

Social Psychology and Evaluation, edited by Melvin M. Mark, Stewart I. Donaldson, and Bernadette Campbell, 2011. New York, NY: Guilford. \$65.00

Reviewed by Gene Shackman

Social Psychology and Evaluation, edited by Melvin Mark, Stewart Donaldson, and Bernadette Campbell is a collection of chapters by evaluators and by social psychologists about the current and possible future interactions between social psychology and evaluation. Each chapter could be the subject of a book review itself, so I will only focus on a few of them.

Mark, Donaldson and Campbell start this book with a chapter about how social psychology contributes to evaluation. Social psychology informs program theory: it is a general map of how programs should change behavior. In addition, social psychology also helps in other ways with evaluation: getting outcomes used (e.g., attitude change, persuasion), building trust with those involved with evaluation (interpersonal relations) and developing surveys (cognitive processes). The authors outline how they hope the relationship between evaluation and social psychology will continue to develop. Theory driven evaluation could benefit from increasing integration of social psychology, for example to help build more complete

program theory. Social psychology could also benefit as evaluation could test, and correct or modify, theories from social psychology. Social psychology could itself be used to study the practice of evaluation, to look for ways that evaluation might be improved.

The book then has contributions by two giants in the field of social psychology, Albert Bandura and Icek Ajzen. Each author demonstrates how specific social psychology theories can be applied to the design and evaluation of programs.

For example, Ajzen writes about the theory of planned behavior. Basically, human action is influenced by a person's attitude toward the behavior, perceived social norms about the behavior, perceived self-efficacy, and perceived ability to control behavior and the situation. When those are more positive, there is higher intention to do the behavior, and people are then more likely to do it when the opportunity comes up. The consequences of this theory are that behavioral interventions need to address the attitudes, perceived norms, self-

efficacy and perceived control. Ajzen writes that the theory of planned behavior can be a conceptual framework for understanding behavior, and for designing and evaluating interventions. Theory of planned behavior can show the pathways that interventions should follow in order to change behavior, and can likewise be used to show, in general, how the intervention should be evaluated to determine its success.

Monique Fleming contributes a chapter on applying social psychology to increase evaluation use, by looking at how evaluations influence attitudes and behaviors, through persuasion. The idea is that evaluations that are more persuasive are more likely to be used. She then outlines key points of persuasion. People change their mind either through a thoughtful process (e.g., careful consideration of information) or through a nonthoughtful process (e.g., simple peripheral cues such as number of arguments listed or close association of the information presented with other information the reader already agrees with). The thoughtful process is more likely when the topic is personally relevant, when the person is individually accountable for evaluating the information, when the message is fairly easy to understand, when there are no distractions, when the person has the appropriate background to fully understand the message and when the person can take their own time to evaluate the message. In short, for program evaluations, “thoughtful processing is more likely for those stateholders who are most invested in the evaluation or program and who have the background knowledge and time to make sense of the evaluation findings” (page 217). Fleming also points out that attitudes changed through the thoughtful process are more

likely to last and are more likely to guide behavior.

Schwarz and Oyserman talk about how people report on their own behavior, a process that is less simple than it seemingly appears. Basically, this chapter describes issues with self reporting, including problems that may arise from people’s difficulties with accurately reporting what they did, to problems with methods of asking people about what they did. For example, one issue in asking is whether to use close-ended or open-ended questions. Close ended reduce ambiguity, and, in my own experience, make analysis much easier. However, Schwarz and Oyserman also point out that close-ended questions may increase the likelihood of agreeing with the choices presented (social desirability) while reducing the likelihood of getting any responses that are not listed. Schwarz and Oyserman briefly discuss what to do about each issue. So, about asking questions, they write that the researcher should look at the context of each question to see whether there is anything in the survey that could influence the question meaning, check the questions for common errors (they cite a reference list) and should pilot questions using cognitive interviewing procedures. Schwarz and Oyserman similarly review a few other issues, such as respondent recall, confidentiality and self-presentation. Schwarz and Oyserman conclude with general advice, including that researchers take the surveys themselves. If the researcher, who designed the survey, has any difficulty, then respondents surely will. Researchers should also identify good surveys to use as models, should keep in mind that the design of the survey itself may influence how people respond, should pilot surveys using cognitive interviewing techniques, should find some

way to get respondents to invest in the effort to accurately respond, and should have extensive training for survey administrators. In this chapter, Schwarz and Oyserman very briefly review the social and cognitive processes involved in answering questions, and suggest that researchers take the time to become more familiar with the basic psychology of asking and answering behavioral questions.

Tindale and Posavac talk about the social psychology of groups, in relation to program evaluation. For example, group polarization can happen when a group has a discussion on some topic and, because of the discussion, ends up taking a more extreme position than the average position initially held by individual member of the group. So, for example, a group discussion could lead a group to have a high level of commitment to a program or intervention. On the other hand, if one group of stakeholders don't share the same ideas about a program as does those who sponsor an evaluation, then a group meeting of the stakeholders could lead to polarization of opposition to the intervention or to the evaluation. Another issue relates to trust and motivation in groups. In order for the evaluation to be useful, the stakeholders need to trust the evaluators and must be motivated to follow the recommendations of the evaluation. The way to gain the trust and motivation of stakeholders is to have them feel as though they are part of the evaluation, generally by involving the stakeholders early in the evaluation and continuing to have them involved throughout the process.

In conclusion, this book should be required reading for students in program evaluation graduate programs. There is much in the book that explains social psychology, and a great deal that shows

how social psychology can be useful in evaluation. Most practicing evaluators should read the book. However, I think that most practicing evaluators will not read this book. One problem with this book is that a lot of it is very academic, heavy on theory. The authors explain a lot of the theory of social psychology, and a lot is very dense reading. I am a social psychologist and so I am familiar with much of the content and can follow most of it. However, for those without a background, much of this may not be very clear. A second problem is that, as I mentioned, this book has to explain a lot of social psychology. As a consequence, there isn't enough applied evaluation. That is, practicing evaluators may come away from this book saying, "But what am I supposed to do? How does this help me to do evaluation?" I'm not very clear that this book gives an easy answer.