



ANSWERING EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Task 3: Answering evaluation questions

Causal maps help us to assemble evidence for the causal processes at work in specified domains, including the influence of activities being evaluated. They can also help expose differences between the evidence given by different sources and differences between the analysed data and theories of change derived from other sources, including those officially espoused by the commissioner of the evaluation (Powell et al., 2023). The identification of differences in understanding can then feed into further enquiry, analysis and action concerning why people have different views, what the implications of this are and how these might be addressed.

Focusing on causal claims is of course only one way of answering evaluation questions from a corpus of text data. But it is productive because many evaluation questions are at least partly about causation and causal contribution, and we have found that causal mapping points to possible answers to these questions relatively rapidly compared to more generic QDA approaches.

Answering questions about efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability, for example, all depend on identifying the causal effects of a specific intervention, be they perceived as positive or negative, intended or unintended (OECD, 2010). Even 'relevance' can have a causal interpretation in the sense that an intervention is relevant if it is doing the right thing: Whether it is likely to help to address the needs of stakeholders is at least partly a judgement about its causal powers.

For a data set comprising hundreds or thousands of links, an unfiltered global map of all the links is a bewildering and useless 'hairball' that includes everything but highlights nothing.