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Book review

Empowerment evaluation is a systematic way of thinking: A response to Michael Patton
Empowerment evaluation: Knowledge and tools for self-assessment, evaluation capacity building, and accountability.

We embrace this critique as an opportunity to reflect on our practice and further clarify and refine empowerment evaluation.

1. Empowerment evaluation is a systematic way of thinking

The essence of EE is a systematic way of thinking, not a single principle, concept, or method. Empowerment evaluation, first and foremost, helps people evaluate their own programs and initiatives. It is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination (Fetterman, 1994, 1996, 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015; Fetterman, Delaney, Triana-Tremain, & Evans-Lee, 2015). It is an evaluation approach that aims to increase the likelihood that programs will achieve results by increasing the capacity of program stakeholders, to plan, implement, and evaluate their own programs (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007).

It is the gestalt or whole package that makes it work. Empowerment evaluation theory, concepts, principles, and steps are used to guide practice. Patton's critique is off-target because it focuses on individual parts or principles, failing to recognize that empowerment evaluation is more than the sum of its parts (including "essential" parts). Clinton and Hattie capture the big picture when they apply empowerment evaluation to their work. They focus on a way of thinking. In their case it is summarized as: "know thy impact" (2015). Together empowerment evaluation ideas, values, and practices help people learn how to think like an evaluator. They build their evaluation capacity in the process of evaluating the impact of their own work. This approach to evaluation fosters improvement and self-determination.

2. Core or essential features

Patton commends the authors for doing a "great service of clarifying what constitutes the core of empowerment evaluation." We presented the theories, concepts, principles, and steps guiding empowerment evaluation. However, his focus was almost exclusively on the principles. The 10 guiding principles were highlighted in each chapter, including: (1) improvement, (2) community ownership, (3) inclusion, (4) democratic participation, (5) social justice, (6) community knowledge, (7) evidence-based strategies, (8) capacity building, (9) organizational learning, and (10) accountability.

We explained how these principles work together synergistically. For example, the first principle, improvement, reflects the pragmatic and utilitarian nature of empowerment evaluation. The aim is to help people improve their programs and practice and succeed in accomplishing their objectives. Community ownership is required to make this happen in a meaningful and sustained manner. This is linked to process use. The more people take ownership of the evaluation, the more committed they are to using the evaluation findings and follow through on the recommendations. Authentic community ownership requires inclusion. It cannot be a single elite group making all the decisions. People from all parts of the organization and/or community should be to be included. Participation from many stakeholders, including those typically marginalized or excluded, is critical if the effort is to be credible and taken seriously. It is also more efficient to include major stakeholders at the beginning rather than having to re-visit each of the issues every time a new group is invited to participate in the group.

The same type of synergy and interconnectivity applies to the remaining combination of principles (see Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, p. 210–212 for details). The interaction among the participants and the principles results in a rising level of empowerment and self-determination (see Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, pp. 213, Fig. 9.1 for a visual representation of the fluid capacity of empowerment and self-determination in a social container).

3. A constellation of fidelity: "zero" is not an option

Patton states empowerment evaluation can be applied with "zero" levels of adherence to the principles. He refers to this as a "pick-and-choose menu". This is an inaccurate understanding of the approach. Patton confuses principles designed to guide practice with fidelity to a model. We do not agree with his assumptions, which isolate principles from each other and the larger values shaping the approach. Like developmental evaluation's essential elements, empowerment evaluation's principles are interconnected, interrelated, and reinforcing. It is that interconnected nature of empowerment evaluation that gives it strength and sustainability.

More to the point, empowerment evaluation is conducted within a constellation of theories, concepts, principles, and steps as discussed in our book. Fidelity to a worldview, with the guidance of a model, is a more useful conception of how empowerment evaluation works.

4. Context matters

Cousins' critical friend chapter in our earlier book, *Empowerment Evaluation Principles in Practice* (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005), explained how empowerment evaluation depends on

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"which combination of principles are most important, given the needs of the local context and the impetus for the empowerment evaluation in the first place" (p. 201).

Cousins' observation does not imply zero application of the principles. It simply reaffirms the importance of adapting empowerment evaluation to the local context and needs of the community and/or initiative. A more reasonable interpretation would be that empowerment evaluation is not a one-size fits all approach. It is adapted to local circumstance, conditions, and needs.

However, Cousins' observation represents the background, not the foreground of empowerment evaluation. Empowerment evaluation is not anything to anyone depending on one's perspective or set of local concerns. It is a specific way of thinking and acting, helping people conscientiously assess the impact of their work, that is shaped, not driven, by local conditions.

5. Arbitrary judgment: 8 versus 10 essential elements

Patton's focus on the principles extends to the number of principles. He suggested: "10 empowerment evaluation principles seemed like a lot to manage" (Patton, 2015, p. x). However, he states that "all 8 essential elements of developmental evaluation must be manifest to some extent and in some way" to merit that label. It does not appear to be intellectually defensible to argue that 8 elements are manageable for developmental evaluation and 10 are not manageable for empowerment evaluation. This judgment seems arbitrary.

6. Weaving a tapestry with the threads of empowerment evaluation: ownership, capacity building, and accountability

We published *Empowerment Evaluation Principles in Practice* (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) because we recognized that many of the principles were implicit and it was time to make them explicit to better inform and guide practitioners (see Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Miller & Campbell, 2006; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007). In addition, we described high, medium, and low levels in practice, depending on local conditions and the levels of evaluator, community, and funder commitment to the 10 empowerment evaluation principles in practice (see Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, pp. 55–72).

Empowerment evaluation principles are like the principles of a democracy, such as free speech and freedom of religion. Democracies vary throughout the world. Failure to equally and consistently apply all the principles of a democracy at maximum levels, does not mean they are not a democracy. In addition, selecting only the "essential" principles of a democracy in a social and cultural vacuum, privileges some principles and unintentionally minimizes the value of others. They are all needed to fully and faithfully implement a democracy.

Three empowerment evaluation principles have been selected to help highlight the holistic nature of empowerment evaluation. Ownership, capacity building, and accountability principles are important threads of empowerment evaluation. A brief description of these principles demonstrates how together they weave a way of thinking and acting, into the tapestry of empowerment evaluation. (These three have been selected for illustration purposes. This example is not designed to minimize the need to apply as many principles as possible in a given effort.)

6.1. Community ownership

People have the right to make decisions about actions that affect their lives. Putting evaluation in the hands of program staff and participants is thought to foster self-determination and responsibility instead of dependency. In addition, as stated earlier, empowerment evaluation is guided by the theory (process use) that people are more likely to believe and use findings and follow recommendations if they were responsible for creating them.

6.2. Capacity building

Stewart Donaldson made an astute observation in the Foreword to our book concerning critical guiding principles: "empowerment evaluation's respect for community knowledge and commitment to the people's right to build their own evaluation capacity has influenced the evaluation mainstream, particularly concerning evaluation capacity building" (p. viii).

In addition, it is no accident that we added "evaluation capacity building" to the title of our new edition. On page 7 we state: "this book brings to the surface a central theme in empowerment evaluation: evaluation capacity building" (Fetterman et al., 2015). Empowerment evaluation's emphasis on capacity building and process use helps people think like evaluators. Evaluation capacity building is related to producing outcomes (see Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012). If there is no capacity building, there is no empowerment evaluation.

6.3. Accountability

Empowerment evaluation has always been committed to producing outcomes. It is not simply an engaging process. Empowerment evaluators, funders, staff, and community members share a common commitment to producing results. The list of real-word outcomes associated with empowerment evaluations is both long and significant. A few, drawn from our new book, are listed below. They focus on helping:

- Peruvian women transform their craft activities into a successful and sustainable business (Sastre-Merino, Vidueira, Díaz-Puente, & Fernández-Moral, 2015).
- Communities of color bridging the digital divide (Fetterman, 2013a; Fetterman, 2015c).
- Teachers evaluating their effectiveness in the visible learning model for schooling (Clinton & Hattie, 2015).
- SAMHSA improving substance abuse prevention outcomes (Imm, Biewener, Oparah, & Dash, 2015).
- Minority staff and community members reducing tobacco consumption in their communities (Fetterman et al., 2015).
- Improving school social worker effectiveness (Haskell & Iachini, 2015).
- Improvement in drug prevention programs (Chinman, Acosta, Hunter, & Ebener, 2015).

(Also see: Stanford University's School of Medicine transforming its curriculum and preparing for a successful accreditation review (Fetterman, Deitz, & Gesundheit, 2010) and NASA/Jet Propulsion Laboratory educating youth about the prototype Mars rover (Fetterman & Bowman, 2002)).

7. Truth in advertising: labeling correctly

Empowerment evaluation is influenced by the readiness of the organization to engage the approach. Environmental and organizational variables that also shape an empowerment evaluation include: pre-existing capacity, level of receptivity, commitment, resources, and perceived need. These variables help to produce high, medium, and low levels of empowerment evaluation, as noted earlier. In addition, there is a "spectrum" or continuum of empowerment evaluation. The practice of empowerment evaluation, within this spectrum, is influenced by the type of empowerment evaluation