



Empowerment evaluation: An approach that has literally altered the landscape of evaluation



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ABSTRACT

The quest for credible and actionable evidence to improve decision making, foster improvement, enhance self-determination, and promote social betterment is now a global phenomenon. Evaluation theorists and practitioners alike have responded to and overcome the challenges that limited the effectiveness and usefulness of traditional evaluation approaches primarily focused on seeking rigorous scientific knowledge about social programs and policies. No modern evaluation approach has received a more robust welcome from stakeholders across the globe than empowerment evaluation.

Empowerment evaluation has been a leader in the development of stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation, setting a high bar. In addition, empowerment evaluation's respect for community knowledge and commitment to the people's right to build their own evaluation capacity has influenced the evaluation mainstream, particularly concerning evaluation capacity building. Empowerment evaluation's most significant contributions to the field have been to improving evaluation use and knowledge utilization.

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The quest for credible and actionable evidence to improve decision making, foster improvement, enhance self-determination, and promote social betterment is now a global phenomenon. Without a doubt, this positive social epidemic spreading across the globe is largely due to the discovery and development of innovative evaluation approaches that better meet stakeholder, organization, community, and societal needs. In these past two decades, evaluation theorists and practitioners alike have responded to and overcome the challenges that limited the effectiveness and usefulness of traditional evaluation approaches primarily focused on seeking rigorous scientific knowledge about social programs and policies. No modern evaluation approach has received a more robust welcome from stakeholders across the globe than empowerment evaluation (Datta, 2016).

This special topic edition of E&PP, consisting of luminaries in the field, celebrate the 21st anniversary of empowerment evaluation, an approach that has literally altered the landscape of evaluation. David M. Fetterman introduced the approach as part of his presidential address to the American Evaluation Association in 1993 (Fetterman, 1993). Since that time, it has gone viral and is

practiced vigorously throughout the United States and in more than 16 countries.

Empowerment evaluation has been a leader in the development of stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation (Fetterman, Rodríguez-Campos, Wandersman, & Goldfarb O'sullivan, 2014), setting a high bar. In addition, empowerment evaluation's respect for community knowledge and commitment to the people's right to build their own evaluation capacity has influenced the evaluation mainstream, particularly concerning evaluation capacity building. One of empowerment evaluation's most significant contributions to the field has been to improving evaluation use and knowledge utilization.

Their recent book *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-assessment, Evaluation Capacity Building, and Accountability* (Fetterman et al., 2015; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015), represents the culmination of decades of dialogue. This collection of scholars and practitioners, led by David M. Fetterman, Abraham Wandersman, and Shakeh Kaftarian, have engaged in an honest and sincere dialogue with their colleagues, seeking critical feedback at every juncture.

In addition to exchanges in the *American Journal of Evaluation and Evaluation and Program Planning* with numerous colleagues, I organized and moderated a pivotal debate about the value of empowerment evaluation between David M. Fetterman, Michael

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Quinn Patton, and Michael Scriven at the Claremont Colleges in August 2009. While the exchanges were invigorating and overflowing with evaluation wisdom, the most remarkable memory was how David modeled empowerment evaluation's characteristic orientation to openly and honestly engage in self-reflection and critique throughout the debate (see Donaldson, Patton, Fetterman, & Scriven, 2010). David and his colleagues have used this critical feedback to refine and improve their conceptual clarity and methodological specificity. Their book, building on these exchanges, represents the cutting edge of insight and understanding into empowerment evaluation.

Their collection presents the history of empowerment evaluation, from its turbulent first steps to its well-established and institutionalized stages, including the establishment of a special division within the professional association – the Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation TIG.

I have had the great pleasure of traveling down evaluation byways with David over the past decade. It is amazing to observe David facilitating empowerment principles in practice. I can attest this man practices what he preaches and serves as a wonderful spokesperson and role model for the evaluation profession. David and his colleagues have created a brilliant evaluation path that provides discipline to one of the most pervasive forms of evaluation going on today throughout governments, universities, for profit and not-for-profit organizations, and communities across the globe—that is, self-evaluation.

David has convinced me and others that, contrary to popular belief, self-evaluation is without a doubt the most common form of

evaluation being practiced throughout the world today. However, most of this pervasive self-evaluation work is rather superficial, practiced by amateurs without professional evaluation training, and is not informed by professional evaluation standards, principles, and ethics. One of the greatest evaluation innovations of the past two decades has been the development of a professional and systematic approach to self-evaluation called empowerment evaluation.

Today, in this collection of thought leaders, we celebrate this powerful innovation and contribution to both the field and our global community.

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