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Needs: Defining What You Are Assessing

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Abstract

By definition your needs assessment should assess needs, but how do you define them? Further, how do you operationalize that definition to measure needs? Do your partners and stakeholders also hold the same conceptual, and operational, definitions? Is there agreement that the project is only going to assess needs and not wants, assets, capacity, or solutions? Or are you really expected to assess all five? Each of these is an important consideration that can substantially influence the success of any needs assessment. In this chapter, the authors examine how definitions and use of the word need influence the design and implementation of an assessment, suggesting that the definition can shape the results of what is found. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Introduction

What is a "need"? On the surface it sounds like an easy question. Yet this word, which is fundamental to all needs assessments, has not gotten much attention of late. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a vibrant conversation on what constitutes needs and needs assessments (Bradshaw, 1972; Monette, 1979; Witkin, 1984), but the debate in the literature has not continued in recent years—even though agreement on a definition remains elusive. Today, numerous ones are used, and many times in research and practice no precise definition is applied at all.

From needs being seen exclusively as gaps in results to needs incorporating values, wants, and assets, the definition delineates the scope of

your assessment. More specifically, how you define needs (a) clarifies the goals of your assessment; (b) influences how you design your assessment; (c) determines what you measure, and therefore how you measure; and (d) influences what you report, to whom, and in what format. In this chapter, we review how theorists and practitioners define needs across varied disciplines, how these definitions may influence your next needs assessment, and what potential challenges a definition (or a lack thereof) can create for implementing a successful assessment.

Why Needs Are Important in Evaluation Practice

The effectiveness of a program or project is often measured by evaluating responsiveness to the needs of participants, organizations, donors, communities, or others. As a consequence, many "participatory approaches" of evaluation, for example, place a particular emphasis on the needs of clients (Brandt, 2011; Meyer, 2011; Stockman, 2011). The clear definition and measurement of needs, for one or more of these stakeholder groups, is therefore considered an essential component in most evaluation practices. Further, this focus on needs separates evaluation practice from other complementary approaches of quality assurance (auditing, lean six sigma, etc.).

As a result, on a daily basis, professionals, consultants, counselors, evaluators, and others are approached with statements and questions that relate to needs, such as "We need an evaluation of our program," "Which groups' needs should we address first?" or "They really need to get their act together; can you help?" People and organizations after all have a common requirement to know how they are doing at meeting needs—their own or those of others—in order to make decisions about what to do next.

In practice, needs are also disguised in common expressions—for example, when someone says "we have a problem," "that team's results are unsatisfactory," or "our return-on-investment is negative." These typically indicate that there is an undefined need. This is true to the extent that often clients seeking an evaluation are not aware of the professional use of the term "need" or "needs assessment." Thus, it becomes the task of the assessor (or evaluator) to uncover and think about the hidden meanings in such cases.

Yet no matter how they are described, needs exist in all organizations, communities, and societies. And the act of labeling them as needs (even if other expressions are used) suggests their existence and requires some action. Such knowledge helps evaluators to determine the effectiveness of the program and frequently forms the basis for future actions (or inactions). Likewise, in needs assessment practice the identification and prioritization of needs is the primary goal of the activity (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

Without a clear definition of need, it is difficult (if not impossible) to objectively evaluate results, determine quality, and make justifiable

decisions about what to do next. For example, community leaders must frequently weigh the "need" of one group for public transportation against that of another group for lower cost utilities. Or in an organization, they ask how the "need" of health benefits for employees is related to those of clients for lower cost products. When people talk of their needs or those of others, they most often think of tangible results, values, wants, existing assets, and/or preferred solutions —making comparisons of needs often misleading and making effective decision making a challenge (Nutt, 2008). Without a consistent and agreed upon meaning, decisions have to be made based on unequal comparisons (apples to oranges).

Searching for Meaning

Satisfying of needs may be a motivator of our actions, but in modern use, the word "need" appears to have lost a clear sense of meaning. This is not unexpected. Bremner (1956) suggested that the concept of human need tends to be periodically rediscovered, and we contend that it is appropriate to reinvigorate the conversation once again in order to guide needs assessment research and practice.

Needs are often defined and interpreted differently when applying the conceptual systems of various disciplines or examining them across contexts, ranging from government policy making to organizational management to community development. Wright, Williams, and Wilkinson (1998) noted that doctors, sociologists, philosophers, and economists all have unique views of what needs are (and are not). Likewise, psychologists and educators use other frameworks to define needs. This lack of a unifying perspective (Doyal & Gough, 1991) is troubling, leaving researchers and practitioners working in such areas to search for their own meaning.

This is not new, of course. Since Aristotle, people have struggled with need, and by the 1970s the issue was at the forefront in the emergence of needs assessment as a field of practice. Witkin (1984) provides a useful discussion of definitions and frameworks that engaged the needs assessment and evaluation communities during this period. But in the decades that followed, the debate has not continued.

> Experience alone does not create knowledge. (Kurt Lewin, 1946)

As exceptions, current philosophy literature does debate on definitions of needs (e.g., Wiggins, 2005), as does the literature on "human needs" (especially in international development). There the focus is on how to define needs, in the light of increasing awareness of limited societal resources for satisfying them. Yet, there is still no clear distinction between objective needs (childhood mortality rates, etc.) and subjective needs (expanding democracy, etc.). But this has not led to a consensus definition within

these fields, nor one that can be practically applied across diverse areas and professional practices (including needs assessment and evaluation).

Further, there is not even agreement on whether "need" is a positive or negative term (Table 2.1). In the positive, "needs" are often used as placeholders as goods, nutriments, positive environment, commodities, or things (as in "basic necessities") to be provided and secured. In other cases, "need" carries an undesirable connotation, meaning deprivation, deficiency, lack, harm, discrepancy, or gap that has to be identified and avoided. Lastly, needs can be associated with drives, goals, and potential that cannot be directly linked to a positive or negative category of meaning, as seen most clearly in the psychology literature (Maslow's hierarchy of needs as motivators).

Without clear and accepted guidance, through our choice of words we routinely (and often carelessly) apply the label of need to objects or goods (a house, a latte), to activities (exercise, paying taxes), and even to psychological states (self-actualization), leading you to hear comments like "I need to a new car" or "they need to take training." By doing so, we quickly elevate the perceived importance of these objects, activities, or states from things we desire to things that we can't live without, even when we would not consciously argue for such a high level of perceived importance.

Further, without a definition, the relative importance cannot readily be measured or questioned, nor can alternatives for meeting the needs be effectively weighed. For example, how can an organization trying to reduce costs choose between reducing healthcare benefits and reducing vacation days without a clear specification of employee needs? Employees commonly refer to each (healthcare benefits and vacation days) as "needs," though the two are obviously not equivalent on all dimensions.

Qualifying needs with terms such as "relevant," "special," "basic," "essential," "universal," "absolute," or "vital" without offering ways to distinguish them can also increase the motivational power of the word. Who can argue against providing resources for meeting the "basic" or "universal" needs of people? Indeed, the motivational power inherent in labeling something as a need (or a "vital" or an "absolute" one) could lead to abuse of the term—making it all the more important that needs assessments and evaluations, as well as other activities contingent on needs, work from an agreed upon meaning of the word.

Another concern in the search for a shared meaning is the politics often associated with whose expertise decides what is a need (Lister, 2010). Clarke and Langan (1998, p. 260) stated that the "question of how the needs of different individuals, or groups of individuals, are met in our society is not so straightforward. It is immediately apparent that there is considerable conflict over the ways in which society defines and meets the needs of particular individuals or sections of society." This challenge has led some professionals to avoid the concept of need all together, including some philosophers (Reader, 2005) and economists (McCain, 2011); this has also been found in social work, education, and several other social

Table 2.1. Common Categories of Meanings of the Term "Need"

Object-Focused Definitions

A thing	Denotes *a thing* without which it is impossible to live, such as one cannot live without breathing or nourishment (Wiggins, 1987).
Things	*Things* without which someone will be seriously harmed or else will live a life that is vitally impaired (Wiggins, 2005).
Commodities	The *commodities* that are indispensably necessary to support life, and whatever custom renders indecent or intolerable for anyone to be without (Smith, 1776).

Goals

Sets of goals, drives	*Sets of goals* (also called basic needs or drives): physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1970a, 1970b).
Category of goals	"Need refers to a particular *category of goals* which are believed to be universalisable" (Gough, 2002, p. 7).
Environment	An *environment* in which an animate creature won't flourish unless it has it (Anscombe, 1958/1981).

Deficiencies

Objective deficiencies	*Objective deficiencies* that actually exist and may or may not be recognized by the person who has the need (Atwood & Ellis, 1971).
Deprivations and potential	Finite, few, and classifiable, needs are both as *deprivations and potential* (Max-Neef, Elizalde, & Hopenhayn, 1991).

Gaps

Gap in results	Gap in results *between "what is" and "what should be"* (Kaufman, 1996).
Gap in conditions	A learning or performance *gap* between the current condition and the desired condition (Gupta, Sleezer, & Russ-Eft, 2007).
Discrepancy of states	Measured *discrepancy* between the current state and the desired one (Altschuld & Lepicki, 2010).
What we require	"Our human needs are *what we require* to function minimally well as the kinds of creatures we are" (Brock, 2005, p. 65).

Human Condition

Necessary conditions and aspirations	The *necessary conditions and aspirations* of full human functioning (Hamilton, 2006).
Means, ends, drives, and goals	Human needs take the form of *means or ends* and *drives or goals* depending on context; together, they constitute different equally significant moments in human existence and human individuality and freedom and are therefore not solely means but means and ends (Hamilton, 2003).
Energy or information required or lacking	"A need is *matter-energy or information* that is useful or *required* but potentially *lacking* in some degree according to a purpose of a living system" (Tracy, 1983, p. 598).

Physical/Psychological

Nutriments	"…*nutriments* that must be procured by a living entity to maintain its growth, integrity, and health (whether physiological or psychological)" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 326).
A lack of objective requirement	"An *objective requirement* to avoid a state of illness" (Mallmann & Marcus, 1980, p. 165).

science disciplines. This, however, does not resolve the underlying issue of need (see, McCain, 2011) and it is not a practical option for those conducting needs assessments.

Conceptualizing Needs

Conceptualizing needs, as a precursor to starting a needs assessment, points to several key relationships that should shape your definition.

Needs Versus Solutions

Even well-intending authors and practitioners in many disciplines get tangled in the distinction between needs and solutions to needs. Routinely, they do not get past the solution (sun as solution for growing a plant, or training as a solution to employee performance problems) as the definition of the need. Other examples at the individual level include employment and self-actualization, whereas at the organizational level there are growth and profit. This entanglement leads to the focus on solutions to needs rather than a pragmatic definition of what needs are that can be applied across contexts which would permit objective examinations of alternative solutions for achieving the same results (see the open systems principle of equifinality; von Bertalanffy, 1969).

Noun Versus Verb

From "you need to buy this car" to "they need Internet access," when need is used as a verb it takes us into looking at solutions before we know what results are to be achieved by those solutions. This is so prevalent in today's lexicon that is hard to escape—such as when a child says "I need that toy." Greenwald (1975) noted that when people use need as a verb ("I need a new car"), they cut their options to one and don't realize that other options are possible (a bike, bus, or train) to achieve the same results. By using need as a noun ("my need is to get to work in less time"), you have a basis for comparing potential solutions and guiding decisions—two key tasks of an effective needs assessment.

Needs Versus Wants

On the surface, most people will readily agree that needs are not the same as wants. But without providing guidance it is easy to confuse the two, with really strong wants (or desires) often being elevated to the status of needs.

The distinction is especially important when conducting a needs assessment. Assessing wants can help us determine what people desire, but doing so rarely reflects their actual needs (via a consistent definition of the term). As Hamilton (2006) points out, "Needs are not simply strong wants" (p. 228). Further, "wanting something does not entail needing it, and vice

versa, someone may have a need without having a desire for what he needs and, he may have a desire without having a need for what he wants" (Frankfurt, 1998, p. 30).

Yet, needs and wants are often closely associated. McLeod (2011) suggests that "needs themselves are not to be confused with the desires they generate" (p. 215). In other words, in needs assessment you must ensure that needs (increased productivity or reduction in gender-based violence) are not confused with desired solutions (such as more training for staff or gender-segregated schools). These might end up as recommended solutions in some contexts, but they are not needs. Thus, a prerequisite step to distinguishing needs and wants is to define what you mean by needs in your assessment.

Absolute Versus Relative Needs

McLeod (2011) distinguishes between absolute and relative needs. McLeod (2011) and others (including Wiggins) define absolute needs as "... involve[ing] both necessity and dependency" (p. 212), such as a flower "needs" sunlight to grow. Science, of course, continually challenges our conceptions of absolute needs, including the requirement of sunlight for growing plants. What may be absolute needs today may not be so tomorrow, and very few professional contexts (outside of, potentially, the physiological and biological sciences) have much application for absolutism.

This leaves the focus on relative (or normative) needs as the more pragmatic basis for defining needs. In other words, most needs assessments are done within the context of the society, the organization, and the perceptions of the people at that point in time. This is not to assert that normative needs are not important; they are, yet it must be recognized that needs typically shift over time (including that some needs are met, new ones emerge, and technologies change how we address needs).

Individual Versus Group Versus Societal Needs

There is often a popular assumption that needs are the premises of individuals. Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* in psychology focuses solely on individual-level needs. Nevertheless, groups (such as organizations and institutions) also have needs (increased client satisfaction, productivity that meets consumer demand). Societies have needs (reductions in greenhouse gases or decreases in gender-based violence).

According to Reader (2005), for Plato and Aristotle, needs are as much properties of individuals as they are of states. Aristotle suggested that "the same life is best for each individual, and for states and for mankind collectively" (1325b31; bl4–32). At Politics VII §8 Aristotle further discusses the necessities of the state. For Aristotle, the state first arises out of human necessities (Reader, 2005).

Kaufman (2011), in his definition of need, further emphasized that needs be assessed at the society, organization, and individual levels. Needs, and therefore definitions of what needs are, exist within multiple contexts ranging from a single person (a staff member's number of sales) to an organization (a business' number of defective products being delivered to clients) to our shared society (new cases of tuberculosis).

Need Versus Type of Need

To differentiate needs, qualifiers are often added to the term to indicate a particular type of need (basic needs, training needs, client needs, patients' needs, etc.), and as a result a variety of needs assessments are created: training needs assessment, client needs assessment, and so forth. These may seem to be practical terms for describing the focus of your needs assessment (or evaluation), but they do not define what the need is (or is not) on their own, and they often confuse the focus of the assessment. By calling it a "training needs assessment," you are inferring (and communicating to others) that training is the solution for whatever needs you identify and that those not associated with training solutions will be ignored. This erodes objectivity and leads to an assessment that is often little more than a solution in search of a problem (Triner, Greenberry, & Watkins, 1996).

While there are other relationships that we can reflect on when designing, developing, and implementing a needs assessment, those mentioned earlier are some of the essentials. Each points to why defining needs is critical for guiding professional practice.

Influence of a Definition

Defining needs may seem like an academic exercise or a theoretical debate with little impact or value for practice. This could not be further from the truth. Defining what you are assessing is the foundation to a successful assessment, with implications to multiple aspects of the associated tasks.

Designing Your Assessment

In the end, a needs assessment should help inform decisions about what to do next (Rossett, 1989, 1995). Thus, when designing an assessment, you should first focus the design on the decisions that will have to be made (or questions to be answered) using the results. This type of backward design process, borrowed from numerous disciplines, will guide the design and ensure that the assessment achieves valuable results.

Decisions about what to do next typically hinge on the ability of people to define the results they want to accomplish. The challenges of this are often overlooked, and assessments frequently focus too early on measuring the current state based on the assumption that people agree on the

measurable goals and objectives for the future. In most cases, needs do come with either an explicit or implicit expectation that there is a desired condition—the explicit expectation that "all reports going to clients will meet all five quality standards," or the implicit expectation that "we must improve the quality of reports before they go to clients." Such expectations affect the design of a needs assessment.

Explicit expectations of results can usually be applied in the determination of needs very easily. For example, if "currently 30% of reports meet all five quality standards," then the need would represent the other 70%. On the other hand, when desired results are not explicitly defined (or assumed and not discussed), it is essential that needs assessment provide the context for clarifying the desired results.

Continuing the example, if it is only agreed that the quality of reports should be improved (or some other vague statement of intent), then it is difficult (if not impossible) to systematically determine what to do next. As Lewis Carroll (1865) reminded us in *Alice in Wonderland*, if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. Therefore, by measuring needs, evaluators and other professionals also must deal with measuring and validating the goals (desired results) that create, or at least help define, the need.

Unfortunately, many needs assessments are not designed with either a focus on future results to be achieved or the current results being accomplished. When needs are defined by solutions (training, new software, more schools), they really identify or justify times when the previously selected solution can be applied. A solution-focused assessment may try to answer what training has to offer by relying on interviews with managers who have responsibilities for it within an organization or on a survey of staff asking them what training they want to take in the next year. In both instances, this could be a self-fulfilling prophecy; if you ask people what training they want to offer or take, then they will tell you what training they want regardless of its link to future results.

Conversely, doing assessments properly can help guide decisions about what to do next. And professionals conducting them require appropriate tools to not only assess the need but also to define (or clarify) the long-term vision, mission, and goals behind it.

Implementing Your Assessment

During implementation of an assessment, how you define needs impacts the data collected and the techniques used to obtain the information. If you are using the needs as gaps in results definition, then methods, instruments, and data analysis all include a strong focus on the two results (desired vs. current) that define gaps. Your survey contains questions on what are the desired results of activities and what current results are being achieved.

Similarly, your interviews explore how success is defined and how progress in that direction is being monitored.

Whereas if needs are studied from an object-focused definition (Table 2.1), then the data you collect and the tools used will be different. You may ask about the things people perceive as necessary to avoid harm (water, transportation, cell phones, etc.) and ask questions about the barriers they face when acquiring what they "need." Here you may choose a simple survey to measure these desires, while focus groups may be used to consider the relationships among perceived needs.

Who participates in your assessment may also vary depending on the definition of need being applied. After all, those who know what results should be, and are being achieved (such as a production line manager who implements lean six sigma or total quality management), are valuable participants in an assessment focused on results. Alternatively, for a physical/psychological definition of need (see Table 2.1), providers of medical and psychological treatment would be key participants.

How data are analyzed is also shaped by the definition. With a gaps definition, for example, you examine the size of the gaps, where they are located, the direction of the gaps, and demographics associated with them (Watkins, West Meiers, & Visser, 2012). A small-sized gap, as an illustration, in the performance of sales people in documenting leads, may be a higher priority than a medium-sized one in following up with clients after sales.

In comparison, with an object-focused definition (Table 2.1) you might look more on differences in preferences across demographic groups. Here, the data might indicate that a large percentage of sales staff believe that tablet computers would be beneficial for documenting leads, whereas sales managers may perceive that financial incentives are required.

These and other implementation differences may seem subtle in many cases where the definition will have significant implications for budgets, personnel requirements, timeframes, and other considerations in the assessment process. Hence it is important to be clear and consistent with the definition of need from the beginning of any assessment project.

Making Recommendations Based on Your Assessment

The final step of most needs assessments is to make recommendations (or decisions) about what should happen next. The definition of need influences key decisions you have to make in this step—from what alternatives get considered to how data are used to support recommendations. When presenting recommendations based on a discrepancy definition (Table 2.1), you would directly link a proposed solution (or solutions) to the closing of the discrepancy. To do this, you might furthermore choose to use a multi-criteria analysis (Watkins et al., 2012) in order to compare alternatives and prioritize options.

In contrast, if you use a goals definition with motivational drivers of behavior (Maslow's hierarchy), then the focus may be on individual aspirations and how they can best be supported. These recommendations might come from a survey or other data to reflect the values of participants. Next steps in this context might stress on creating an environment where people are intrinsically motivated to achieve organizational objectives. The definition of need influences recommendations and decisions arising from a needs assessment.

Summary

There is nothing so practical as a good theory. Kurt Lewin (1951, p. 169)

Our goal was to rekindle a professional dialogue about what is a need (and thereby, what is a needs assessment). The chapter begins with a case for the importance of a clear and consistent definition of needs as the guiding light for any needs assessment and evaluation for that matter. As Stockman (2011) posited, "there is broad consensus on the fact that evaluations must take into account the perspectives and needs of the stakeholders" (p. 36). Meyer (2011) furthered "evaluation by its definition has primary emphasis on 'usefulness' and its orientation towards the needs of clients and stakeholders" (p. 135).

With this as a foundation, a variety of meanings were offered (Table 2.1), along with a framework for thinking about the relationships embedded in the definitions. Lastly, the implications a selected definition of need would have on the design, implementation, and results of a needs assessment were examined.

We hope that there can be a professional debate in the coming years about what are needs, and needs assessment, and their role in practice. This is not to necessarily create broad consensus on a single definition, but rather to enhance the foundations of research and practice in the profession as well as those in disciplines carrying on similar debates. We recognize that defining needs may also limit, or set boundaries around, professional practice. This is not our intent, rather we want the discussion of needs to expand bringing in wants, assets, and other important considerations into the discourse.

To continue the dialogue, we encourage you to enter conversations about needs assessment at conferences, write articles sharing experiences, join us on social media (http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Needs-Assessment-4151483), and to start professional interactions about what is a "need" the next time an internal or external client requests a needs assessment (or an evaluation).

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