BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

J. Fitzpatrick, C. Christie, & M. M. Mark. (2009). *Evaluation in Action: Interviews with Expert Evaluators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. xiv + 456 pages.

Reviewed by Leigh M. Tolley and Nick L. Smith

Although much has been written about evaluation methods and conceptual approaches to planning evaluations (i.e., evaluation theory), little is available about how evaluators reason during an evaluation study. How do evaluators make the myriad choices necessary in creating an evaluation design, working with clients and stakeholders, and managing evaluation operations? What are evaluators thinking as they respond to emerging problems and to changing stakeholder interests and needs? This volume enables readers to listen in as experienced evaluators reflect on how they conducted actual studies.

Evaluation in Action comprises 12 cases of evaluation practice by exemplary evaluators in the field, as well as an introductory chapter and two closing chapters relating the cases to evaluation theory and practice. Nine of the cases were previously published in the "Exemplars" section of the *American Journal of Evaluation* while Fitzpatrick and Christie were section editors. Each case is introduced by the authors and followed by an interview with the evaluator who conducted the study. The case is concluded by commentary suggesting what can be learned from the case, questions for discussion, and recommendations for further reading about that particular evaluation.

The first chapter of the book reviews evaluation's purposes, uses, theories, models, and approaches before noting that "[i]n spite of all the writing on evaluation theory, we have little idea of how evaluators actually practice" (p. 11). By interviewing skilled and experienced evaluators about exemplary studies they had conducted, the authors hoped to learn more about what Schwandt (2008) terms "practical knowledge," the practice-relevant expertise developed in the field through dealing with real problems encountered in conducting actual evaluations. These cases thus illustrate "the decision processes

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employed in a real practice setting by a range of skilled evaluators"
(p. 13).

The 12 cases in the book are organized into four different categories,
although the authors note that "[t]he categories are not all-inclusive
and the interviews could be organized in many different ways" (p. xiii);
other possible categories are provided in an appendix. The cases are
grouped as evaluations that (a) are "traditional evaluations," or con-
ducted for determining merit or worth; (b) have a focus on description;
(c) emphasize program planning and organizational development; or
(d) concern cultural competence.

The first grouping of "traditional evaluations" begins with James A.
Riccio's evaluation of the Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN)
welfare-to-work program. Issues of practice that are raised through
this case include frequent stakeholder involvement, an examination of
program implementation, and the ability to adapt a design as needed
throughout the study. The next case is Jennifer C. Greene's evaluation
of the Natural Resources Leadership Program (NRLP), which leads
the reader to examine how the social role of the evaluator is defined.
The final case in this section is the series of evaluations that compose
Len Bickman's evaluation of the Ft. Bragg and Stark County systems
of care for children and adolescents, which drew from multiple data
sources over an extended period of time, and identified aspects of
program theory that were critical to the evaluations.

The second set of interviews, focused on description, starts with David
Fetterman's evaluation of the Stanford Teacher Education Program
(STEP), notable because Fetterman chose to use an approach other
than empowerment evaluation, and the study gained national atten-
tion in the teacher education field. Next is Debra J. Rog's evaluation
of the Homeless Families Program (HFP), a five-year, multi-site study
whose design evolved as it moved forward, and is an example of the
need for comfort when identifying and discussing program failures,
such as inability to meet all program goals. The third case in this
section is Gary T. Henry's work with the Council for School Perform-
ance and the development of performance reports for schools in the
state of Georgia. This particular example highlights the creation of
a performance measurement system, the importance of collaboration
with stakeholders, and the utility of an end product.

The third category of evaluations, emphasizing program planning
and organizational development, includes four cases. Jean A. King's

participatory evaluation of the Special Education Program at the Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota is presented first. King's study involved as broad a range of stakeholders as possible in order to help build evaluation capacity in the school district. The next case is Stewart I. Donaldson's evaluation of the Work and Health Initiative with a focus on Winning New Jobs, identified by Donaldson as representative of his practice of theory-driven program evaluation. The third case is Hallie Preskill's development of an evaluation system for the Corporate Education Development and Training (CEDT) Department at Sandia National Laboratories, remarkable for its focus on appreciative inquiry and training design and delivery. The final case in this section is Ross Conner's evaluation of the Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative (CHCI), a collaborative, community-based evaluation that had strong stakeholder involvement and engagement across diverse communities.

The final group of cases includes two examples of evaluations relating to cultural competence. Katrina Bledsoe's evaluation of the Fun With Books Program in the state of New Jersey emphasized the need to develop a knowledge of a community and its values in order to understand a program. The last case study in the book is Allan Wallis and Victor Dukay's evaluation of Godfrey's Children Center in Tanzania, which stressed the importance of cultural validity of instrumentation and the involvement of regional natives to develop an evaluation that was appropriate to the cultural context.

The book concludes with two chapters relating the cases to evaluation theory and practice. Fitzpatrick's chapter, "Exemplars' Choices: What Do These Cases Tell Us about Practice?", uses examples from the cases to examine the roles evaluators play in evaluation, the factors and questions evaluation addresses, the ways that stakeholders are involved, the methods that are selected, and the strategies evaluators use to encourage use of the findings. The last chapter by Christie, "Analyzing the Practice of Evaluation: What Do These Cases Tell Us about Theory?", uses the evaluation theory tree (Alkin & Christie, 2004) to review the cases in terms of use, methods, and values.

Although some of the studies examined had won awards for outstanding work, the process and criteria for selecting these specific studies for examination are not clearly identified. Apparently these cases were not selected because they were representative of particular problems or aspects of practice, since, as the authors note, there are many ways in which the cases could have been organized for review.

Further, there is little discussion of what is meant by "exemplary," and so it is unclear whether these cases are meant to represent excellence in evaluation practice or if they are better seen as clear examples of particular applied problems in evaluation—as exemplars rather than as exemplary.

A more serious limitation to this book is that these cases contain only the evaluators' accounts of what happened in the respective evaluations, why certain actions were taken, and with what consequences. Other participants, such as clients and stakeholders, might have had different stories to tell, but those are not shared. In general, these evaluator accounts are not very self-critical, nor do the interviewers push the evaluators to share examples of failed attempts, poor decisions, or misread circumstances. Thus, the reader has only a generally positive, one-sided account of what happened in the evaluations. The interviews could have been less reportorial and more investigative; a more balanced view would have provided additional insight into the difficulties of making good evaluation decisions.

However, the book does provide a collection of thoughtful examinations of a diverse set of evaluations, highlighting evaluator rationale and reasoning, emphasizing the importance of reflection and flexibility in conducting an ongoing evaluation, and illuminating how changing context and stakeholder needs influence selection of evaluation design, method, and implementation. Students of evaluation will appreciate the opportunity to learn how experienced evaluators reason their way throughout a prolonged study, making necessary critical adjustments on a routine basis. Because such insights are not available in published evaluation reports, their availability here may help inoculate novice practitioners against some of the major problems they are likely to encounter as they begin practicing. More seasoned practitioners will find the volume useful as a source of how others think about their own practice. They may resonate to the problems encountered and consider how they themselves might have proceeded. Learning from others' experience can be a productive way of avoiding similar problems in one's own practice. Finally, the volume provides evaluation theorists and methodologists with important perspectives about how practical conditions in the field force adaptations to conceptual approaches as well as methodological options.

As one of the few collections of evaluator applied reasoning and practical insights, this volume is a useful resource for students, practitioners, and theorists/methodologists who want to better understand how

evaluators think in practice and make decisions; how flow of work and events arising in the field shape the nature and use of evaluation theory, method, and practice.

REFERENCES

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