



Celebratory reflections, appreciations, clarifications, and comments



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 September 2016

Accepted 7 December 2016

Available online 8 December 2016

Our thanks are extended to each one of our critical friends. They have been an integral part of our lives for over two decades. They have enriched our understanding and held the bar high. They, along with the communities we work with, inspire us to improve both in theory and in practice. We conclude this special topic edition of *Evaluation and Program Planning* – empowerment evaluation’s 21 anniversary celebration – with a few reflections, appreciations, clarifications, and comments concerning the panelists’ remarks.

1. Stewart donaldson

First, we agree with Stewart that the search for “credible and actionable evidence to improve decision making, foster improvement, enhance self-determination, and promote social betterment is now a global phenomenon”. Empowerment evaluation has been embraced by stakeholders across the globe. We are grateful to be part of this world-wide demonstration of evaluation use and we strive to continue to be a professional and systematic approach to self-evaluation.

We particularly value Stewart’s contributions to the development of program theory-driven evaluation science (Donaldson, 2007). The commitment to soliciting stakeholder’s views resonates with empowerment evaluation. As he explains:

Simply stated, evaluators work with stakeholders to develop a common understanding of how a program is presumed to solve the problem(s) of interest; to formulate and prioritize key evaluation questions; and then to decide how best to gather credible evidence to answer those questions within practical, time, and resource constraints . . . The choice of the evaluation design and methods

used to gather credible evidence is made in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders, and is not solely decided by the evaluation team (Donaldson, 2009; p. 243–244)

We simply take this approach one step further and place the stakeholders in charge and evaluators as guides, coaches, or critical friends. Thank you Stewart for your comments and contributions, as well as setting the stage for this engagement. We will return to your introductory comments at the conclusion of our discussion.

2. Michael scriven

Second, we are honestly struck by the wave of compliments and praises we received today from Michael Scriven. For those unfamiliar with our early exchanges, let’s just say on several occasions our intellectual sparing prompted colleagues to jokingly suggest we strap on boxing gloves before stepping up to the podium to debate with each other. We may disagree from time to time, and take pokes at each other – highlighting our differences, but we deeply respect each other and the company of colleagues committed to both the same standards of quality and use in evaluation (see also Fetterman & Ravitz, 2016).

Today, however, we are struck most by Michael’s compliments about our use of the critical friend to help us improve our work, the community’s complex initiatives, and who we are as evaluators. We may not always match our aspirations, but we make more than a good-faith effort to, as Stewart said, “practice what we preach.”

We have addressed many of the issues concerning bias that were raised in Michael’s comments (see also Scriven, 1997). They appear in AJE (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007) and our books (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996, p. 21–24; Fetterman, 2001; p. 104–105). However, a brief additional response about bias is warranted. We have found people to be quite honest and open in part because they want their programs and their communities to work. People are tired of functioning in “broken” environments. Empowerment evaluation often opens up the first opportunity or

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window to address these chronic problems. In addition, critical friends are often more honest and critical than less involved evaluators because they care. They have a vested interest in the success of the program. They are more critical because they want them to work. Less invested evaluators rarely see or comment on the “devil in the details” the way a more micro (and invested) evaluator might. In addition, the bottom line in empowerment evaluation is results—the same results (and indicators) that a traditional evaluator would look for.

3. Michael patton

Our gratitude is also extended to Michael Patton for his gracious and informative remarks. Michael Patton’s comments about empowerment evaluation being “exemplary” in its “openness to dialogue and reflective practice” were reflected in Stewart and Michael Scriven’s comments as well. It has been part of our practice, since the inception of empowerment evaluation, including posting both Michaels’ critiques on our web pages with their permission (and of course our responses). Michael also captured empowerment evaluation’s commitment to process use. We have found that the more people conduct their own evaluations, the more they find them credible and act on them. Process use also contributes to stakeholders learning to think like evaluators, as Fetterman discussed in Alkin’s *Roots of Evaluation* collection (Fetterman, 2013b). We agree with Michael that “empowerment evaluation is fundamentally about systemic, systematic, empirically-oriented, and rigorously facilitated evaluative thinking”, not tools. We will return to this point in our discussion about Alkin’s comments.

We also agree with Michael’s observation that “improvements occur and findings are used” in empowerment evaluations. However, we disagree with two points raised in his remarks: 1) empowerment evaluation outcomes; and 2) individual versus organizational level foci. Concerning empowerment outcomes, tribes have used empowerment evaluation to help bridge the digital divide in communities of color (Fetterman, 2013a). They have transformed their lives, for example, by building the largest unlicensed wireless network in the country, according to a former head of the Federal Communications Commission (Fetterman, 2013a, 106–107). They built the towers and their children maintained the routers to support their wireless network. This enables them to communicate throughout the reservation and outside the reservation, accessing educational, employment, and cultural opportunities. They have also used empowerment evaluation to develop and operate small businesses, such as a digital printing press. This is empowerment. They have literally migrated from being systematically disempowered, in part as a function of an earlier incarnation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to systematically empowered human beings.

Impoverished rural schools have emerged from academic distress using empowerment evaluation, as evidenced by standardized test scores (Fetterman, 2005; p. 116–120). Teachers functioning as evaluators are maximizing student learning and achievement around the globe, using empowerment evaluation as their guide (Clinton & Hattie, 2015). Similarly, fourth and fifth-grade students are using empowerment evaluation to create change in their world (Langhout & Fernández, 2015).

Peruvian women are using empowerment evaluation to enhance the quality of their crafts. In addition, they are selling their products online (bypassing the middle man/woman who had consumed most of their profits in the past). Women involved in the initiative report feelings of belonging, collaboration, and self-worth. “These once economically disenfranchised women are now significant contributors to the financial well-being of their families and communities and can be used as beacons of hope for other

disenfranchised groups of women across the world” (Sastre-Merino, Vidueira, Díaz-Puente, & Fernández-Moral, 2015). These outcomes are just a handful of the proxies used to document empowerment. The evidence that empowerment is occurring in empowerment evaluation is overwhelming. We may measure it differently, using different proxies, but the evidence is still incontrovertible.

Second, we believe there may be a misunderstanding about the practice of empowerment evaluation. We have stated that “people empower themselves.” By this we mean, we do not empower anyone. We help create an environment that is conducive to people empowering themselves. It is incorrect to infer from this phrase, however, that empowerment evaluation is simply “targeting individual people”. Our focus has always been on the program, organizational, community, or systems level of change. One of our 10 guiding principles is organizational learning, not individual level learning. We should note that our organizational level focus is not mutually exclusive with an individual transformative level of personal change per se. It is simply not where we operate most of the time.

Empowerment occurs on multiple levels in empowerment evaluation. The multiple levels of empowerment are described in great detail in our recent response to Michael’s review of our latest book (see Patton, 2015; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2015). Nevertheless, we appreciate the recommendation to pursue systems change and systems thinking more rigorously. We will pursue that recommendation.

4. Marvin Alkin

We thank Marv Alkin for his long-standing contributions to making empowerment evaluation more focused and useful. His focus on theory prompts us to share a brief story. There once was a young energetic student. He ran into the classroom, bubbling with enthusiasm. He described, in tremendous detail, how effective his program was, how it served so many people, and was embraced by almost everyone in the community. The professor listened intently. When the student finished, he paused and asked one question: “Wonderful, so it works in practice, but what about in theory?”

We appreciate Alkin’s recommendation to focus on prescriptive theory, because we were taught that there is nothing as practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1952; Weiss, 1995). We will take his recommendation to heart and continue to more rigorously pursue prescriptive theory development. However, there are a number of issues raised during Marv’s remarks about the nature of empowerment evaluation that merit attention (Duncan & Miller, 2006b).

First, two out of five empowerment evaluation books were used as “admissible evidence” when determining how well the theory is delineated (operational specificity). Moreover, one of the two books was written over 21 years ago. That is like adding a child’s IQ (intellectual intelligence) or EQ (emotional intelligence) with their IQ or EQ as an adult and coming up with an average score. The most recent, more mature, IQ or EQ would seem like the best indicator of the individual’s capacity – not an average of their scores over a 21-year period. In addition, all of the chapters in the collection are viewed as exemplars of empowerment evaluation. They are treated as equally valid to include as admissible evidence in defining empowerment evaluation. However, an editor selects a chapter for inclusion for multiple purposes, not exclusively to demonstrate or define the approach. For example, Leviton’s chapter was included to highlight a major foundation’s favorable disposition toward empowerment evaluation, signaling significant changes ahead. She describes the potential role of empowerment evaluation in achieving the foundation’s philanthropic strategy for social

change, not as an exemplar to be used on par with a case example of empowerment evaluation.

There are other issues that merit clarification as well, ranging from assurances that empowerment evaluation continues to document progress (albeit in a more sophisticated manner than was practiced 21 years ago) to the role that the 10 guiding principles play in enhancing conceptual clarity. However, the most important indicator of a conceptual misunderstanding concerning the nature of empowerment evaluation is the discussion about the steps of empowerment evaluation. The steps are a “how-to” guide to help people, programs, or communities conduct empowerment evaluations. People need to know how to do empowerment evaluation.

Empowerment evaluation’s “theoretical signature”, however, has little to do with the steps – 3-step or 10-step. The “theoretical signature” is a systematic way of thinking, not a single principle, concept, or step. Empowerment evaluation, first and foremost, helps people evaluate their own programs and initiatives. It is the gestalt or whole package that makes it work. Empowerment evaluation theory, concepts, principles, and steps are used to guide practice.

Focusing on the steps is off-target, much like Patton’s emphasis on principles in and of themselves, because it focuses on individual parts or steps, failing to recognize that empowerment evaluation is more than the sum of its parts (or in this case steps). There are several approaches and many tools to conduct empowerment evaluations. Patton articulately captured this point. “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. . . It reinforces that empowerment evaluation is fundamentally about systemic, systematic, empirically oriented, and rigorously facilitated evaluative thinking” (2016, p. x). The only friendly amendment is that the evaluation is conducted by program staff and participants, with the assistance and guidance of an empowerment evaluator.

Finally, part of the confusion in our exchange is attributable to how we define evidence, particularly admissible (or even credible) evidence. At this point we come full circle in our panel’s discussion. Stewart set the tone with his introductory comments about program theory driven evaluation. His comments directly respond to the issue at hand. Donaldson calls for a broader view of admissible or credible evidence. We agree with Donaldson (2009, p. 249) that: “it is safe to say we are a long way from consensus and a universal answer to the question of what counts as credible evidence in contemporary applied research and evaluation.”

Empowerment Evaluation has evolved from both evidence-based practice¹ and practice-based evidence (Duncan & Miller, 2006a). Marv’s comments are rooted in evidence-based practice which is laudable. However, it does demonstrate the pitfalls of not speaking to practice-based evidence. In this case it would have been more accurate and efficient to ask the founder and major contributors and proponents of the approach, what they think constitutes credible evidence. Examples might have been more focused and strategically selected to best represent the theory, (reducing the intellectual “noise” associated with less accurate representations of empowerment evaluation). For example, they may have been limited to: Fetterman’s chapter in Alkins book (Fetterman, 2013b), the latest empowerment evaluation book in the series (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015), Wikipedia selections, and chapters that are exemplars of the approach, as compared with chapters presented for other purposes. Other

chapters or passages might be more accurately characterized as “thoughtful, reflective, provocative, or symbolic”. Donaldson (2009, p. 249) captures the sentiments of the empowerment evaluation stakeholders in this context:

It now seems clear that disparate views about what constitutes credible evidence are predicated on divergent assumptions, often implicit (Mark, Chapter 12). Practitioners should be well advised to explore these assumptions in great depth with their stakeholders before embarking on their quest to gather credible evidence.

5. Conclusion

We thank each and every one of our colleagues for their contributions today and over the last 21 years. We look forward to continuing the dialogue and development. Patton’s closing remarks are appropriate here: “today we are celebrating 21 impressive years of making contributions to evaluation practice and theory . . . let’s shoot for the big 50th anniversary” (when we meet again to reflect on empowerment evaluation’s evolution of theory and practice in the future).

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