

In Response to Drs. Patton and Scriven

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Empowerment Evaluation: Focusing on the Issues

Empowerment evaluation (EE) is conducted throughout the United States and countries around the world, including Japan, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Finland, Canada, and South Africa. EE scholarship is borne out of practice (and often necessity) by dedicated coaches and critical friends. When advances are made in the development of EE scholarship, there is cause for celebration. When setbacks and mistakes occur, these must be corrected. When misstatements and misunderstandings are disseminated, it is important to set the record straight.

In this brief response, I offer my appreciation of the reviewers, address what I believe are misstatements of fact regarding the book, and identify directions for the nature of future dialogue. (A detailed response to their reviews is available at <http://homepage.mac.com/profdavidf/eeresponse>.)

Appreciation and Agreements

EE is dedicated to improvement and building on strengths. It is an appreciative form of inquiry, and it is in this spirit that I begin my response. Michael Patton and Michael Scriven have each made valuable contributions to my thinking and practice, responding affirmatively to my invitations to engage in the ongoing dialogue in person, at professional meetings, and in journals. I particularly appreciate the following points made by Patton and Scriven in their book reviews:

1. Patton agrees that “over the course of the last decade, empowerment evaluation ‘has become a part of the intellectual landscape of evaluation.’”
2. Patton generously states that we “are forthright in describing difficulties, tensions, and weaknesses.”
3. Patton states that “the book offers substantial and convincing evidence that empowerment evaluation has become a significant and important approach.”
4. Scriven writes that the book is “full of good things: interesting case studies, a hundred suggestions and lines of thought worth considering by beginners and professionals alike. I didn’t say that I wanted David to review my next book just so he could get even; he’s a very smart evaluator and I’ll learn from him. Read this book and you’ll learn a lot from him and his co-editor and co-authors.”

I also believe it is important to formally recognize that Patton’s and Scriven’s ideas, as well as those of Brad Cousins, and the current dialogue will lead to positive developments in EE. It is

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because we are all committed to truth and honesty, respectful of people's rights, committed to conducting evaluation with rigor and quality, committed to the logic of evaluation, committed to ensuring that evaluation make an important contribution to society, in agreement that it is an abdication of professional responsibility to leave people without evaluation guidance and training, and aware of the value of critical friends and other critics that EE scholarship can advance. These agreements provide a foundation on which we can build.

Misstatements About the Book

Purpose of the Book

The reviewers assessed the book against their own purposes for it rather than against my and my colleagues' purpose for the book, which was to present the 10 principles of EE and to examine these principles in practice. Evaluating the book against purposes other than those that guided the book's development predictably resulted in misinterpretations and a misevaluation of the book. Patton seems to view the book as a tool of a political party or movement designed to persuade or dissuade a reluctant if not hostile constituency. He speaks of political persuasion and references the combative politics of U.S.-Iraqi relations when writing about EE language and concepts. This is his sociologically and polemically oriented conflict, not mine. I am preoccupied with enhancing cooperation, not conflict, and with advancing EE scholarship.

Scriven takes aim at EE, in part because it falls under the conceptual umbrella of self-evaluation. In broad strokes, Scriven excludes many evaluators, organizational development strategists, and consumers from the evaluation community by assuming an anti-self-evaluation position. The book's contributors and I do not agree with his critique because we do not agree with his core assumptions. We believe in the value of self-evaluation, which has a time-honored role in organizational life, including comprehensive institutional self-examinations, such as institutional accreditation self-studies and internal audits.

Outcomes

The reviewers criticize the book for the lack of evidence it provides regarding outcomes of EE. Ample evidence of substantive program outcomes is provided in this book; however, these outcomes appear to be ignored by the reviewers. To highlight a single and salient example, in the book, I provide evidence of dramatic improvements in academically distressed schools in Arkansas using indices ranging from parental involvement to discipline (Fetterman, 2005). Indeed, one of the most important outcome measures reported, and ignored in the reviews, was traditional student test scores—often considered the “coin of the realm.” The data from the evaluation show a 15% improvement in the proportion of students who score above the 25th percentile! Furthermore, stakeholders credit the EE approach with contributing to these gains. The book contains other similar examples of documented outcomes resulting from EE, including the construction of one of the largest wireless systems in the country in a \$15 million Hewlett Packard Tribal Digital Village project.

Scholarly Practice and Publication

The reviews raise concerns about scholarly practice and publication in evaluation. One of the benefits of published scholarship is that it enables evaluators to return to the text. In this

case, Scriven's comments concerning our earlier books (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996) are preserved for posterity. His own words contradict his current position on the value of self-evaluation.

According to Scriven (1997),

devolving some of the responsibility for evaluation is good. A program whose staff are not doing reasonably good evaluation of their own program is incompetently staffed, at some or all levels. Empowerment evaluation is doing something important to reduce that deficit. (p. 174).

Making empowerment evaluation a clearly defined part of good evaluation . . . could be highly valuable. If combined with serious (third-party) evaluation . . . it could represent a major contribution to the evaluation repertoire. In my judgment, the best future for empowerment evaluation lies in this direction. (Scriven, 1997, p. 174)

In the current review, Scriven suggests that empowerment evaluators are not interested in the synergy of combining EE and external evaluation. Yet I have stated the position that external evaluation can be an important complement to EE from the inception of the approach and reiterated this view in journal exchanges, in the previous books, and in the book under review. Indeed, in *Foundations of Empowerment Evaluation*, I state that

empowerment evaluation and external evaluation are not mutually exclusive . . . a second set of (external) eyes often helps the group avoid blind spots and provides another vantage point outside the internal vision of the program. Complementing an external evaluation's contributions, empowerment evaluation provides an extraordinarily rich source of information for external assessments. Empowerment evaluation and external evaluation thus can be mutually reinforcing efforts. (Fetterman, 2001, pp. 122-123)

To state that the book does not convey the view that external evaluation can be an important adjunct to EE misrepresents the book and my prior writing on EE.

The Future

The aim in evaluation is to build on knowledge and agreements, not to ignore or dismiss the steps we have already taken to move forward together. Scholarship can create a rich tapestry of knowledge. The threads of knowledge, however, are woven together, one at a time. If evaluation is to develop into a mature field, it must continue to rely on evidence, scholarly conversation, and movement toward common understanding. Ignoring data and prior areas of understanding and agreement tears the social fabric that our evaluative community seeks to create. The written record prevents misunderstanding from unraveling our common cloth of knowledge. It serves precisely that purpose in this exchange.

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