

Empowerment Evaluation

Clarity, Dialogue, and Growth

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The provocative language of questioning credibility and ethics (Scriven, 2005) and the controversial references to hydrogen bombs (Scriven, 2005) and the Iraq war (Patton, 2005) reminded us of a spirited humanism-behaviorism debate that Wandersman was involved in years ago. In the early 1970s, humanism and behaviorism were “like cats and dogs.” The original proponents of these approaches tended to marginalize and minimize the stance of the other. Eventually, after new members joined the discussion, a productive discourse took place, leading to growth and synthesis. One of the products that resulted from this discussion was a book called *Humanism and Behaviorism: Dialogue and Growth* (Wandersman, Poppen, & Ricks, 1976). We firmly believe in the use of dialogue to establish clarity and promote growth. Recognizing some similarities between those discussions and exchanges with Patton (2005) and Scriven (2005; both past and present), we are reminded of how important it is to (a) provide clear representations of positions and correct misinterpretations, (b) look for complementarity and synthesis, and (c) grow and evolve our approach.

Fetterman (2005) does a masterful job of systematically responding to Patton’s (2005) and Scriven’s (2005) book reviews by providing clarification and addressing misinterpretations. In our response, we identify areas of agreement with Patton and Scriven and then attempt to clarify misconceptions and promote dialogue on several key points: (a) the value and definition of self-evaluation, (b) the evaluator-client relationship, (c) the definition and purpose of summative evaluation, and (d) professionalism in evaluation work. After clarifying empowerment evaluation’s (EE) perspective on each of these issues, we identify some next steps we need to take to continue improving our practice. We hope that the dialogue brings illumination and growth.

In the interest of clarity, we overview the why, what, when, where, how, and who of EE in Table 1 below. This table is offered as a summary table for the reader to refer to throughout this article. It addresses why EE was adopted, what EE is, when EE is appropriate, where EE is used, how EE is practiced, and who uses EE.

Areas of Agreement

We agree with Scriven (2005) and Patton (2005) that (a) more empirical evidence is needed regarding how and when EE works, (b) EE is not appropriate for every evaluation need, and (c)

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We are grateful for the thoughtful comments and suggestions of David Fetterman, Dana Keener, members of Wandersman’s program evaluation class, Seth Wandersman, and Lois Pall Wandersman.

American Journal of Evaluation, Vol. 26 No. 3, September 2005 421-428

DOI: 10.1177/1098214005278774

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Table 1
The Why, What, When, Where, How, and Who of Empowerment Evaluation

Why was EE developed?

There is a commonly held perception that many program evaluations tend to show few, if any, outcomes. This has led to tremendous dissatisfaction and disappointment with programs and with program evaluation. There are many reasons EE was developed. However, a major motivation for the creation of EE was to offer an alternative approach to program evaluation that is sensitive enough to detect and document program outcomes and that helps programs work better.

What is EE?

"EE aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by: (a) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (b) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization" (Wandersman et al., 2005, p. 28).

When is EE appropriate?

EE is well-suited as an evaluation approach when the primary goal of the evaluation is to help place evaluation tools in the hands of program participants and staff members to help programs achieve results. EE is particularly appropriate if the stakeholders are interested in having the evaluators involved at the beginning with program planning and implementation. If the primary goal of the evaluation is to examine whether a program worked according to a predetermined theory and without influence from the evaluator, then the hands-off stance of traditional evaluation is more likely to be a suitable approach.

Where is EE used?

EE is used in health and human service programs, nonprofits, education, business, foundations, churches and synagogues, and government. It is also used at multiple levels, including program, organization, municipality, state, national, and international. The EE approach can be useful in a variety of settings as long as the evaluation needs fit the why and when of EE.

How is EE practiced?

The application of the principles of EE (improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability) guides the practice of EE. Multiple methods, including traditional evaluation methodology, Fetterman's three-step approach (chapter 5), and the Getting To Outcomes 10-step approach (chapter 6) can be used to implement the values of the approach. EE is not defined by its methods but by the collaborative manner in which methods are applied according to the EE principles.

Who uses EE?

EE involves key program stakeholders, including funders, practitioners, program staff members, participants, and evaluators. These stakeholders hold each other accountable to an interdependent, results-based approach to evaluation.

additional examples about how EE is different from other evaluation approaches would be helpful. We expand on each of these areas of agreement below.

More Empirical Evidence Is Needed Regarding How and When EE Works

We agree that systematically examining the effects of EE on people, programs, and organizations is a logical direction for EE to continue pursuing. The first book on EE, *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability* (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996), set forth a vision but lacked specificity. Fetterman (2005a) and the accompanying response by Fetterman (2005b) provide evidence that EE has led to important results, including improvement in objective achievement test scores. We want to clarify that the majority of the case examples in the book were used to provide clarity about EE principles and practices, not as empirical evidence that an EE approach causes changes in people or programs.

We agree with Patton (2005) that as evaluators we need to examine whether what we think is happening is what is actually happening. One preliminary step we have taken toward monitoring our own practice occurred with the Foundation for the Future (FFF) initiative described in chapter 4 (Keener, Snell-Johns, Livet, & Wandersman, 2005). One of the overarching goals of the FFF partnership was to establish a self-evaluation system. To evaluate progress toward this

goal, evaluation team members designed an evaluation capacity survey (Snell-Johns & Keener, 2000). The survey was administered to assess whether program staff reported any increased capacity to plan, implement, and evaluate their programs as a result of working with the evaluation team. The results were positive and provide one source of information indicating that the EE approach was affecting stakeholders' perceptions of their own evaluation capacities. However, Fetterman (2005; Fetterman & Eiler, 2001) and Snell-Johns and Keener's (2000) efforts are just the beginning of the type of analysis that needs to be conducted.

EE Is Not Appropriate for Every Evaluation Need

We agree with Patton (2005) and Scriven (2005) that there are situations when self-evaluation is not the most appropriate approach for a given situation. EE is not for everyone, nor is it appropriate for every evaluation need. We will continue to increase our specificity about when EE is and is not appropriate, and Table 1 represents one step toward this goal.

Additional Clarity Is Needed About How EE Is Different From Other Evaluation Approaches

EE has more work to do in terms of providing conceptual clarity about its similarities and differences with EE, participatory, collaborative, and use-focused approaches (Patton, 2005). As Fetterman (2005a) describes, there is an overlap between EE and these approaches. The developmental nature of building evaluation capacity means that at times, an empowerment evaluator's practices may have similarities with other collaborative approaches. We will continue to identify what we see as philosophical and practical similarities and differences. Also, we agree that there is some variation in the EE approaches used by the contributors to the *Empowerment Evaluation: Principles in Practice* book. EE is an umbrella term (e.g., behavior therapy) that includes multiple methods and facets guided by shared principles.

Areas for Clarification and Dialogue

Patton's (2005) and Scriven's (2005) reviews caused us to reflect on areas of agreement as well as areas in need of further clarification and dialogue, including (a) the value and definition of self-evaluation, (b) the evaluator-client relationship, (c) the definition and purpose of summative evaluation, and (d) professionalism in evaluation work.

The Value and Definition of Self-Evaluation

There appears to be a major misconception that self-evaluation in EE means that practitioners decide what they think about their program independent of other sources of information. For example, Scriven (2005) states that "EE lacks credibility because it is self-evaluation, and everyone knows that self-evaluation is subject to the major bias of overrating oneself and one's own work" (p. 415). In EE, self-evaluation is about a system, not about anecdotal information. The emphasis is on teaching key stakeholders (e.g., program leaders, funders) the importance of creating a culture where people are encouraged to reflect on the effectiveness of their work. Additionally, EE aims to help programs and organizations establish structures for sharing what they learned so that barriers to achieving results are identified early and addressed quickly.

Although EE considers individuals' views of their own behavior as one source of information, EE develops a self-evaluation system that includes methods for gathering data from a variety of stakeholders. This system is designed to include diverse stakeholders in a democratic process to identify goals and indicators of success. A critical role of an empowerment evaluator is to help ensure that the self-evaluation system gathers accurate information. This is guided by the EE principles of improvement, evidence-based strategies, and accountability. Additionally, it is important to note that most forms of evaluation depend on some form of self-evaluation. Surveys administered to randomly assigned participants using an experimental design depend on people self-evaluating to report their own behaviors.

Scriven (2005) suggests that EE is about training staff to trust their own views of their work and expect others to do the same. This is a misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of EE. Although EE values people's self-reflections, EE creates feedback structures so that people have access to multiple sources of information regarding the effectiveness of their work. Furthermore, EE teaches practitioners traditional, scientific approaches to data collection using research-based measures. In our work with the FFF initiative (chapter 4), establishing the self-evaluation system involved examining whether appropriate measures were being used to evaluate progress toward the partnership's stated objectives. For example, the evaluator suggested that a parent survey chosen before EE began had some methodological limitations. Together, the evaluator and the collaboration manager reviewed commonly used and well-researched parent surveys, leading to the adoption of a more appropriate tool for the evaluation.

Is self-evaluation always sufficient or appropriate? Of course not. For example, in the Enron and Arthur Andersen financial debacles, it was too late for EE. (These cases also demonstrate the weaknesses of traditional auditing.) Similarly, to investigate what caused the Columbia shuttle disaster, it was important to have a more traditional compliance-oriented evaluation. The \$400 million evaluation of the shuttle program and disaster detailed the organizational and technical explanations for why the shuttle disaster occurred. This type of retrospective analysis, which involved assigning responsibility for right and wrong, is not an appropriate match for an EE approach.

In citing issues about the credibility of EE, Scriven (2005) appears to suggest that an evaluator should act similarly to an auditor, who operates from a removed, skeptical position and judges right and wrong using a rigid set of guidelines. Just as EE is not suited for all occasions, we think that an audit approach to evaluation is not suited for many evaluations. There is a reason we have a field of auditing (management controls) and a separate, although overlapping, field of evaluation. Two of the biggest challenges program evaluators face are fear and resistance to evaluation. Instead of evaluation being mainstreamed (e.g., Sanders, 2003), it is often marginalized and designated as a necessary evil. One reason this occurs is because of the "gotcha" mentality associated with an audit-like approach to evaluation. Evaluation does not always have to be about catching people doing something wrong, and it does not have to involve a winner and a loser. Not all scenarios are zero sum. Additional paradigms of evaluation should be considered. For example, EE is designed to promote win-win strategies where stakeholders identify weaknesses in their program so that problems can be addressed positively, ultimately benefiting program staff, participants, funders, and the community.

The Evaluator-Client Relationship

Differences of opinion regarding the appropriate nature of the evaluator-client relationship follow naturally from differences regarding what constitutes credible sources of information. "The AEA Joint Standards and Guiding Principles specifically identify stakeholder participation as important. Naturally, how stakeholders are involved will depend on the preferences of

the stakeholders, on who is conducting the evaluation and under what conditions” (Whitmore et al., in press). Based on Scriven’s (2005) response, he appears to view intentionally amiable relationships between evaluators and program stakeholders as another source of bias. Empowerment evaluators, on the other hand, view friendly evaluator-client relationships as potentially reducing bias. Experience has taught us that most evaluations require involvement with stakeholders to develop a rich understanding of program operations and the internal motivations shaping behavior in the organization. Amiable relationships are also needed to provide key stakeholders with social and instrumental support to learn to evaluate their own programs. We have found that relationships with stakeholders and the EE principles of community ownership, inclusion, and community knowledge help ensure that key process and outcome variables are identified and examined. Although purposefully avoiding amiable relationships may avoid certain types of bias, other biases are introduced by information that is not collected because of a lack of trust and proximity.

The Definition and Purpose of Summative Evaluation

Can EE address tough-minded evaluation questions such as “Should the program be terminated?” (Cousins, 2005, as cited by Scriven, 2005, p. 415)? Both Cousins (2005) and Scriven (2005) express concerns regarding the appropriateness of EE for summative evaluation and suggest that EE might not be appropriate for accountability to external parties. Scriven and Cousin’s portrayal of summative evaluation implies that you are not doing summative evaluation unless you are deciding whether a program should be terminated. It is important to discriminate between providing information about outcomes and making decisions based on these findings.

It is accurate that empowerment evaluators do not think it is their responsibility to decide whether a program should be terminated, but they do see it as their role to help establish a self-evaluation system that provides information about effectiveness. This information can then be used by program staff, funders, and other stakeholders to make decisions about future programming. For example, information gathered through the FFF self-evaluation system (chapter 4) revealed that FFF’s parenting program was not reaching the desired number of parents. This made it difficult to examine outcomes. Concerned about the effectiveness of the existing program, program staff and the evaluation team collaboratively reviewed evidence-based parenting programs (Keener et al., 2005, p. 87). Based on recruitment and participation data and on information provided by the evaluation team about research on best practices, program staff decided to terminate the original program, hire new staff, and get trained in a different curriculum. Therefore, although empowerment evaluators were not the decision makers, they facilitated a process of data-driven decision making that was owned by the stakeholders. The FFF examples demonstrate that EE can provide the information necessary to make decisions typically associated with summative evaluation, including program termination, when appropriate.

Professionalism: The Role of Program Participant and Evaluator

Ever since EE was introduced in the early 1990s, it has generated controversy. Some people were concerned that it was not evaluation, whereas others embraced it. Some people were concerned it was not about results, whereas some tried to marginalize it as evaluation suited only for marginalized groups. A few people labeled EE as a movement. Some evaluators were afraid that they would be put out of work. The case examples included in the book should help illus-

trate that a focus on self-evaluation and building practitioners' evaluation capacity has implications for the role of the evaluator, not usually for the need for an evaluator.

Scriven (2005) suggests that EE is amateur evaluation because nonprofessionals have ownership over the evaluation and the only professional involved is excluded from exerting control over the conclusions drawn. This statement suggests that because empowerment evaluators do not control the evaluation efforts, noncredible or unethical decisions will be made. Scriven's argument could be used to suggest that the best way to deliver medical care is for medical doctors to not only offer their medical knowledge and opinions to patients but also to have full control over medical decisions (e.g., whether a patient has surgery or not). Empowerment evaluators strive to positively influence programming and decision making. However, they work from the belief that community knowledge is valuable and essential to good decision making. Finally, EE sees community ownership as a critical component to stakeholders' willingness to consider recommendations shared by the evaluators.

There appears to be confusion about the developmental nature of EE's approach to building evaluation capacity (Wandersman et al., 2004; Wandersman et al., 2005) and the quality of evaluation work conducted in a self-evaluation system. Scriven (2005, p. 4) suggests that EE involves training staff and then using their first attempt at evaluation as the basis of the evaluation efforts. This portrayal of EE suggests that empowerment evaluators step in to conduct a training on evaluation and then exit the system. An empowerment evaluator's role is quite the opposite. EE is an ongoing process and it is critical that empowerment evaluators assume different roles at different points of a program's life cycle (Fetterman & Eiler, 2001). For example, early in their work with the FFF initiative (chapter 4), the evaluation team did more writing of the report than editing. As the capacity of the collaboration manager increased, the evaluation team continued to review evaluation reports. However, fewer and fewer changes were suggested throughout time because of the improved quality of the reports.

Empowerment evaluators' roles are not rigid or static. They develop in accordance with developmental changes in programs and people. When empowerment evaluators are in the beginning stages of building evaluation capacity, their actions may look similar to those used by evaluators using other collaborative approaches. For example, an empowerment evaluator may select a measure, analyze data, and write a report. A distinguishing feature of EE is that the evaluators and the program staff mutually agree and understand that the goal is for program staff to conduct all aspects of evaluation and for evaluation to become mainstreamed as part of the planning and management of their program and organization (Wandersman et al., 2005, p. 28). Because of the EE principles of improvement and accountability, empowerment evaluators take an active role in the evaluation work until capacities have been established.

Next Steps for the Field of EE

There is a paragraph in Patton's (2005) review that we particularly value. It begins with the following: "The credibility of empowerment evaluation will ultimately rest on evidence that it can deliver on its claims. . . ." Patton has done a wonderful job of articulating a direction toward demonstrating these claims. Early steps in this process were described in the current book, and we plan to build on this foundation of evidence. Patton's eloquent articulation will help us as we plan our next efforts.

This is an exciting time for EE. Empowerment evaluators have opportunities to help communities help themselves when funders, community stakeholders, and evaluators work interdependently to achieve results. For example, Wandersman and colleagues (2004) are using an EE approach with a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initiative designed to prevent domestic violence. Fetterman is working with the CDC, the Arkansas Department of

Health, and the Minority Initiative Group at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff to build a more effective antitobacco campaign. In both CDC initiatives, the empowerment evaluators collaborate with the CDC and the involved communities to develop an EE system that builds capacity; promotes quality planning, implementation, and self-evaluation; and works to achieve results-based accountability. The EE systems will be evaluated in collaboration with third-party evaluators using methods that include traditional methodology.

Concluding Comments

We do not expect to change Patton's (2005) or Scriven's (2005) evaluation philosophies by providing our response to their reviews. However, we are greatly concerned that if you read the book reviews without also reading *Empowerment Evaluation: Principles in Practice*, you would not have a clear understanding of EE. Although Patton perceived that our book was written for "the choir," it was actually written for a wide variety of funders, program staff and participants, and evaluators. More and more funders, practitioners, communities, and evaluators want an evaluation approach that helps achieve effective programs. Traditional and audit approaches to evaluation have legitimate roles to play in answering the question "What happened?" However, many funders and communities are frustrated with the norm of evaluation reports that say the program was not effective. There are other roles that program evaluation can play. Given the needs of our society to obtain meaningful outcomes, we will work to clarify, dialogue, and grow EE to achieve its aim of helping programs, organizations, and communities achieve results.

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