



## Empowerment evaluation 21 years later: There is much to admire about empowerment evaluation



There is much to admire about empowerment evaluation, and on this festive occasion, I will begin with the features that I most admire.

- 1 This approach begins with the people who know the most of any group about the actual operation of the program (or the product, policy, person, etc. if we go beyond program evaluation). This knowledge is often highly inaccessible for external evaluators and often crucial to the validity of the evaluation.
- 2 Empowerment Evaluation (EE) is dealing directly with the agency for implementation, and hence the people in perhaps the best position to implement recommendations for improvement.
- 3 Using program staff as the evaluators gives one access to and perhaps the best chance of control over abuses of staff and interpees.
- 4 Although this is not an unmixed blessing, it is often important that EE frequently converts agents into advocates.
- 5 In converting agents into advocates, EE can sometimes transcend the limits of a particular program and make them advocates for a methodology, not only EE, but serious tools used in its implementation.
- 6 EE provides a great machinery for three functions that are related to evaluation and frequently required in order to maximize its implementation: marketing, explaining, and justifying a program.
- 7 A powerful and possibly unique (in practice) level of the ethical and pragmatic use of meta-evaluation. I try to match David on this, and indeed advocate to David on this, by going further than his enthusiasms for the use of the “critical friend” to the use of “critical enemy” but am less successful. However, I never think of empirical evaluation without reflecting on his inspirational example of treating his critics as friends—and not just friends but helpers—as they indeed are. The connection between us is close because we are both part of that small group who really believe that proposition and act on it.

Hail, David and your colleagues, on this well earned celebration of your birthday!

OK, so much for Mr. Nice Guy. What happened to Mr. Critical Friend/Enemy? My concerns about Empowerment Evaluation are simple. They relate to only two dimensions of its achievements. However, these two dimensions are very important: (a) the dimension of validity, of the evaluations conclusions; (b) the dimension of credibility. On these dimensions the evaluation team, which in EE is the staff of the program, is severely compromised. They are subject to—though not automatically destroyed by—three facts:

- 1 They are evaluating, to a substantial extent, their own efforts: a paradigm example of bias-proneness.
- 2 They are usually amateurs at evaluation, often doing their first evaluation.
- 3 They are being guided by an enthusiast for one approach to evaluation, which increases the chance of bias toward EE, and hence may lead them away from the use of hard-nosed controls for that bias, e.g. antagonistic meta-evaluation, recruitment of and cooperation with an external team or—very often the case—a critical friend or enemy.

So, with all due respect and indeed affection, I remain,  
Yours sincerely,  
A critical friend,  
Michael Scriven

Michael Scriven<sup>1</sup>  
Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA  
<sup>1</sup>[michaelscriven.info](mailto:michaelscriven.info). E-mail address: [mjscriv1@gmail.com](mailto:mjscriv1@gmail.com) (M. Scriven).

Received 17 September 2016

Available online 15 October 2016