



When is a theory a theory? A case example



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ABSTRACT

This discussion comments on the approximately 20 years history of writings on the prescriptive theory called Empowerment Evaluation. To do so, involves examining how “Empowerment Evaluation Theory” has been defined at various points of time (particularly 1996 and now in 2015). Defining a theory is different from judging the success of a theory. This latter topic has been addressed elsewhere by Michael Scriven, Michael Patton, and Brad Cousins. I am initially guided by the work of Robin Miller (2010) who has written on the issue of how to judge the success of a theory. In doing so, she provided potential standards for judging the adequacy of theories. My task is not judging the adequacy or success of the Empowerment Evaluation prescriptive theory in practice, but determining how well the theory is delineated. That is, to what extent do the writings qualify as a prescriptive theory.

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The purpose of this session as I understand it is to comment on the approximately 20 years history of writings on the prescriptive theory called Empowerment Evaluation. I will do so by examining the extent to which “Empowerment Evaluation” satisfies the criteria of being an adequate theory. I will examine how “Empowerment Evaluation Theory” has been defined at various points of time (particularly 1996 and now in 2015). I am initially guided by the work of Robin Miller (2010) who has written on the issue of how to judge the success of a theory. In doing so, she provided potential standards for judging the adequacy of theories. Let me note that defining a theory is different from judging the success of a theory. This latter topic has been addressed elsewhere by Michael Scriven, Michael Patton, and Brad Cousins.

My task is not judging the adequacy or success of the Empowerment Evaluation prescriptive theory in practice, but determining how well the theory is delineated. That is, to what extent do the writings qualify as a prescriptive theory. In essence this is the first two of Robin Miller’s five criteria: “operational specificity” and “range of application”. The other criteria that she provides deal with application in practice – measures of the success of the theory.

A theory is defined by the written words of the theorist. In essence, a theory is the author’s view about how he or she would prescribe that an evaluation be conducted towards a particular end goal that the theorist has specified. Additional thoughts by the

theorist that are unsaid are not part of the theory. So too, I would say, are verbal comments that are not part of a written record. Likewise, and most certainly, external papers or evaluations written or conducted by others who advocate that they are performing an evaluation in accordance with a particular theoretical stance are inadmissible as part of that theory since we do not know whether the manner of implementation is, or would be, acceptable to the theorist.

I will examine only the admissible evidence of the Empowerment Evaluation prescriptive theory based on two major books on empowerment evaluation (1996 and 2015). In each case these are Fetterman’s own words as well as the cases he chose to include in the 2015 volume. Does inclusion of the cases in a volume imply that the author (Fetterman) has, by their inclusion, accepted that they are valid representations of his theory? I am willing to accept that premise. And that acceptance may be a major source of some ambiguity with respect to what exactly is the theory called “Empowerment Evaluation”.

Theories are defined in part by the specified end or goal that the evaluator espouses. This is the first element to be considered in examining “operational specificity.” Fetterman et al. have variously defined the goal as “foster improvement and self-determination” (1996); “Helping others to learn to evaluate their program” (1996); Or, “create an environment that is conducive to empowerment and self-determination” (2001). The 2015 volume offers up the first of the above 1996 goals: “foster improvement and self determination.” These statements are somewhat different even though they all may be thought of as part of a larger goal – increasing evaluation

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use. Thus, the precise evaluation goal of the current theory seems to be somewhat ambiguous.

Another critical element in defining theories is the description of procedures prescribed by the author for attaining these ends. An overarching part of the procedures is the definition of the role of the evaluator and of stakeholders. On these two elements Fetterman is quite clear – stakeholders are engaged at all stages and the evaluator serves as mentor.

Beyond this, a theory should prescribe specific steps that it is expected that the evaluator would follow. Theories differ in this respect. Some are more open-ended providing only general guidelines – a theory deficiency. Others, like Empowerment Evaluation, appear to be more highly detailed – but not exactly. In Fetterman's combined program planning, management and evaluation model as described in 1996, he indicated four major elements of the procedures: 1) Creating a mission or vision statement; 2) Identifying and prioritizing the most significant project activities and rating how well each is doing; 3) Establishing goals and determining strategies for their accomplishment; and 4) documenting progress. In the 2015 volume, steps three and four have been combined, creating what he now refers to as "The Three Step Method". The previous fourth category "documenting progress" is now subsumed within the "goals and strategies" step. Does this mean that the documenting stage is considered to be of less importance? That would be unfortunate since it must be a major aspect of Fetterman's Empowerment model, if we are to consider it an evaluation theory. Moreover, I note that in some writings this third step is also referred to as the "planning for the future" step.

For the first two of these major elements, (mission statement and prioritizing activities), Fetterman provides very detailed group exercises including charts and worksheets, that could be employed. The question that might be raised here is whether these are just examples or an explicit part of the theory. That is, if these two first phases have not been done in the way emphasized in Fetterman's writings, then has the theory not been followed? Furthermore, the 2015 book offers up, in addition, a ten step GTO (Getting To Outcomes) approach which appears to not bear great resemblance to the three step approach. Are there two different Empowerment Evaluation theories or are these alternate appropriate sets of procedures? Further, Fetterman notes that the GTO method has been used in multiple domains, not necessarily as a part of an Empowerment Evaluation. Is it a unique part of the Empowerment Evaluation prescriptive theory?

Indeed, Fetterman himself reinforces the concern about the lack of a single "theoretical signature" (Miller, 2010) for Empowerment Evaluation:

There are many ways in which to implement an empowerment evaluation. In fact, empowerment evaluation has accumulated a warehouse of useful tools. The 3-step (Fetterman, 2001) and 10-step Getting To Outcomes (Chinman, Imm, & Wandersman, 2004) approaches to empowerment evaluation are the most popular tools in the collection. (Fetterman et al., 2015, p. 29)

In the 2015 book, Fetterman offers case study exemplars of the application of the Empowerment Evaluation theory. I performed an analysis of the cases presented in the 2015 volume. Two of them were methodological in that they provided a further elaboration of

the GTO method. Of the remaining chapters: five were applications of the three step method (or some variation thereof). Two of those were authored by Fetterman. Two involved the use of GTO – one authored by Wandersman. And, two chapters utilized something called "Ten Core Principles" which was a pretty generic list of ideas such as social justice, inclusion, capacity building, and accountability – a list that has much in common with many other theories, and does not offer a unique theoretical signature. Finally, two used as a generic guideline "empowerment evaluation principles" which were relatively unspecified and did not attune directly to the noted methodology of Empowerment Evaluation as a theory. It seems clear that not all of the cases have followed the prescribed methodology, – either the 3 step or GTO, – in its entirety. This is a deficiency that runs through both earlier and later texts – namely, the failure to distinguish between empowerment evaluation as a "theory" and empowerment as an "idea" or "aspiration". Is any evaluation that says that it is seeking "empowerment" an example of the "Empowerment Evaluation" prescriptive theory? "What is the theory" – has it been explained in sufficient detail so that when we see one conducted we will know that it is an Empowerment Evaluation. Or, can we properly determine what are not Empowerment Evaluations.

The criterion of "range of application" refers to the kinds of evaluation situations for which the theory is appropriate, (formative, summative, developmental) and the kind or size of program in which the theory might be employed. Clearly Empowerment Evaluation seems to be focused on developmental or formative evaluation. And, it has been applied primarily in small or medium size programs. The ideas behind Empowerment Evaluation theory have had major and long standing impact on the field. The next step in future writings is to provide greater detail on "operational specificity" and impose much harsher judgment as to what is an admissible instance of the prescriptive theory called Empowerment Evaluation. This will help to clarify an already important model.

More generally, what I am calling for is essentially similar to what we do as evaluators in trying to see that programs are appropriately identifiable. We need to do the same thing in examining evaluation theories. Indeed, I want to consider the issue when the next edition of *Evaluation Roots* (Alkin, 2012) is produced.

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