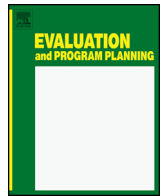




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Celebrating the 21st anniversary of empowerment evaluation with our critical friends[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This special topic edition of E&PP presents the insights of luminaries in the field who have helped shape empowerment evaluation with their critiques, concerns, and congratulations. We celebrate their contributions to empowerment evaluation. This special topic edition of E&PP presents their comments about an evaluation approach that, according to president Stewart Donaldson, has “gone viral” across the globe (Donaldson, 2015).

To set the stage for these critical friends' comments, additional context for their discussion is provided. In addition, this special topic edition concludes with a brief comment on their thoughts.

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1. Introduction

David Fetterman introduced empowerment evaluation to the field of evaluation during his presidential address 21 years ago (1993). Since that time it has been used in over 16 countries, ranging from corporate offices of Google and Hewlett-Packard to squatter settlements and townships in South Africa. Empowerment evaluation has been used by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US. Department of Education, Stanford University School of Medicine, and Native American tribes in reservations stretching from Michigan to San Diego.

David Fetterman, Shakeh Kaftarian, Abraham Wandersman, and many other empowerment evaluators, have contributed to blogs, presented in professional association panels, published in scholarly journals, and contributed chapters in books and encyclopedia (including Wikipedia). They have published 5 books on the topic of empowerment evaluation. David has even been invited to radio interviews to speak about the use of empowerment evaluation to help bridge the digital divide in communities of color.

This special topic edition of E&PP presents the insights of luminaries in the field who have helped shape empowerment evaluation with their critiques, concerns, and congratulations. We celebrate their contributions to empowerment evaluation. This special topic edition of E&PP presents their comments about an evaluation approach that, according to president Stewart Donaldson, has “gone viral” across the globe (Donaldson, 2015).

To set the stage for our critical friends' comments we provide additional context for their discussion. In addition, we conclude this special topic edition with a brief comment on their thoughts.

[☆] Based on presentations made at the American Evaluation Association, Chicago, IL, November 11, 2015.

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2. Brief history

Twenty-one years ago empowerment evaluation was introduced to the field. The atmosphere was electric. Some colleagues embraced the approach immediately. It resonated with their own practice. Others viewed the approach as a threat to the status quo.

“Colleagues who fear that we are giving evaluation away are right. We are sharing it with a broader population. Those who fear that we are educating ourselves out of a job are only partially correct” (Fetterman, 1993, 1994). Colleagues who remember these words also remember [Stufflebeam \(1994\)](#) and [Sechrest's \(1997\)](#) terse responses, expressing their concern about giving evaluation away. They may also remember Fetterman's somewhat impassioned and extensive responses in an effort to defend the approach and allay their fears and concerns about what they referred to as a world-wide “movement” (Fetterman, 1995, 1997a; Scriven, 1997; Sechrest, 1997).

Fetterman also said in his address: “Like any tool, empowerment evaluation is designed to address a specific evaluative need. It is not a substitute for other forms of evaluation inquiry or appraisal.” It is gratifying (and a relief) to see that in retrospect, we were reasonably temperate in our views. However, our position has never wavered. We believed and continue to believe in our mission or purpose: “We are educating others to manage their own affairs in areas they know (or should know) better than we do. At the same time, we are creating new roles for evaluators to help others help themselves.”

At this very early and somewhat tumultuous stage, strong bonds were being created. Shakeh Kaftarian was one of the first colleagues to come up to the podium to thank David and agree with the tenets of empowerment evaluation. At that time, she was deputy director of the Office of Scientific Analysis at the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). Shakeh, along with many of her colleagues, observed the need for development, evaluation, and accountability in communities with major service needs.

Shakeh also played a role in connecting Abe and David. She invited Abe to participate in a panel at the 1992 AEA conference. Abe ran into Len Bickman, a past-president of the association. Len was speaking to a very energetic guy and invited Abe to join him for a walk to get some Seattle coffee with “that guy”. Abe did, and the rest is part of empowerment evaluation history. The energetic guy was David. David and Abe started talking and a few hours later realized how many common interests they shared. Abe shared his work with coalitions and David shared his work with public school systems in the United States and townships in South Africa. A bond was created, lasting over two decades.

While these foundational friendships were being forged, there was “trouble” brewing in the field. In spite of what might appear to have been simple, logical, and reserved comments at David's presidential address, the response was fast and furious, the flood gates were open. They were interpreted as a “call to arms.” Controversy ensued.

3. Initial controversy

[Scriven \(1997\)](#) and [Patton \(1997\)](#) were some of the first scholars to critically engage the text and provide a critique of empowerment evaluation. They were asked to write a book review. However, they immediately decided there was something much larger to engage. According to [Scriven \(1997\)](#): “What began as a book review has thus been somewhat enlarged in scope to become a review and critique of a movement that is now an important part of the evaluation scene.”

According to [Worthen \(1997\)](#), AJE editor, the early critiques ranged from ad hominem personal attacks (which he abhorred and rejected during his tenure) to reasoned scholarly critique. Blaine

single handedly created an environment conducive to scholarly debate and inquiry and thus facilitated both a discussion about empowerment evaluation as an approach and its role as a catalyst for change in the guild ([Fetterman, 1997b, p. 254](#)). [Wild \(1997\)](#) summed up this initial reaction to empowerment evaluation: “Fetterman et al. have nailed their theses to the door of the cathedral. Now the question is: How tolerant is the establishment of dissent?”

4. Embracing critiques

Critical friends play an instrumental role in empowerment evaluation. They help facilitate the processes and steps of the approach. Edmund Burke appreciated the value of this role in scholarly work and practice: “He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skills. Our antagonist is our helper.” Our colleagues, serving as critical friends, have helped us shape and refine empowerment evaluation over the last couple of decades.

[Stufflebeam \(1994\)](#) and [Sechrest's \(1997\)](#) critiques provided an insight into the fear this approach elicited. These colleagues fought long and hard to establish the credibility of evaluation. They felt threatened. One of the positive effects of their critique was that they challenged empowerment evaluators to demonstrate how they met or exceeded the [Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation \(1994\)](#), in terms of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy ([Fetterman, 1995](#); [Fetterman, 2001, p. 87–99](#)).

[Scriven \(1997\)](#) and [Patton \(1997\)](#) also raised meaningful issues and concerns about bias, rigor, and objectivity. They were addressed in large part in AJE ([Fetterman, 1997b](#)). The critique also provided a forum to discuss the significance of process use, devolving responsibility for an evaluation, and recognizing positions of privilege ([Fetterman, 2001](#)). However, one of the most noteworthy aspects associated with our exchanges was the shift in the nature of the discourse itself.

Patton shared his manuscript with David Fetterman before publication, and David provided a long list of corrections and suggestions. He incorporated these, as deemed appropriate, to refine his argument in some instances and strengthen it in others. This back-and-forth process allowed them to focus their attention on crystallized and improved arguments, rather than on errors and omissions. Similarly, Scriven and Fetterman exchanged and disseminated both of their critiques and responses. For example, in response to David Fetterman's request for permission to place Scriven's critique on the Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation TIG home page, Scriven responded, “. . . sure, post it and congratulations for doing so: it's in the best spirit of evaluation (not to mention science)!”

[Chelimsky \(1997\)](#) was more illuminative than critical when she highlighted the multiple purposes of evaluation. Her insights provided a watershed moment in the dialogue ([Fetterman, 1997b, p. 263–264](#)). Many of us were talking past each other before she entered the discussion. Some colleagues were arguing about accountability, while some of us were responding to empowerment evaluation's contribution to development. Her insights helped make the conversation more efficient, meaningful, and productive.

[Alkin and Christie \(Alkin & Christie, 2004, p 58; Christie & Alkin, 2013, p 50\)](#) understood empowerment evaluation's commitment to use, over methodology and valuing. This served to reinforce and help crystalize our commitment to use. [Cousins' \(2005\)](#) request for greater clarity set the stage for comparing and contrasting stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation, specifically comparing empowerment evaluation with collaborative and participatory evaluation approaches ([Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, Wandersman, & O'sullivan, 2014](#)).

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