

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

J. A. Morell. (2010). *Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty: Anticipating Surprise and Responding to the Inevitable*. New York, NY: Guilford. 303 pages.

Reviewed by Isabelle Bourgeois

Every seasoned evaluator can attest to the fact that our craft is replete with unanticipated occurrences and events. These events, dubbed “surprises” by Jonathan Morell, often cannot be foreseen and require significant adjustments to evaluation plans and processes. Morell explores these surprises fully in his book by identifying the most common sources of surprise in evaluation as well as the tactics that can be taken to mitigate it.

Morell defines surprises as unintended consequences that could not be foreseen, or that could have been foreseen if the proper mechanisms had been in place. He argues that although evaluators are trained to react to surprise when it crops up, better results could be achieved through the development and implementation of “a systematic understanding of how to contend with surprise” (p. 1).

Anchored in the systems perspective, this book positions surprise within two conceptual frameworks, the lifecycle and the social/organizational perspectives. The lifecycle view focuses in part on the fact that programs and evaluations each follow their own lifecycles, and that “the same dynamics that explain surprise in programs also explain surprise in evaluation” (p. 123). According to this view, unanticipated incidents can take place during the design and implementation phase of an evaluation, or they can take place during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The social/organizational view surmises that surprises can be related to the program under scrutiny (i.e., changes in the program’s environment, issues related to program clients or stakeholders, or the organization’s behaviour in general), or to the implementation of the evaluation (i.e., data availability, changes in design). A key insight of the social/organizational view is that, often, evaluators and program staff make assumptions about the program, the data, or each other, that remain unexplored and prove to be incor-

rect. Morell offers practical solutions to highlight assumptions and correct them early on in the evaluation process.

The book provides a useful presentation of the tactics that can be implemented to prevent surprises from weakening an evaluation plan. The tactics are organized within eight broad categories, which include (among others) using program and content-based theory, exploiting past evaluation experiences, limiting time frames to minimize the opportunity for surprise, and using leading indicators and program monitoring techniques. Although these seem obvious at first, the integration of these tactics within evaluation planning and implementation requires significant thought and effort, and brings with it the risk of unmanageability (if several unanticipated events are identified).

In cases where surprise is difficult or impossible to foresee, Morell advocates the use of “agile evaluation,” which focuses on increased flexibility in data collection and analysis, the evaluation’s methodology in general, and retooled program theory through a retrospective analysis of the linkages between program activities and outcomes. In order to develop more agile evaluation plans, Morell recommends working with key stakeholders throughout the evaluation lifecycle and establishing “redesign” points along the way. He cautions us, however, against working with all program stakeholders, focusing instead on those deemed “essential” to the evaluation process.

Aside from the more theoretical discussion provided by Morell, the book presents and makes extensive use of 18 cases drawn from the experiences of practicing evaluators around the world. These cases cover various geographical boundaries, organizational types, program foci, and target populations. Morell refers to these cases as illustrative examples of his principles throughout the book and includes them in their entirety at the end of the text. Although good summaries of the cases are provided within the chapters and the lessons taken from them are made clear, it is sometimes difficult to follow the flow of the arguments presented in the chapters when cases are read in their entirety. Morell offers various methods of integrating the cases into the book chapters, and some of these may work better than others, depending on the reader. One of the unstated benefits of these cases is that they would make excellent teaching examples for newer evaluators: not only will they feel as though they are not alone in encountering unanticipated situations in their work, but they will learn important lessons from the experience of others.

Overall, this book addresses more experienced, senior evaluators, which is both refreshing and useful. In a discipline where texts tend to target new evaluators or program personnel, this type of work meets a very real need and undoubtedly advances our thinking about the issue of surprise in evaluation. The conceptual frameworks used in the book provide grounding to the arguments presented and are useful for that purpose, but a greater, overarching framework might have better clarified the sources of surprise and contributed to a better understanding of the key concepts, which sometimes get lost in the chapters. However, Morell provides good, practical advice on dealing with unanticipated events throughout the text, based on his own experiences and those of the evaluators who provided the cases for the book. The key insights found in the book will surely enable evaluators to better plan their work, identify surprises before they crop up, and, in the end, enable them to produce higher-quality evaluations.