Review of American Journal of Evaluation Volume 27(2)

Nadini Persaud

Western Michigan University

American Journal of Evaluation (Volume 27, Issue 2) includes eight articles and five book reviews. The undermentioned is a synopsis of the articles and book reviews in the order in which they appear.

Articles

In the first article, "*Developing a Stakeholder-Driven Anticipated Timeline of Impact for Evaluation of Social Programs*," Sanjeev Sridharan, Bernadette Campbell, and Heidi Zinzow present a stakeholder-driven method, designed to assess stakeholder expectations for the earliest time frame in which social programs are likely to affect outcomes. The timeline of impact is developed within a concept-mapping framework and is illustrated using a process evaluation of a comprehensive community initiative, in which the authors discuss both the benefits and limitations of the model. The authors conclude by noting that they believe that such as model can supplement existing methods of explicating theories of change among stakeholders.

In "*Online Diaries for Qualitative Evaluation: Gaining Real-Time Insights*" Deborah J. Cohen, Laura C. Leviton, Nicole Isaacson, Alfred F. Tallia, and Benjamin F. Crabtree report on a novel approach for evaluating project implementation. The authors posit that the use of interactive online diaries provides an innovativ approach to manage communication between evaluation staff members and program implementation staff. The online diary approach is illustrated using a foundation-sponsored program with 17 practice-based research networks. The authors discuss both the strengths and limitations of the approach, noting that online diaries may not be appropriate for all types of evaluations. They conclude by acknowledging that the online diary approach is much more time consuming and intensive compared to other methods, but may be worth the effort.

Markku Lehtonen's article on "*Deliberative Democracy, Participation, and OECD Peer Reviews of Environmental Policies*" examines the extent to which evaluations carried out in a highly government driven manner contribute to deliberative democracy. This perspective is examined by using the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's environmental performance reviews as an illustration of an expert-led evaluative process built on the ideals of representative democracy. The author posits that even though the reviews are not participatory, they lay the foundation for deliberative democracy by empowering weak government stakeholders. Lehtonen concludes by noting that the type of empowerment discussed in the article may not be desirable if it allows "opportunistic governments, ministries, or politicians to legitimize inefficient, nonegalitarian, or otherwise poor policies" (p. 196).

In the article "*The Power of Why: Engaging the Goal Paradox in Program Evaluation*" Victor J. Friedman, Jay Rothman, and Bill Withers argue that

although clearly defined goals are commonly considered as prerequisites for effective evaluation, goal setting nonetheless presents a paradox since it takes place at the interface of rationality and values. The authors discuss how to unlock this paradox, namely by making goal setting a process of evaluating goals, rather than simply a process of defining them. Using a case illustration, the authors discuss the method in the context of goal based evaluation literature and offers guidelines for practice.

Embry M. Howell's and Alshadye Yemane's article on "*An Assessment of Evaluation Designs: Case Studies of 12 Large Federal Evaluations*" provides a critical review of the quality of federal program evaluations. Based on the review, the authors provide several recommendations to improve federal program evaluations. These include: assessing many sites to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how programs adapt to changes over time; use of program monitoring to learn who the program is serving, the services they are receiving, and client outcomes; utilization of rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs; and more careful attention to credentials and training of those overseeing federal evaluations. The authors posit that if these guideless are followed for federal evaluations, government programs are likely to yield more credible and useful results.

In "*A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data*" David R. Thomas argues that evaluators doing qualitative analyses can become bewildered with the diversity of strategies for conducting qualitative analyses. Thomas posits that there is a nontechnical means to carry out qualitative analyses, namely the general inductive approach which is an easy, systematic method that produces valid and reliable findings. Thomas' approach involves: condensing raw

data into brief summary formats; establishing clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings from the data; and developing a framework of the underlying structure of experiences/process that are evident in the data. Thomas acknowledges that the inductive approach may not be as strong as other analytical procedures, but notes that simplicity may be appealing to many.

According to Mary V. Davis in "*Teaching Practical Public Health Evaluation Methods*", many public health practitioners lack the requisite background and skills to conduct evaluations. Using the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framework for program evaluation, Davis demonstrates how this framework can be adapted to teach practical evaluation methods to graduate students in public health. According to Davis, the CDC framework is flexible tool that is easy to apply. Its emphasis is on utilization-focused evaluation for program improvement and involves a systematic six-step process to conduct an evaluation. The six step process involves: engaging stakeholders, describing the program, focusing the evaluation design, gathering credible evidence, justifying conclusions, and ensuring use and shared lessons learned.

Finally, Mary E. Arnold article "*4-H Field Faculty: A Framework for Success*", examines the complex and multifaceted nature of organizational capacity building and presents a framework of four strategies for building evaluation capacity. Using this framework, Arnold demonstrates how this method was used to train 4-H educators. According to Arnold, the framework provides a useful blueprint of an effective strategy to build evaluation capacity among groups of educators who many not have evaluation expertise. Arnold notes that the success of the framework is largely dependant on a supportive infrastructure; however, once this

is in place, it provides a way to increase evaluation capacity in a way that is supportive and unifying.

Book Reviews

The section commences with a review by J. Bradley Cousins of "*Encyclopedia of Evaluation*" edited by Sandra Mathison. According to Cousins, although the encyclopedia may not necessarily be a book for curling up in front of the fireplace, the encyclopedia is nonetheless an invaluable and important reference resource that should be on the bookshelf of serious evaluation scholars, practitioners, teachers, and students of evaluation. Cousins used two criteria to evaluate the book, comprehensiveness and quality of representation. Cousins felt unable to comment on whether the encyclopedia was comprehensive; however, he noted that it appeared to be slightly American-centric—i.e. 11/16 editorial board members were from America and the list of publications omitted important non-American peer reviewed journals. In terms of quality of representation, Cousins stated that he could not ascertain whether the entries were peer reviewed, but that he generally found entries to be concise and in accessible terms.

Next, E. Jane Davidson conducts a review of "*Evaluation Roots: Tracing Theorists' Views and Influences*", edited by Marvin C. Alkin. Davidson begins her review with an outline of Alkin and Christie's evaluation theory tree. According to Davidson, the tree brings together a range of influential theorists categorized into four groups—the trunk of the tree consists of theorists rooted in Accountability & Control and Social Inquiry, while the three large branches on the tree represent evaluation approaches that focus on methods, valuing, and use. She notes that the book provides a fascinating journey into the minds of some of our greatest

evaluation pioneers. In the first part of the book, Alkin and Christie summarize the major contributions of each of the theorists on the tree and justify the placement of the theorists on the tree. Section 2 "Methods" presents eight chapters that cover the contributions of Ralph Tyler, Donald Campbell, Thomas Cook, Robert Boruch, Peter Rossi, Huey Chen, Carol Weiss, and Lee Cronbach. Section 3 "Valuing" presents 5 chapters authored by Michael Scriven, Elliot Eisner, Robert Stake, Ernest House, and Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba. Section 4 presents nine theorists on "Use", namely Daniel Stufflebeam, Joseph Wholey, Michael, Quinn Patton, Marvin Alkin, David Fetterman, Bradley Cousins, Jean King, Hallie Preskill, and John Owen. Finally, Alkin and Christie revisit the theory tree in Section 5 in light of the contributors' comments. Overall, Davidson provides a favorable review of the book, but questions the placement of some of the theorists on the tree. She also expressed concern that the theory tree was very American-centric, had on 4 women theorists and only 1 non-Caucasian.

In Jean A. King's review of "*Practicing Evaluation: A Collaborative Approach*" by Rita G. O'Sullivan, King provides a favorable review of O'Sullivan's book, noting that one of its main strengths is that about one third of the book is devoted to examples from various evaluations and includes numerous examples that provide useful skills building for its readers. According to King, "this is a lively way to teach and, to my mind, a strength of the book as these cases make a constructive addition to the field's instructional materials" (p. 277). King notes that the eight chapters in the book provide step by step guidance from the initial framing of the study, to the review of its results. Overall, King believes that the book is a practical and useful guide; however, she notes that O'Sullivan describes her approach to program evaluation as collaborative, when her approach focuses

mostly on collaboration in decision making, with little emphasis on collaboration in implementation. King's major disappointment with the book was that the final chapter concluded without a review of the book theme i.e. collaboration.

Carl E. Hanssen's review of "*Evaluation Strategies for Communicating and Reporting (2nd ed.)*", by Rosalie T. Torres, Hallie Preskill, and Mary E. Piontek, is quite favorable. According to Hanssen, the book describes 34 different reporting strategies framed around individual, group and organizational learning. Overall, Hanssen notes that the book is well written, and provides a diversity of communicating and reporting styles with illustrative examples that novice and seasoned evaluators should find useful. Notwithstanding, Hanssen cautions that care should be taken in adopting and applying concepts i.e. the advice provided should not be considered as best practice or even acceptable practice. The guidelines are useful, but judgment must be exercised. For example, the suggestion that 20 PowerPoint slides in a 20 minute presentation is acceptable, is not only ridiculous, but illogical.

Finally, Daniela C. Schröter conducts a review of "*Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*" (2nd ed.), edited by Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer. According to Schröter, the primary goal of the book is to supply strategies for conducting systematic evaluations. The book is divided into four sections: (1) Designing Performance Monitoring Systems and Evaluation Studies; (2) Practical Data Collection Procedures; (3) Analyzing Evaluation Data; and (4) Getting Evaluation Results Used. Schröter notes that the Handbook presents a useful array of topics relevant to program evaluation, and discussion is enriched and enhanced by numerous examples, tips, tricks, discussions, problems and pitfalls. Schröter major criticism is that the Handbook does not adequately

capture the wide array of evaluation approaches and evaluation specific methodology. Schröter recommends this book as a useful resource to those interested in research methods and practical advice, but cautions that this book is not suitable for expanding evaluation specific knowledge.