. If you don't have the positive reinforcement as well as the critiques, it's kind of hard to swallow the negative." (Director, Health sector)

In summary, from this part of the interview it can be highlighted that:

1. When asked what they thought the most important facilitators of uptake are, these decision makers consistently mentioned involving stakeholders in the evaluation process and offering feasible recommendations ( $n = 8$ ). Both variables were deemed "consensus" items and are consistent with the consensus findings of Study 1.

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2. While not deemed a consensus item, many participants ( $n = 6$ ) explained that having an evaluator who understands the program and its unique context is an important facilitator as well. This was not reflected strongly in Study 1; neither was the fact that participants made explicit links among these variables.

## Discussion

The main research question guiding this study was: *Are there certain variables that implementers consistently nominate as being important facilitators of recommendation uptake? And, if so, what are they?* Using the consensus items as the criteria for “consistently nominate”, the answer to this question seems to be: Yes, certain elements of the evaluation and a certain element of the recommendation were consistently nominated by these implementers. Specifically, stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process, stakeholder commitment to evaluation use, and recommendation feasibility were consistently nominated as important facilitators of uptake.

This study was intended to build on the results of Study 1; to move closer toward identifying variables that reliably influence recommendation uptake. But, before I examine how these findings correspond to Study 1, allow me to highlight some important contributions this study makes in its own right; contributions attributable to the open-ended method used.

One important theoretical contribution is in the application of the “other” code to account for those respondents who emphasized the importance of evaluators recognizing the “good as well as the bad” when making program assessments and judgements. This is not a novel finding (Thompson, 2013), but it is a sentiment that is not reflected strongly in the evaluation literature, and was therefore not a major category in the coding scheme.

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Indeed one gap in the evaluation literature is that it is comprised mostly of evaluators' opinions, and the opinions of evaluation *users* have not been examined extensively (Alkin, 2003; Leviton, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004; Weiss, 1998). Where evaluation users have been asked, they have been asked in a structured way or only about a small subset of variables (Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Johnson et al., 2009).

Yet, when asked in an unprompted way about the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake, one quarter (3 out of 12) of Study 2 participants discussed the importance of the evaluation emphasizing what the program does well in addition to what needs to be improved; thereby suggesting this is an important consideration for implementers. This is an important finding, and diverges from research that shows evaluators perceive their role to be in addressing program problems; not emphasizing program strengths (Marsh & Glassick, 1988). This finding underscores the importance of examining evaluators' *as well as* evaluation users' perspectives about the facilitators of use; as the two may not perfectly align. A complete theory of evaluation use needs to include the voices of both views.

Another important contribution that the open-ended methodology enabled was that it allowed for perceived links among the facilitators to be revealed; something the more structured Q-sort task did not allow. Specifically, participants noted that involving stakeholders in the evaluation process facilitates evaluator understanding of the program context and making feasible recommendations. This is an important theoretical contribution in that it suggests that stakeholder involvement is an underlying process or a mechanism responsible for recommendation uptake. This is consistent with recent research on evaluation use where reviewers have suggested that "stakeholder

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involvement is a mechanism that facilitates those aspects of an evaluation's process or setting that lead to greater use" (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 389).

This finding about links among the variables that facilitate uptake is also in line with calls to identify the pathways of evaluation influence (Henry & Mark, 2003). Certainly, research aimed at explicating such pathways in the specific context of recommendation uptake would be theoretically and practically informative. At present however, existing research on evaluation use does not allow for an analysis of pathways leading to use because most studies identify and examine "variables *related* to use, not pathways that *lead* to it" (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 388 – italics added). Perhaps the links among key variables that were suggested by these respondents can inform future research aimed at explicating pathways to recommendation uptake. I will talk more about mechanisms and influence pathways in the General Discussion section of the dissertation.

The final contribution of this study that I will discuss is in how the results complement those from Study 1. Indeed, the main purpose of Study 2 was to use the findings to assess the reliability of the consensus factors on the "most important" side of the Q-distribution. The idea is that if, by using a vastly different methodology from that of Study 1, the findings of Study 2 converge with those of Study 1 it can be concluded that the results are reliable.

In order to explicitly assess the reliability of the Study 1 consensus findings, the consensus findings from Study 1 and Study 2 were compared to determine if the findings from the two studies do align. To facilitate that, a summary table was created (See Table 13). The reliability analysis involved "eyeballing" Table 13 to determine which, if any, of the consensual facilitators from Study 1 emerged as consensual facilitators in Study 2.

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That was determined by looking at the last three columns of Table 13. Any item that populated two of the last three columns of Table 13 was deemed a reliable consensus item. In other words, if a consensus facilitator from the “most important” side of the Q-distribution (Study 1) also emerged as a consensus item in Study 2, it was deemed to be a reliable facilitator of recommendation uptake.

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Table 13. *Summary of Study 1 & Study 2 Findings*

Higher-order Category	Subcategory	Q-item/Code (statement#)	Study 1				Study 2		
			ViewA	ViewB	ViewC	ViewD	Consensus: + Q items	Consensus: Unprompted	Consensus: Takehome
<b>Elements of the Evaluation</b>	<b>Communication Quality</b>	Report quality/format (2)							
		Report clarity (29)	x			x			
		Communication btw. evaluator/user (11)							
	<b>Evaluation Quality</b>	Appropriate methods (1)							
		Meaningful data (14)							
		Evaluator competence (18)		x					
	<b>Credibility</b>	Objectivity(9)							
		Transparency (16)	x						
	<b>Timeliness</b>	Timely reporting (6)							
	<b>Evaluator Characteristics</b>	Social competence (21)							
		Good working relationship (25)			x				
		Understands program context (28)							
<b>Involvement</b>	<i>Stakeholders involved (19)</i>		x	x		<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>	
	<i>Stakeholders committed to use (30)</i>	x		x		<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>		
	Evaluator promotes use( 27)								
<b>Elements of the Evaluation Context</b>	<b>Small 'p' factors</b>	Program constraints (3)			x	x			
		Forces outside of eval. (17)			x				
		Personal characteristics of stakeholders(26)							
<b>Elements of the Recommendation</b>	<b>Level of change</b>	Gradual changes (13)							
		Micro level changes (23)							
		<i>Realistic/feasible (24)</i>	x				<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>
	<b>Recommendation Content</b>	Honest suggestion (4)		x					
		Positive/favourable(10)							
		Consistent with beliefs(15)							
	<b>Recommendation Quality</b>	General (5)							
		Linked to findings (20)		x		x	<b>x</b>		
		Specific (22)				x			
	<b>Relevance</b>	Issues are relevant (7)	x						
Implications clarified (8)			x		x				
Reflects concerns (12)									

Note: “Reliable” consensus items (i.e., those that emerged as consensus items in both studies) are italicized.

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As can be seen in Table 13, three of the four consensus items from Study 1 also emerged in Study 2; namely the feasibility of the recommendation, stakeholder involvement, and stakeholder commitment to use (Italicized in Table 13). The fourth consensus item from Study 1 (whether the recommendation is linked to the findings), was spontaneously mentioned by some participants, and agreed by all to be important when prompted. However, this item did not meet the consensus criterion in Study 2, and consequently, was not deemed to be a reliable facilitator of uptake. Having compared the consensus findings from both studies, allow me now to discuss the contributions and implications of this research as well as some directions for future research.

### **Overall Discussion**

To summarize, this research sought to explore what recommendation implementers perceive to be the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake; and to explore whether there are subsets of variables that reliably facilitate uptake. The main research questions were: i) are there different perspectives among implementers about the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake?; and ii) is there a subset of variables that reliably facilitate uptake regardless of the implementers' specific point of view? The intended outcome of this research was to provide empirical evidence that could be used to guide evaluation practice.

Study 1 had decision makers reflect on their experiences with recommendation uptake, and rank order a set of variables according to whether they have been most to least important to uptake in their experiences. Responses were factor-analyzed and revealed that there are four distinct views about the most important facilitators of uptake.

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The analysis also revealed that, regardless of their unique point of view, implementers agree that a certain four variables are important facilitators of uptake.

Study 2 sought to assess the reliability of the consensus findings from Study 1 using a vastly different methodology. Study 2 had decision makers reflect on a given evaluation experience, and spontaneously mention variables that facilitated recommendation uptake and nominate the most important facilitators of uptake. Responses were coded and quantified to determine consensus. It was concluded that a certain element of the recommendation and two elements of the evaluation are reliably related to uptake, regardless of the unique evaluation context: recommendation feasibility, stakeholder involvement, and stakeholder commitment to use (See Table 13). This research makes an important contribution with both practical and theoretical implications, and it also suggests areas for future research and theory development.

This study contributes to the evaluation literature by offering an empirical examination of evaluation users' perspectives about the facilitators of evaluation use; specifically the facilitators of recommendation uptake. That contribution is fourfold. First, this study offers empirical evidence to complement the mostly conceptual literature on evaluation use. As such it addresses repeated calls for more research on evaluation so that our practice and theories can be more empirically-based (Alkin, 2003; Brandon & Singh, 2009; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark, 2008; 2011; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991; Smith, 1993; Weiss, 1998).

Research on evaluation is both theoretically and practically important. Theoretically it can deepen our understanding of evaluation practice, and provide new knowledge which can lead to the development and refinement of evaluation theory

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(Christie, 2003; 2011). Indeed, by documenting that there are different points of view among implementers about the facilitators of uptake, this research makes one such theoretical contribution; to date, no study has attempted to explore whether there are different “types” of users (Mark, 2008).

Practically, evidence-based theories of evaluation practice can help evaluators choose from the myriad of prescriptions about how to *do* evaluation work (Mark, 2008). Indeed, evaluators have expressed a need for more research on evaluation; especially research aimed at understanding the factors that facilitate the impact of evaluation (Szanyi, et al., 2012). The results of this research contribute in that sense as they suggest a few key variables that influence the impact of recommendations; regardless of the evaluation context.

A second contribution of this research is that it is based in the real-world evaluation experiences of a variety of evaluation users. As such, it adds decision makers' voices to the evaluation use literature which is based mostly on evaluators' points of view (Alkin, 2003; Leviton, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004; Weiss, 1998). In doing so, we can begin to explore the extent to which evaluation implementers' perspectives map on to existing evaluation theory. This is an important contribution as I have suggested in the discussion of Study 2, the two may not perfectly align.

A third contribution of this research is in the comprehensive nature of the studies. Research on use has conventionally focused on only a subset of variables related to use, with almost half of the studies focusing only on a single characteristic (Johnson et al., 2009). Conversely, this research sought to take an all-encompassing approach to studying use by allowing for the exploration of all possible facilitators of use with an eye toward

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identifying reliable facilitators among that list. To do so I used the Synthesis Framework (Figure 1) to structure the Q-sort items and to code the open-ended interview responses. Doing so allowed the possibility for various aspects of the evaluation, the evaluation context, and the recommendations themselves to emerge as important facilitators of uptake. Taking such a comprehensive approach proved fruitful as certain elements of the evaluation, evaluation context, and the recommendations themselves did indeed surface as important facilitators of uptake in both studies.

Taking that comprehensive approach also allowed me to examine the *relative importance* of the variables, and to explore whether there are reliable facilitators of uptake (i.e., of the variety of variables related to use, which are most important or most consistent in predicting use?). This is an important contribution, and a step toward moving beyond the shopping lists of variables related to use toward identifying a few key variables that might reliably be related to uptake; a direction that was called for over three decades ago (Patton, et al., 1977).

Finally, as an empirical study focused specifically on recommendation uptake, this study advances the recommendation uptake literature, which currently occupies only a small subset of the evaluation use literature. As a result, these findings can be used to guide evaluation practitioners looking specifically for direction on how to increase the odds that their recommendations will be implemented. One practical implication stems from the “different points of view” finding. Since there are different points of view among implementers about the most important facilitators of uptake, evaluators should try to become familiar with their users’ needs and flex their evaluation approach accordingly. Indeed, becoming familiar with the evaluation context and the evaluation

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users' needs are considered necessities in some evaluation approaches (Conner, et al., 2012; Patton, 2003).

Another practical implication of the findings comes from the “reliable facilitators” finding. That is, while certain variables matter more or less depending on the evaluation context, these findings suggest that there are also “sure bets”. In other words, regardless of the evaluation context, three key variables seem to be consistently related to uptake. Thus, regardless of the particular context evaluators find themselves in, and regardless of the particular approach to evaluation they adopt (Stufflebeam, 2002), they should be sure to incorporate these elements into their evaluation/recommendation formulation practice. Specifically, to increase the odds that their recommendations will actually get implemented, evaluators should be sure to: involve stakeholders in the evaluation process; foster a sense of commitment to use from the implementers; and make recommendations they are sure are feasible that can realistically be implemented.

It is true that these findings can be practically informative; however, I do acknowledge that it is not “case closed”. I confess modesty in the amount these studies can contribute to evaluator practice decisions. To be sure, there are limitations to this research that hamper the generalizability, and therefore the practical utility, of the findings. One important limitation is the scope of the evaluation contexts explored. On the one hand, I do not know which evaluation experience the participants had in mind when they conducted the Q-sort, and therefore cannot comment on the “contexts” to which these findings apply. On the other hand, I do know that the Study 2 participants consistently reflected on small-scale, local level evaluations. Thus, it is unclear how these findings would generalize to larger scale, multi-site evaluations.

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In addition, while an effort was made to maximize diversity in the samples, I did not vary the “stakes” involved in the evaluation. However, I do know that all Study 2 participants reflected on what can be called low stakes evaluations. Thus, it is also not clear how these findings would generalize to “high stakes” evaluations. Future research should explore these research questions in a variety of evaluation contexts. Doing so would bring us closer to identifying the “key variables” that matter in a “large number of cases” (Patton et al., 1977).

Another potential limitation is my choice to limit the focus of the research to *instrumental use* (i.e., use of evaluation findings for tangible program decision-making). While narrowing the studies to one specific instance of use of evaluation findings is of benefit in studying very specific kinds of behaviours, it does not account for other ways in which recommendations can be *implemented*.

To be sure, there is an effort in the field to move away from the concept of *use* toward a more inclusive concept of *influence* (Kirkhart, 2001), and there has been long-standing recognition that evaluation findings can be used in ways other than instrumentally (Leviton & Hughes, 1981). It would be worthwhile to expand the current research to explore the impact of the various facilitators on *conceptual use* (e.g., instances where a recommendation served to educate stakeholders, for example, a recommendation led to thinking about the program in a different way). Furthermore, it is recognized that although recommendation feasibility is an important facilitator of uptake, there are times when evaluators will choose to make recommendations despite knowing they are unfeasible. For example, evaluators may choose to offer unfeasible recommendations if they recognize they may be *used symbolically* by stakeholders to leverage more program

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funds (Iriti et al., 2005). Thus, future research on the facilitators of recommendation uptake that expands the definition of uptake to include these other types of use would be informative.

In addition to the areas for future research suggested by a reflection of the limitations of this research, a reflection on some specific study findings also suggest areas for future investigation. One important observation to make is about the relative importance of elements of evaluation quality. An examination of Table 13 reveals that two important facets of evaluation quality (viz. appropriateness of the evaluation methods, and meaningfulness of the evaluation data) received no “hits”. In other words, neither of these two elements was considered to be most important to uptake from any of the points of view, nor did these variables emerge in the interview study as important facilitators.

That is an important observation given that scientific rigour is thought by many to be the sine qua non of evaluation. Indeed, evaluators have spent much time discussing evaluation methods, and there have been public debates among theorists as to what counts as appropriate methods and credible evidence in evaluation (Cook, 1997; Donaldson, Christie, & Mark, 2009; Stake, 2001). I can only speculate as to why a topic of such great interest to evaluators did not emerge among the implementers in these two studies.

One possibility is that issues such as methodological appropriateness and credibility of the data do not matter all that much to evaluation users. Or, perhaps it matters, but not as much as evaluators tend to think. This again highlights the need to

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include the perspectives of evaluators *and* evaluation users in the literature on evaluation use as the two may not perfectly align.

Another possibility is that questions of methodological appropriateness and the type of data that get collected are encompassed in the notion of stakeholder involvement. Most participants agreed that stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process is an important facilitator of uptake. Thus, perhaps stakeholder involvement is important because it ensures that the evaluation methods and data are appropriate and credible (e.g., through stakeholder/evaluator negotiation of the methods to be used). Indeed it has been suggested that stakeholder involvement is a mechanism responsible for evaluation use because it facilitates other variables related to use (Johnson et al., 2009). Future research exploring the merit of these speculations would be theoretically informative.

Following up on a discussion point from the Study 2 findings I turn now to the recent notion of *mechanisms* of evaluation use. Scholars have recently noted that our current understandings of the factors affecting evaluation use are “simultaneously impoverished and overgrown” (Mark & Henry, 2004, p.37). Our understanding is overgrown in the sense that there is no shortage of variables that have been identified as being related to use. Yet it is impoverished in the sense that no attention has been paid to the “range of underlying mechanisms through which evaluation may have its effects” (Mark & Henry, 2004, p. 37). They argue that we need to begin to pay attention to the different pathways that lead to evaluation use, and underlying mechanisms that might explain why particular factors are importantly related to recommendation uptake (Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004).

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As I mentioned in the discussion of the Study 2 findings the results of this research strongly suggest that stakeholder involvement is a mechanism of uptake because it facilitates other aspects of the evaluation that are also related to use (Johnson et al., 2009; Patton, 2003). Indeed, participants explicitly suggested stakeholder involvement as a mechanism of use when they explained that involving stakeholders in the evaluation process helps ensure the feasibility of the recommendations. This is consistent with certain approaches to evaluation that emphasize stakeholder involvement; the rationale being that involvement facilitates evaluation relevance, and presumably, commitment to use (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 2001; Patton, 2003). Indeed, it has been explicitly suggested that stakeholder involvement is a mechanism that triggers commitment to use (Henry & Mark, 2003). This also aligns with the current findings and suggests an influence pathway such that if stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process, that involvement may inspire an individual to “rise to action as a change agent” (Henry & Mark, 2003, p. 302).

It is also possible that stakeholder commitment to use is a mechanism in its own right. Indeed Henry and Mark (2003) propose “change agent” as one potential mechanism of evaluation use. Examining the role of commitment to use (i.e., change agents) as a mechanism of uptake is beyond the scope of these findings. However, future research should explore that possibility. Indeed the current state of the research on evaluation use prohibits an analysis of mechanisms and influence pathways (Johnson et al., 2009; Weiss, Murphy-Graham, & Birkeland, 2005). Future research explicitly designed to explore pathways and mechanisms of use is necessary, and would be of great practical and

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theoretical benefit to the field (Mark & Henry, 2004; Shadish et al., 1991). Perhaps these findings can serve as a launch pad for such future research.

Finally, beyond understanding the roles of stakeholder involvement and commitment to use as mechanisms of evaluation use, future research aimed at unpacking these concepts in a bit more detail would be valuable. For example, are the variables “involvement” and “commitment” conceptually distinct? In what ways are they related? Are these two variables necessary and or sufficient conditions of evaluation use (e.g., if you have “commitment to use”, does involvement matter? does it add anything?). Teasing apart the two concepts and their relative contributions would be theoretically and practically informative.

Another important area to follow up on is the level of stakeholder involvement. Stakeholder involvement can occur at varying degrees of depth (Cousins, 2003; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998); thus, an important follow up question from this research is what type of involvement is most facilitative of recommendation uptake (e.g., consultation versus collaboration; involvement in all versus certain parts of the evaluation, etc.)? What level of involvement should evaluators strive for? Related questions are: How can evaluators champion change agents? How can evaluators facilitate commitment to use? Such questions are theoretically and practically important, and represent a movement beyond identifying variables related to use toward an understanding of the mechanisms responsible for use and an understanding of some of the boundary conditions that explain use. In identifying a few key variables that are consistently related to use (i.e., recommendation uptake), these findings can begin to inform future explorations of research on use.

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Such questions represent a new line of inquiry in research on evaluation; inquiries that are focused on a deeper understanding of the variables related to evaluation use, and *how* and *why* they are related to use. Such inquiries are important not only to refine our evaluation theories, but also to help guide evaluation practice by identifying key elements responsible for evaluation use; elements that supersede the variety of prescriptive models about how to *do* evaluation (Christie, 2003; 2011; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark, 2008; Smith, 1993)

### **Summary and Conclusion**

A central goal of program evaluation is to provide information to decision makers that will inform programming decisions. Often that information is provided in the form of recommendations that are derived from the evaluation effort. Yet, it is well documented that evaluators' recommendations often do not translate into practice; thereby wasting precious resources and thwarting evaluators' ultimate goal of social betterment. A myriad of variables related to evaluation use in general and recommendation uptake in particular have been identified. However, decision makers' views on the relative importance of the facilitators of recommendation uptake have not been explored, and there is a need to move beyond the laundry lists of variables in the literature, and assess whether there are any key variables that are reliably related to evaluation use in general and recommendation uptake in particular. This research sought to address those gaps.

Specifically, I explored what recommendation implementers perceive to be the most important facilitators of recommendation uptake; and whether there are subsets of variables that reliably facilitate uptake. The main research questions were: i) are there different perspectives among implementers about the most important facilitators of

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recommendation uptake?; and ii) is there a subset of variables that reliably facilitate uptake regardless of the implementers' specific point of view? To answer those questions, two studies were conducted with recommendation implementers; one using a structured Q-sort task, and the other using an open-ended interview method.

Together the results of those studies suggest that there are indeed different points of view among recommendation implementers as to the important facilitators of recommendation uptake. Depending on their unique point of view, implementers consider different variables to be most facilitative of uptake. However, there is also a small subset of variables that are consistently considered facilitative of uptake regardless of the implementers' point of view; stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process, stakeholder commitment to evaluation use, and the feasibility of the recommendation. Given that these two elements of the evaluation and one element of the recommendation itself are reliably related to uptake, evaluators interested in increasing the odds that their recommendations will be implemented, should be sure to incorporate these three elements into their evaluation activities.

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Recommendation Uptake

**Appendix A**  
Factor Arrays

Recommendation Uptake

Perspective A

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
Active promotion by and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.27	The nature of the recommendation (i.e., whether it's positive/favourable to the agency/program).10	Whether recommendations are consistent with yours (or other stakeholders') expectations, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours.15	Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them.25	Focusing on micro-level (i.e., changes to behaviours & rules) as opposed to macro-level changes (i.e., changes to organizational structure and purpose).23	Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.22	Whether the evaluator understands the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.28	Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.30	Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.29	
Personal characteristics of stakeholders, such as personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc.26	A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change.4	The objectivity of the evaluation/evaluator.9	Forces outside of the evaluation (e.g., political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.).17	Having an evaluator with good people skills (i.e., social competence).21	Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.20	Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.19	Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.24	Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context.7	
	The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report.2	Whether the recommendation is general (e.g., non-prescriptive suggestions for change, presents several possible actions/options to address a problem, etc.).5	Effective & ongoing communication between you and the evaluator throughout the evaluation process.11	The competence and qualifications of the evaluator.18	Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.14	Whether the recommendation focuses on gradual change that occurs within an existing framework and/or builds on current activities.13	<b>The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.).16</b>		
		Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.).3	Whether the implications (benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified.8	Whether the recommendation reflects your (or other stakeholders) concerns and needs.12	Whether the recommendation is provided in a timely fashion.6	The appropriateness of the evaluation methods (e.g., methodological quality, sophistication, rigour, etc.).1			

\* distinguishing statements (i.e., those statements that statistically distinguish this viewpoint from all other viewpoints,  $p < .05$ )

Recommendation Uptake

Perspective B

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
<b>Focusing on micro-level (i.e., changes to behaviours &amp; rules) as opposed to macro-level changes (i.e., changes to organizational structure and purpose).23</b>	<b>Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.22</b>	Active promotion by and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.27	The nature of the recommendation (i.e., whether it's positive/favourable to the agency/program). 10	The appropriateness of the evaluation methods (e.g., methodological quality, sophistication, rigour, etc.).1	Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.29	Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.30	Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.19	<b>A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change.4</b>
Having an evaluator with good people skills (i.e., social competence).21	Whether the recommendation focuses on gradual change that occurs within an existing framework and/or builds on current activities.13	Personal characteristics of stakeholders, such as personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc. 26	Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context.7	The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.). 16	Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.24	Whether the evaluator understands the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.28	The competence and qualifications of the evaluator.18	Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way. 20
The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report. 2	Whether recommendations are consistent with yours (or other stakeholders') expectations, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours. 15	Whether the recommendation is provided in a timely fashion.6	Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.14	Whether the recommendation reflects your (or other stakeholders) concerns and needs.12	Forces outside of the evaluation (e.g., political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.).17	Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified.8		
	Whether the recommendation is general (e.g., non-prescriptive suggestions for change, presents several possible actions/options to address a problem, etc.).5	Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.)3	Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them.25	Effective & ongoing communication between you and the evaluator throughout the evaluation process.11	<b>The objectivity of the evaluation/evaluator.9</b>			

\* distinguishing statements (i.e., those statements that statistically distinguish this viewpoint from all other viewpoints,  $p < .05$ )

Recommendation Uptake

Perspective C

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change. 4	<b>Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.</b> 29	Whether the evaluator understands the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.28	Active promotion by and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.27	Focusing on micro-level (i.e., changes to behaviours & rules) as opposed to macro-level changes (i.e., changes to organizational structure and purpose).23	Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.24	Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way. 20	Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them. 25	Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.30
The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report. 2	<b>Whether the recommendation is provided in a timely fashion.</b> 6	Whether the recommendation focuses on gradual change that occurs within an existing framework and/or builds on current activities.13	Personal characteristics of stakeholders, such as personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc.26	Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.22	The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.).16	The competence and qualifications of the evaluator. 18	Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process.19	Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.) 3
	<b>The appropriateness of the evaluation methods (e.g., methodological quality, sophistication, rigour, etc.).</b> 1	Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.14	Having an evaluator with good people skills (i.e., social competence).21	Whether recommendations are consistent with yours (or other stakeholders') expectations, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours.15	Whether the recommendation reflects your (or other stakeholders) concerns and needs.12	Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context.7	Forces outside of the evaluation (e.g., political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.).17	
		Whether the recommendation is general (e.g., non-prescriptive suggestions for change, presents several possible actions/options to address a problem, etc.).5	The objectivity of the evaluation/evaluator.9	Effective & ongoing communication between you and the evaluator throughout the evaluation process.11	The nature of the recommendation (i.e., whether it's positive/favourable to the agency/program).10	Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified. 8		

\* distinguishing statements (i.e., those statements that statistically distinguish this viewpoint from all other viewpoints,  $p < .05$ )

Recommendation Uptake

**Perspective D**

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report.2	The nature of the recommendation (i.e., whether it's positive/favourable to the agency/program). 10	The objectivity of the evaluation/evaluator.9	Whether the recommendation focuses on issues that are relevant to your specific program and context. 7	The appropriateness of the evaluation methods (e.g., methodological quality, sophistication, rigour, etc.).1	Whether the recommendation reflects your (or other stakeholders) concerns and needs.12	<b>A perception that the recommendation is an honest suggestion for change.4</b>	Whether the implications (e.g., benefits, drawbacks, required resources, etc.) of implementing the recommendation are clarified. 8	Program constraints or other aspects of the program (e.g., resources, budget, purpose, history, etc.)3
<b>Having a good working relationship with the evaluator and trusting them.25</b>	<b>The competence and qualifications of the evaluator.18</b>	Effective & ongoing communication between you and the evaluator throughout the evaluation process.11	Whether recommendations are consistent with yours (or other stakeholders') expectations, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours.15	Whether the recommendation is general (e.g., non-prescriptive suggestions for change, presents several possible actions/options to address a problem, etc.). 5	The transparency and credibility of the evaluation process (e.g., how decisions got made, results were interpreted, recommendations were developed, etc.).16	Whether the recommendation focuses on gradual change that occurs within an existing framework and/or builds on current activities.13	Whether the recommendation is specific and clearly outlines exactly what should be done to address a problem.22	Whether the recommendation is linked to the evaluation findings in a logical and sensible way.20
Having an evaluator with good people skills (i.e., social competence).21	Personal characteristics of stakeholders, such as personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc. 26	Whether the evaluator understands the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.28	Focusing on micro-level (i.e., changes to behaviours & rules) as opposed to macro-level changes (i.e., changes to organizational structure and purpose).23	Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.14	Forces outside of the evaluation (e.g., political climate, administrative mood, reorganizations, personnel changes, the presence of information that conflicts with the evaluation, etc.). 17	Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible.24	Whether the evaluation report is clear and easy to understand.29	
		Whether the evaluator understands the unique and complex nature of your specific program/context.28	Active promotion by and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation.27	Whether you perceive the evaluation procedures and data collected to be meaningful.14	Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process. 19	Whether program personnel care about the evaluation, and are responsible for/committed to the use of its findings.30		

\* distinguishing statements (i.e., those statements that statistically distinguish this viewpoint from all other viewpoints,  $p < .05$ )

## Appendix B

## Interview Script

\*\*\*\*\*

**Preamble** (after obtaining written consent):

“Thank you taking the time to chat with me today. The purpose of today’s discussion is to help me gain an understanding of people’s experiences with program evaluation, and what importantly influences whether recommendations get implemented.

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. I am most interested in learning from your experiences with recommendation uptake. To make our discussion more concrete, I am going to ask you to focus your discussion on ONE particular evaluation, kind of like a case study.

Do you have one in mind? Ok....

\*\*\*\*\*

**Questions: Section 1** (Aim: To obtain spontaneous views about the factors that facilitated recommendation uptake)

**Questions:**

1. Can you please describe that evaluation?

*Probes:*

- a. Who solicited the evaluation?
- b. What was the purpose of the evaluation?
- c. What was your role in this evaluation?

2. Roughly how many recommendations were offered to you as part of the evaluation?

3. How many of those recommendations have been implemented?

4. How did you decide which recommendations to implement?

--> If no recommendations were implemented, then probe why:

- Were the recommendations considered seriously?
- Why were the recommendations not acted upon?
- Whose decision was that?
- What could have been done differently to help facilitate uptake?

--> If recommendations were implemented, then probe the decisions around which ones got implemented and the variables that facilitated uptake:

- Can you share your thoughts on what you think the most important variables were in influencing whether a recommendation got implemented?

- Why were those particular recommendations implemented? Why not the others?

\*\*\*\*\*

**Questions: Section 2** (Aim: To obtain reactions to prompted questions about variables identified in study 1).

*Instructions to interviewer:* Try to insert these questions as natural extensions from the answers to section 1.

*1. Stakeholder involvement:*

→ Can you describe the extent to which stakeholders were involved in the evaluation?

→ In what ways do you think stakeholder involvement influenced uptake?

*2. Whether program personnel care about the evaluation and are committed to its use:*

→ How would you describe the care and commitment on behalf of program personnel to the evaluation and its use?

→ How did that level of commitment influence uptake?

*3. Whether the recommendations are linked to evaluation findings:*

→ Can you describe the extent to which the recommendations were linked to the evaluation findings?

→ In what ways did that influence uptake?

*4. Whether the recommendation is realistic and feasible:*

→ How do you think the feasibility of the recommendation influenced whether it was implemented?

*5. Active promotion and/or assistance of the evaluator in implementing the recommendation:*

→ Did the evaluator actively promote or assist in the implementation of recommendations?

→ Was that important to uptake?

6. *Personal characteristics of stakeholders (e.g., personalities, attitudes, information needs, etc.):*

→Can you describe the extent to which the personal characteristics of the stakeholders influenced uptake (e.g., the personalities of stakeholders, you information needs, etc.)

7. *The quality, attractiveness, and format of the evaluation report:*

→Can you describe the style of the evaluation report? How do you think the look of the report influenced uptake?

\*\*\*\*\*

**Summary Question**

Thank you for sharing your views and experiences today.

By way of summary, or a “take home message” what would you say are the most important facilitators of uptake?

In other words, if an evaluator wants to ensure that her recommendations are implemented, or at least considered seriously – what would you recommend she focus on?"