

EPILOGUE — COMMENTS ON THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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█ In the thirty odd years of its acknowledged existence, evaluation has matured rapidly. Evaluation is now established as a unique discipline and is taking on many of the trappings of a profession. The path has been rocky, with intense debate and significant differences developing in how evaluators practice their craft. Much of the debate has been about *how* we go about our craft — there is a high level of consensus that Scriven's characterization of evaluation as being the practice of making *judgements on the merit or worth* represents *what* evaluation is about. While our debates have most often been about *how* we do evaluation, they have frequently been posed as being *what* evaluation is.

As Smith illustrates in his article — this confusion of *how* with *what* has permeated the recent empowerment evaluation debate. (By empowerment evaluation debate I refer to the exchanges involving leading U.S. evaluators following publication of *Empowerment Evaluation*).¹ And, as Smith shows, both sides of the debate have had a hand in this confusion. Smith also clarifies some serious questions about the utility of empowerment evaluation that were left unanswered in that debate. Smith's framework provides a mechanism to identify the substance of different approaches and is a valuable contribution to the current debates.

One of the lingering less functional categories in evaluation is the distinction between summative and formative evaluation. Formative or improvement-oriented evaluation is said to aim at providing information about the evaluand that will contribute to improvement. Summative evaluations are said to be about judgements about the merit or worth — what is the incremental contribution of this evaluand — so that, for example, senior policy officials can improve how they allocate resources among a wide variety of policy options. Alternatively we can consider *all* evaluation improvement oriented, but the nature of the evaluation assignment can differ widely. The

common theme is that evaluation, regardless of the level at which it is conducted, is about providing knowledge about the incremental value of the evaluand — what difference does it make and for whom. In this view the summative/formative distinction has more to do with the context for the evaluation. For example:

- Summative evaluations are frequently conducted at senior policy levels, whereas formative evaluations are more likely at the program level.
- Summative evaluations are usually periodic, mandated, or conducted as part of policy reviews, whereas formative evaluations range from ongoing to frequent.
- Senior management, central agency, or external funders usually initiate summative evaluations whereas formative evaluations are most often initiated by program area management or internal evaluation groups.
- Summative evaluations are more likely to include cost-effectiveness type questions and address issues at a higher level, and are less likely to address issues of program implementation.

Regardless of the type of evaluation being undertaken, evaluators select their tools from the same kit. The summative/formative categories are still useful to distinguish the context of the evaluation, but they no longer have utility for distinguishing what evaluators do, or how we do it. Evaluators and their clients should select the tools that will be employed in an assignment based on their utility and appropriateness, not on outdated visions of evaluation categories such as summative and formative. We should be looking formatively at all programs to gain critically important information about program results and implementation essential for information-based decision making — a central tenet in modern views of good governance. In this context, it is important for evaluators employing empowerment approaches to heed Patton's advice about the role of organizational culture and structures as a mitigating factor in utilizing knowledge from evaluations.

Like all approaches, empowerment evaluation uses the entire spectrum of evaluation approaches and techniques to provide knowledge in a fashion that is likely to enhance utilization. The distinguishing characteristic of empowerment approaches to evaluation is a conscious desire and effort to have the program gain control of the evaluation process so that it will be better able to integrate evaluation

into daily operations. At some point in the future, empowerment evaluation will be distinguished by a conscious desire and effort to have citizens (clients/consumers and the wider population of citizen stakeholders) take control of the evaluation process, however our current skills and institutions are not up to that challenge.

The main goal of this issue was to demonstrate that empowerment evaluation successfully and usefully addresses the *what* of evaluation — assessing the merit or worth — using a wide range of evaluation approaches. An equally important goal of the issue was to provide tools useful for all evaluators and critically important for those employing empowerment approaches. The third goal of the issue was to contribute to the maturation of evaluation by being attentive to the need to understand what we do at both theoretical and applied levels in all of our adventures. Although constrained as always by space and the limitations of the journal format, this issue has addressed all of these goals. Reflecting on his experiences with empowerment evaluation and on the recent debates, Fetterman addresses these three goals in his contribution to this issue.

Lee and Barrington have provided clear evidence of the successful application of empowerment evaluation in large, multi-year, and complex program settings. Some critics have attempted to relegate empowerment approaches to small program efforts typically undertaken by a community-based organization. Lee and Barrington demonstrate that the approach can be equally successful in the evaluation of important large-scale innovative programs intended to lead system-wide change.

Lee's article also contributes to the frequent discussion of the "role" of an empowerment evaluator. She and a number of the other authors show that implementation of empowerment approaches require long-term involvement and resources to support that involvement. We can characterize the role of the empowerment evaluator as an *évaluation animateur*, likened to the role of a theatre professional skilled in all aspects of the art, who works with a community to portray important issues through theatre by engaging and resourcing citizens with little or no previous theatre experience, bringing in theatre professionals only to fill local gaps.

Patton's article nicely articulates the opportunities for evaluation in helping organizations to improve. Underscoring his words is the truth that evaluation needs to link with organizational cultures and

changes. In this article, Patton demonstrates the value of evaluators being prepared to follow evaluation findings through the logical extension to program and organizational improvement and change. Patton's approach provides a direction for empowerment evaluators to bridge the gap (that he has identified elsewhere) between building capacity and empowerment. While this direction is critical for empowerment approaches, it is instructive for all evaluators. Many evaluators, including prominent advocates of empowerment approaches, believe that if quality knowledge about program outcomes and design is available to organizations, it will be used to improve what is done. Patton demonstrates the fallacy of this view, that improvement may depend on changing the organizations housing the programs being evaluated, and that evaluation has an important place in this process. This likely heralds a future intense debate in the evaluation profession; for now it should contribute to the shape of how we engage empowerment approaches.

The article by Rowe and Jacobs bridges the organizational focus of Patton and the demonstration of successful applications of empowerment approaches by Lee and Barrington. The focus is on understanding what empowerment means in organizations, and what an evaluator needs to bear in mind when employing this approach. The notion of "collective empowerment" is used to articulate how organizations gain control of the evaluation process. Barrington effectively employs a similar concept of "group efficacy" as a means of linking empowerment to evaluation.

Two additional articles provide useful tools for empowerment evaluators, in particular, and for evaluation in general. Connor and Tanjasiri provide an overview and assessment of their efforts to work with communities to develop community evaluation indicators as part of the Colorado Healthy Communities initiative. This has two important dimensions, each of which is a challenge to evaluation. The first arises from the more system and trans-agency focus of communities — they want to achieve things better described as quality of life indicators to which the outcomes pursued by individual agencies and outcomes contribute. The second is the processes of articulating and gaining consensus on realistic and observable indicators.

Porteous et al. provide an overview of a self-assessment toolkit developed for Health Canada. Self-assessment should not be confused with empowerment evaluation — it is a *how* in its own right and a valuable tool for empowerment evaluators. By engaging program

staff in assessing their programs, self-assessment helps to achieve some of the critical elements of empowerment evaluation. Self-assessment tools offer some possibilities for addressing the tension between evaluation going to scale throughout an agency and the heavy resource requirements of empowerment approaches. Fetterman has shown the utility of the Web and Internet resources for empowerment evaluation — which also address reducing the cost of implementing empowerment approaches.

Evaluation discourse in Canada has always been more pragmatic than the debates in the U.S. and is very practice-focused. However, we are strongly influenced by U.S. practice and theory, including discussions of evaluation categories. This journal provides a valuable forum for advancing the emerging profession of evaluation, and this issue has attempted to clarify the place of empowerment approaches in evaluation practice and to confirm its value.

NOTES

- 1 For references, see the articles by Fetterman and Smith in this volume.