

The Cause/Effect Theory Structuring Guide (C/ETSG)

Just as a program can be divided into sub-theories, sub-theories can be combined into *aggregate theories*. Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual links between the theory construction strategies described above, and shows, for example, how Cause/Effect Theories are an aggregate of Delivery and Effects Theories (see Level 3, Figure 3). The Cause/Effect Theory-Structuring Guide (C/ETSG) presented here can be used to create an aggregate theory which is referred to here as a cause/effect theory.

The steps for using the C/ETSG are outlined in Table 4. C/ETSG Examples 1a and 1b are included in this section of the paper to further illustrate how these steps can be applied to the teen smoking and handgun violence examples discussed earlier.

As can be seen in Table 4, Step 1 is used to identify and list each program activity that will be considered in the evaluation. Program activities need to be defined at the lowest level that allows meaningful, unambiguous differentiation from other activities. Once activities are identified, it is important to specify the intended effects of each activity. With this in mind, Step 2 calls for listing the expected short-, medium- and/or long-term effects of each programmatic activity.

The third step ties activities to effects in what are termed cause/effect objectives. These statements express the assumed causal relationship between the activity and its intended effects. Accordingly, each cause/effect objective serves as a theoretical assumption relating to how the program activity is intended to work. These assumptions can be tested by comparing data collected

in the evaluation (step 4) to each cause/effect objective. The results can then be analyzed to determine whether a discrepancy exists between what is stated in the objective and what is observed in the evaluation.

<p>Table 4. Cause/Effect Theory Structuring Guide</p>
<p>Step 1. List each program activity (independent variable) in column 1 of the C/ETSG Form.</p>
<p>Step 2. List key impact (1st and 2nd stage effects) and outcome (3rd stage effects) variables in columns 2, 3 and 4 of the C/ETSG Form, respectively. That is, list those variables that you assume will be influenced by the corresponding program activity (independent variable).</p>
<p>Step 3. Write cause/effect objectives in column 5 on the C/ETSG Form for each dependent variable listed in columns 2, 3 and 4. These statements express the assumed causal relationship between the activity (independent variable) in column 1 and the impact and/or outcome (dependent) variables designated in columns 2, 3 and 4. Separate cause/effect objectives should be written for each intended effect.</p> <p>A format for writing these objectives is: <i>The [independent variable or program activity] will cause a change in the [dependent variable] by [a certain time] requiring [specific resources].</i> For example, if the cause of a problem is a lack of knowledge and the tactic aimed at mitigating this problem is a video presentation, the corresponding cause/effect objective could state that <i>video X will be shown to the target audience to increase their knowledge on a specific subject.</i></p>
<p>Step 4. Collect data required to determine whether the cause/effective objectives hold up under evaluation scrutiny.</p>