



Empowerment evaluation: Exemplary is its openness to dialogue, reflective practice, and process use



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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the 21 st anniversary of empowerment evaluation, congratulations are in order for having established global credibility, demonstrated utility, and for its exemplary openness to dialogue, reflective practice, and process use.

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I remember well the 1993 annual convention of the American Evaluation Association in Dallas when David introduced the idea of empowerment evaluation in his presidential keynote. It was an innovative and radical approach that was met with much initial skepticism, but the approach has certainly prevailed, gaining not only legitimacy but utility, and, as evidenced in the documentary record, is being implemented and appreciated worldwide.

I've had the privilege over the years of engaging in dialogue with David, Abe, and others about various aspects of empowerment evaluation. Certainly ones of the ways in which empowerment evaluation is exemplary is its openness to dialogue and reflective practice. As part of our dialogue I wrote a review of the most recent edited volume of empowerment evaluation, subtitled: "Knowledge and tools for self-assessment, evaluation capacity building, and accountability." That review is available in full in *Evaluation and Program Planning* as well as at the empowerment evaluation website.

Another way in which it is exemplary is its attention to process use: the impacts on people and programs, on communities, and organizations, *from going through the evaluation process*, not just from the findings of the evaluation. David and Abe were among the very first to grasp the importance of the idea of process use, and have insightfully conceptualized and documented its relevance for empowerment evaluation.

For purposes of this occasion and as part of an ongoing dialogue I would note two things from my review of the latest book. First, as noted, the book's subtitle emphasizes empowerment evaluation

tools. Certainly I recognize that people want tools, workshop participants demand tools, EVALTALK is dominated by inquiries of people seeking tools, and empowerment evaluation offers and uses tools. This point is reiterated throughout the book so what's not to like. Well from my perspective, there are no unique empowerment evaluation tools. I don't find a single unique tool in the empowerment evaluation book. There are many examples of generic evaluation tools adapted to and facilitated for empowerment evaluation purposes, in an empowerment evaluation process, but it is the empowerment evaluation facilitation process that makes the tools empowerment evaluation.

You can look at any of the tools, question frameworks, outcome frameworks, empowerment evaluation steps, whether 3 or 10, and you will find generic evaluative thinking. This is not a criticism. Indeed, it is a strength. It reinforces that empowerment evaluation is fundamentally about systemic, systematic, empirically-oriented, and rigorously facilitated evaluative thinking.

Here's my second point. In my judgment, the evidence that empowerment is occurring in empowerment evaluations, remains relatively weak. Certainly program improvements are occurring. The case studies in the edited volumes make it abundantly clear, with convincing evidence, that improvements occur and findings are used. But empowerment?

Participants in empowerment evaluations report high levels of satisfaction, learning, and capacity building. But satisfaction, learning, and capacity building do not seem to me to equate to empowerment.

It is a central issue, invoked by the very designation "empowerment evaluation." So how does the new book address that issue?

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In the Appendix there is a Section on clarifying evaluation issues in which it is stated “a common misconception about empowerment evaluation is it empowers either individuals or groups. Empowerment evaluation can't empower anyone. People empower themselves. Empowerment evaluation simply provides the tools and environment conducive to empowering oneself.”

In my review, which appeared in tis journal *Evaluation and Program Planning*, I wrote: “So, after 21 years and global recognition, this is what the lead empowerment evaluation conceptualizers have to say about empowerment: ‘People empower themselves’.”

I understand that this is a politically correct thing to say. I also understand that such a sentiment could be experienced as insulting and offensive with connotations of blame the victim. People: empower yourselves. I'm afraid that I find this to be a rather simplistic framing of empowerment, one that concerns me.

Empowerment surely involves the dynamics of complex systems. Systems can disempower, empower, and do both at the same time. Empowerment is embedded in authentic and meaningful engagement processes, interpersonal relationships, socio-political, cultural, institutional, and economic arrangements. Indeed, the writings about empowerment evaluation manifest understanding of these dynamics. So this notion that this reduces to “people empowering themselves” doesn't do justice to systems thinking and complexity theory applied to the issue of empowerment – and that's the future that I would hope for empowerment evaluation.

System thinking and complexity theory have become important new framework for understanding and engaging in evaluation in the last decade. I would hope that as empowerment theory and practice moves forward it would incorporate more understandings about how systems affect empowerment and the ways in which empowerment involves systems change. Not simply targeting individual people as empowered. but changing systems as a critical part of the future of empowerment evaluation.

I learned about the nature of empowerment and systems change in a foundation anti-poverty evaluation I did some time ago. We found that how organizations treated their own staff affected how those staff treated clients and participants in programs. We concluded in that evaluation that: *Empowerment breeds empowerment. Disempowerment breeds disempowerment.* When program staff are treated in ways that empower them they treat program participants in ways that empower those participants. When program staff were treated in demeaning ways, they treated people in poverty in demeaning ways. Those are systems dynamics and I would hope that those of you who are involved in empowerment evaluation theory and practice would pay attention to system dynamics and that you would get beyond this simple notion that it's all about individuals empowering themselves.

So that's the future, but for today we are celebrating 21 impressive years of making contributions to evaluation practice and theory. I can only hope that I am around to celebrate the next 21st anniversary when empowerment evaluation will be 42. Indeed, let's shoot for the big 50th anniversary. I'll see you all then.