Toward Distinguishing Empowerment Evaluation and Placing It in a Larger Context: Take Two

Empowerment Evaluation Principles in Practice, edited by David M. Fetterman and Abraham Wandersman. New York: Guilford, 2005.

Reviewed by Michael Quinn Patton

In *Too Many Daves* by Dr. Seuss (1961), he tells of a Mrs. McCave who had 23 sons, all named Dave. This turned out to create some havoc in the McCave household for, when she wanted a particular Dave and called for him, all of them came running. Presumably to avoid this problem in the house of Evaluation, we have many different names for evaluation so that when we call for one, we get the one we want. At least, that's the intent and hope. The challenge is that Mrs. Evaluation has birthed many more than 23 children. In *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 1997b, pp. 192-194), I contrast some 60 different types, and Scriven's (1991) *Evaluation Thesaurus* has more still.

Further complicating the situation is that some of these children appear to be twins, not identical twins, but sharing an awful lot of intellectual DNA. Others are merely cousins. And still others refuse to acknowledge that they are even part of the same family or household. Moreover, definitional issues never quite get settled. As I am writing this, *EvalTalk* (the American Evaluation Association listserv) has yet another vigorous discussion going on trying to distinguish formative from summative evaluation. If confusion remains about that classic distinction, as it surely does, then what hope is there for more nuanced distinctions among alternative participatory orientations? Alas, the Sisyphean endeavor goes on, as it must. And that's precisely the context for understanding this book and its contribution. Fetterman, Wandersman, and colleagues are herein answering the challenge to distinguish empowerment evaluation from close relatives like participatory, collaborative, inclusive, democratic, feminist, and emancipatory evaluation, among others.

Earlier reviews of their writings, including my own (Patton, 1997a), questioned the conceptual meaningfulness and practical applications of these distinctions, a matter to which we shall return shortly. The other question raised in early reviews was whether the idea, or at least the language, of empowerment evaluation had staying power. The phrase "empowerment evaluation" gained prominence in the lexicon of evaluation when Fetterman, as president of the American Evaluation Association, made it the theme of the association's 1993 annual national conference in Dallas. At the time, it was not at all clear that the term *empowerment* could long coexist with the term *evaluation*, especially because the word *empower* stimulates the gag reflex in many, like calls to be "proactive" or to "liberate" (as in Iraq). Yet endure it has. It is hard to argue with Fetterman's conclusion in the final chapter that during the course of the last decade, empowerment evaluation "has become a part of the intellectual landscape of evaluation" (p. 213). The book offers substantial and convincing evidence that empowerment evaluation has become a significant and important approach. Its longevity and status established and documented, the question of precisely what it is becomes all the more important.

Fetterman's own basic definition of empowerment evaluation has not changed and has been consistent across his writings. It is "the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (Fetterman, 1994, p. 1; Fetterman, 2005, p. 10; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996, p. 5). Of course, using evaluation processes for improvement was nothing new in 1993. It was the emphasis on fostering self-determination that was the defining—and controversial—niche of empowerment evaluation and the heart of its explicit political and social change agenda. In the 1996 volume edited with Wandersman and Kaftarian, Fetterman's opening chapter elaborated five "fac-

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ets" of empowerment evaluation: (a) training participants to conduct their own evaluations, that is, capacity building; (b) evaluators as facilitators and coaches rather than judges; (c) evaluators advocating on behalf of groups that are disempowered and/or supporting disempowered groups in advocating for themselves; (d) illumination; and (e) liberation for those involved. One of the weaknesses of that earlier book, at the level of conceptualization and theory, was that it did not provide a conceptual continuum depicting varying degrees of empowerment emphasis appropriate for differing situations and contingencies. Moreover, empowerment evaluation appeared to substantially overlap participatory, collaborative, stakeholder-involving, and aspects of utilization-focused approaches to evaluation in its emphasis on attending to such issues as ownership, relevance, understandability, access, and involvement.

The collaboration of empowerment evaluators in this book has revised and refined the definition of empowerment evaluation:

> an approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization. (p. 28)

This new collection of writings aims to differentiate empowerment evaluation by positing 10 principles and illustrating their application in actual cases. The principles are an elaboration and clarification of a list originally proposed by Wandersman et al. (2004) in an edited volume on participatory community research. The 10 principles are the following:

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
10. Accountability

The first thing I found striking about this list is the absence of self-determination as a principle. Indeed, although the definition of empowerment evaluation as centering on self-determination remains unchanged, the connection of these principles to self-determination remains largely implicit in this new volume.

Fetterman explains that there is no absolute ranking or ordering of these principles. "However, there is a logical flow of the principles in practice" (p. 4). The principles are interdependent.

> As a general rule, the quality [of an empowerment evaluation] increases as the number of principles are applied, because they are synergistic. Ideally each of the principles should be enforced at some level. However, specific principles will be more dominant than others in each empowerment evaluation. The principles that dominate will be related to the local context and purpose of evaluation. Not all principles will be adopted equally at any given time or for any given project. (p. 9)

One of the conceptual developments in the book is emphasizing empowerment evaluation's impacts on individuals, organizations, and communities as a form of "process use." The distinction between process use and findings use (Patton, 1997b) emerged after the original formulation of empowerment evaluation, so it is instructive to see the further conceptual elaboration of empowerment evaluation connected to recent conceptual elaborations within utilization theory.

In the second chapter, eight empowerment evaluation practitioners, including Fetterman and Wandersman, elaborate the 10 principles and their applications. In the third chapter, Fetterman looks at the

principles in practice with emphasis on assessing levels of commitment of those involved. He concludes that the principles are "overlapping and interactively reinforcing" (p. 51). The chapter includes an extensive table that defines three levels of commitment (high, medium, and low) for each principle. Chapters 4 through 7 offer case examples to illustrate the relationship among the principles and common tensions experienced in real evaluation situations. For example, one of the lessons offered by the practitioners in chapter 4 (Keener, Snell-Johns, Livet, Wandersman) is that

> when evaluation is consistent with all of the principles of empowerment evaluation, a natural balance can occur between program improvement and accountability demands. It is when one or more of the principles are emphasized at the expense of others that tension occurs. (p. 87)

The cases constitute the retroactive reconstructions and reflections of the evaluators who facilitated the empowerment evaluations being described. They describe what worked well and are forthright in describing difficulties, tensions, and weaknesses. They take the reader inside facilitation challenges and examine the implications of decisions made. They are especially effective at showing the nonlinear ebb and flow as empowerment evaluators attempt to sustain involvement and build capacity. The cases will help those inclined toward empowerment evaluation make realistic assessments of the amount and difficulty of work involved. In essence, for those inclined to incorporate the principles of empowerment evaluation into their own practice, this book portrays in depth and detail how experienced practitioners perceive what they do and its effects on those with whom they work. This is a book from the preachers directed to the choir, which is fine and altogether appropriate, for the choir needs and deserves inspiration.

To those for whom empowerment is anathema as an evaluation outcome, this book will do nothing to make them less apoplectic. To those more gentle souls disinclined to embrace empowerment as an evaluation priority, this book will do little or nothing to convince them, I suspect. For those not overtly hostile, merely skeptical, they can safely remain skeptics, in part because what the cases fail to do is document that empowerment evaluation actually accomplishes its intended and hoped-for outcomes. These cases epitomize the problems of self-evaluation. The only evidence we have of what these empowerment evaluations accomplished is the testimony of evaluators and occasional secondhand, summarized testimony from those involved as portrayed and interpreted by the evaluators. Let me illustrate the problem. Consider these conclusions about the Tribal Digital Village example.

> A culture of evidence evolved from the discussions and self-assessments. The community of learners engaged in a dialogue about the status of their efforts. This engagement helped them build and refine skills in discourse and reasoning. The skills were generalizable to many other facets of their life. It also contributed to building a trusting relationship in the process. (p. 102)

No evidence is provided for these assertions. We have no direct quotations from participants about how they applied the skills they learned to other facets of their lives. We have no direct quotations about their experience of trust. We have no specific and concrete examples of the quality of their discourse and reasoning skills.

There is an exception that proves the rule, as exceptions often do. The book provides as a case example an empowerment evaluation of a school district in the Arkansas Delta in which major improvements were attained, including increased achievement test scores, greater community and parental involvement, and having the schools removed from the state's "academic distress" list. The question is to what extent one can attribute these changes to the empowerment evaluation. To document the impact of the Arkansas Department of Education project in raising student test scores and increasing student learning, Fetterman quotes two educational accountability officials as stating, "Empowerment evaluation was instrumental in producing Elaine and Altheimer school district improvements, including raising test scores (Smith, 2004; Wilson, 2004)" (p. 116). Turning to these references, we find "Personal communication." Fetterman knows a great deal about qualitative methods, including techniques for establishing credibility, which is inevitably an issue in qualitative data. What are we to make of this quotation? Two people offering exactly the same quote? Were they on the telephone together and one made this assessment and the other agreed? Or did Fetterman ask, "Was empowerment evaluation instrumental in producing Elaine and Altheimer

school district improvements, including raising test scores?" And they agreed. How do two people get credited with the exact same quotation? Was it in something they wrote together?

Is this just nitpicking? Does it matter? Is it fair to expect independent documentation and verification of empowerment evaluation's claims of impact? Is it appropriate to ask for evidence of impact beyond the evaluators' reflections and self-evaluations? Well, one of the 10 principles of empowerment evaluation is adoption of evidence-based strategies. If nothing else, that would seem to call attention to the quality of evidence that supports empowerment evaluation claims. In this volume, that evidence is weak to nonexistent.

In fairness, the purpose of the volume is primarily conceptual clarification of empowerment evaluation's niche, distinctiveness, principles, and practices. The volume did not set itself the purpose of validating empowerment evaluation's claims of utility and effectiveness in building capacity and enhancing self-determination. Still, such claims are made, and made with some bravado.

The credibility of empowerment evaluation will ultimately rest on evidence that it can deliver on its claims of empowerment, that is, that sustainable capacity is built; that those involved feel a real sense of ownership of the process that makes a difference in how they participate, think, and behave; that organizational learning takes place in a way that makes a difference to organizational performance; that participants become skilled at using evidence and that these skills are generalized and carried forward in practice; that communities can point to the knowledge they have gained and how they have used that knowledge; and that the mutual accountability framework of empowerment evaluation satisfies both internal and external accountability demands. These and similar claims remain unsubstantiated. The great contribution of this book is in clarifying empowerment evaluation principles and the corresponding intended outcomes of empowerment evaluation processes. What remains to be done, but the current volume does not accomplish, is to credibly and independently verify, with triangulation, that these outcomes occur and are sustained. Doing so will require more than empowerment evaluators' reflections and self-evaluations.

This critique should not come as news to the volume's editors and authors for it is included in the feedback from the "critical friend" invited to review the contributions in the book. "Critical friend" is one of the optional role designations for empowerment evaluators. In chapter 8, entitled "Will the Real Empowerment Evaluation Please Stand Up?" J. Bradley Cousins plays the role of critical friend. Cousins is well qualified for this role, and it speaks well of the editors' commitment to walk the talk that they invited Cousins to offer an open and transparent critique. He has been one of the most active evaluation theorists working to distinguish various dimensions of participation and collaboration. Among the questions he took on were the following: What form does empowerment evaluation take? and What processes differentiate it from other approaches? He examines both the conceptual framework of empowerment evaluation and the cases presented along five "hypothetical dimensions of form in collaborative inquiry": manageability, depth, control, diversity, and power.

In analyzing the examples offered of findings, knowledge, and process uses stemming from empowerment evaluation, Cousins suggests that

it would be advantageous for empowerment evaluation proponents to consciously and systematically capture such utilization effects of empowerment evaluation, thereby documenting the potency of the approach in producing them. Documenting effects such as liberation, emancipation, self-determination, I think, would be much more difficult to do. Nevertheless, it is important for empowerment evaluation proponents to capture more concrete expressions of impact. (p. 203)

He goes on to elaborate this important point:

The principles of empowerment evaluation are developed and then case examples are provided to illustrate how these principles manifest themselves in practice. You'll notice that I consistently use the phrase "case example," as opposed to "case study." I would argue that a case study is the product of intensive systematic inquiry that involves systematic data gathering, processing, analysis, and interpretation, be those data qualitative observations, interviews, document reviews, or quantitative outputs from field surveys using questionnaires, or a mix of the two. The selected mode of inquiry utilized in the current collection is not unlike much of that which appears in evaluation literature of

late. I would choose to refer to these glimpses into evaluation practice as reflective narratives or essays grounded in observations and experiences of the narrator(s). These are entirely rich and vivid ways of knowing about practical phenomena and, in my view, have considerable value in uncovering the subtle nuances and complex interrelationships among variables. They are limited, however, in that they tell a story from a particular point of view and they are directly a function of the story-telling capabilities of the narrator. To the extent that multiple authors from multiple stakeholder perspectives participate in the telling of the story, the narrative becomes even more enriched. . . . My challenge to empowerment evaluation enthusiasts is to invest heavily in the prospect of empirical inquiry into empowerment evaluation by engaging in established modes of research that have explicit cannons for determining the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of interpretations arising from the data. (pp. 203-204)

Examples of high-quality, multiperspective evaluation case studies have recently been published in *New Directions for Evaluation* (Patton & Patrizi, 2005). Part of what is notable about those in-depth case studies is how many different experiences and perceptions can emerge from an evaluation. Cousins's challenge to conduct such rigorous case studies of empowerment evaluation impacts is important not only for establishing deeper credibility in the field at large but it suggests a cautionary note for empowerment evaluation practitioners. It is easy to fool or deceive oneself about such things as ownership, learning, involvement, buy-in, enhanced capacity, and empowerment. At the level of practice, those facilitating empowerment evaluation processes need credible and meaningful feedback mechanisms to test whether what they think is happening is what is happening within the group being facilitated, especially where cultural, ethnic, racial, social class, and power inequities prevail, as is virtually always the case. We get glimpses of some of those mechanisms in the case examples, but not enough for novices to use in practice. Liberals facilitating empowerment are no less susceptible to self-deception than conservative "liberators," as the capacity for self-deception in the latter case is being played out daily on the world's stage for all to see.

Let me close with a case in point. I suspect that the editors of this book feel good about having included the critique from Cousins, as well they should. No doubt they read the critique and found it insightful and thought-provoking. But the utilization question is what difference it made. As happenstance would have it, I had occasion to have dinner with Brad Cousins in Ottawa and asked him about his experience playing the role of *critical friend*. Was his inclusion a mere token of scholarly balance, or did he feel heard? Did the authors and editors use his feedback to improve the volume? To what extent and in what ways did he have a sense of having been listened to, been engaged in a meaningful dialogue? Here's what he had to say in a follow-up e-mail, used with his permission.

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Michael,

Further to our discussions earlier this month, here are some reflections on the Fetterman/Wandersman EE Principles book. I kind of enjoyed the process of producing an EE critical friend chapter because I went into the process, somewhat reluctantly, with some significant concerns about conceptual clarity, but the exercise helped me to push my own thinking about EE. I now have a better understanding of it as a developmental process, although I continue to grapple with several lingering conceptual issues, as I pointed out in the chapter.

On reading over the final chapter of the book [which appears after Cousins's critical friend review] I was struck by its lack of connection with the chapter contributions. I think the editors really missed an opportunity to integrate thoughts and observations about the utility of the principles in the light of the case examples, this despite Fetterman's claim that the "entire collection provided an intellectual foundation for this concluding discussion about empowerment" (p. 209). Really, the final chapter might have been written completely independent of the case chapters, I think.

I guess what I found most disappointing was that the concluding chapter was completely devoid of any reference to my critical friend chapter. I raised several issues and challenges for EE enthusiasts, in the spirit of stimulating improvement, refinement and extended thinking. The editors' decision to not so much as acknowledge these challenges, let alone respond to them, leaves me somewhat perplexed about their motives for inviting the contribution in the first place.

Interestingly, included in the introductory chapter by Fetterman were a couple of reactions to my contribution. Both, however, were somewhat off the mark, in my estimation. First, he made the claim that I posited "two streams in empowerment evaluation: practical empowerment evaluation (P-EE) and transformative empowerment evaluation (T-PE)" (p. 20). Not so. A careful reading of my chapter would reveal that I made the case that EE is conceptually all over the map with regard to goals and interests and that conceptual clarity and refinement are called for. Second, Fetterman states that "empowerment evaluation has been and always will be committed to outcomes, or results" (p. 20) in taking exception to my choice of classifying EE "primarily in the process-oriented domain" (p. 20). I just plain do not understand this point. True, I did a careful and extended analysis of the EE processes observed in the case examples, but I also had a great deal to say about EE outcomes, consequences and results in chapter sections on 'Goals and Interests' and 'How Good is Good Enough?'

OK, so for me, the most exciting aspect of being a critical friend is the potential for stimulating dialogue and debate that can help to move everyone's thinking (including the critical friend). Probably if that is going to work there needs to be a commitment to careful listening and processing of critical feedback. I did not get a strong sense of such commitment in the present case and I am somewhat disappointed that the absence of exchange precluded further benefits to my own thinking.

And there you have it.

Cheers, Brad

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The principles of empowerment evaluation elaborated in this important volume set a high standard for both practice and impact. Meeting those standards, as Cousins's reflections on his involvement as a "critical friend" suggest, can be difficult. Walking the talk is the ultimate challenge, especially in the face of deadlines and contracted deliverables. The editors and Brad undoubtedly have different perspectives here—reminding us why readers should be skeptical about claims from the perspective only of the advocates of empowerment evaluation. And let me be clear: Walking the talk is not primarily a matter of commitment, values, or integrity. None of those are in doubt in this instance. Time is the Achilles' heel of empowerment evaluation. Every approach has its weak underbelly. I've written that turnover of primary intended users is the Achilles' heel of utilization-focused evaluation. Empowerment evaluation takes a lot of time, as does any highly process-oriented approach. Time for involvement, time for buy-in, time for feedback, time for back-and-forth, time to do it right. Empowerment evaluation is labor- and time-intensive. Up against a publishing deadline, the editors ran out of time to revise based on Cousins's critical friend reflections. But this example illustrates the larger challenge: Conclusions about the actual outcomes and impacts of empowerment evaluation, including perceptions of and effects on the participants in the process, await further evaluation, evidence beyond empowerment evaluators' self-evaluations. Meanwhile, this book makes a significant contribution in further clarifying the nature and essential dimensions of empowerment evaluation.

Closing Acknowledgment

The book under review is published by the Guilford Press, a new presence among evaluation publishers—and likely to become quite important. Why? Because C. Deborah Laughton has joined Guilford as a publisher after 15 years as editor at Sage Publications during which time she deepened and broadened significantly what has become a vast evaluation literature. Her behind-the-scenes influence in nurturing and, yes, empowering new authors and gentling prodding the already-established to keep writing and revising has contributed immensely to the evaluation profession. She has exemplified that rare quality of being first and foremost "a writer's editor" (she is herself a writer, although not of research and evaluation). Within Sage, she championed the writer's perspective throughout the lengthy and oft-treacherous book production processes from idea development, prospectus approval, manuscript solicitation, contracting, production, layout, graphics, design, copyediting, and marketing. I speak from experience in this regard, as well as drawing on conversations with many, many evaluation colleagues who have worked with "C. Deb." Her contributions have gone well beyond the book publishing process as she has engaged the ideas of authors,

using her in-depth understanding of the evaluation field and her sophisticated knowledge of methodology to shape books, push authors for clarity, and open up new directions. She has been bound by no paradigm, no singular perspective, no narrow definition of evaluation, no prejudgment about method. She is an appreciative and knowledgeable connoisseur of evaluation, and I think there's a very good chance that no one knows more about the diversity of the field and the idiosyncratic synergy of personality, writing style, intellectual capability, and professional perspective than C. Deborah Laughton. Watch what Guilford publishes as she creates a portfolio there. It's sure to be important to the field. Thanks, C. Deb!

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