

King, J. A., & Stevahn, L. (2013). *Interactive Evaluation Practice: Mastering the Interpersonal Dynamics of Program Evaluation*. Los Angeles: Sage. 431 pages. Available in paperback (ISBN 978-0-7619-2673-3).

Reviewed by Duyen Thi Kim Nguyen

Although there are many resources available regarding program evaluation techniques and methods, King and Stevahn tackle an evaluation practice that is often cited as an important competence for program evaluators but is inadequately addressed in the evaluation literature—interpersonal practice. Interpersonal practice refers to people skills such as communication, listening, negotiation, conflict resolution, collaboration, and diversity (CES, 2013).

Drawing from decades of teaching experience, mentoring, and conducting evaluations, King and Stevahn offer their expertise on what they have named *Interactive Evaluation Practice* (IEP), defined as “the intentional act of engaging people in making decisions, taking action, and reflecting while conducting an evaluation study” (p. 14). IEP refers to many of the same qualities of interpersonal practice; however, the authors specifically chose the term *interactive* to emphasize the bidirectional influence that exists between the evaluator and other people involved in the evaluation process.

Armed with the belief that everyone has the ability to learn how to develop strong interpersonal skills, King and Stevahn co-wrote *Interactive Evaluation Practice*, to provide an accessible resource that will help readers “learn to foster successful interpersonal interactions in evaluation settings” (p. 10). This book is intended to be hands-on, rooted in research, and applicable to all evaluation practitioners and anyone interested in the field. Novice readers are advised to begin reading the book in sequential order while more experienced evaluators may refer to key chapters of interest.

The layout of the book is reflective of the academic and professional background of the authors (i.e., professor, director, evaluator, and researcher) and their common interest in evaluation, interpersonal skills, and capacity building. Designed as a teaching tool that is intended to be referred to as practitioners evolve their IEP skills, the

authors divide their exposition into three parts, with the second part twice as long as the first and last.

Part I provides the foundation for understanding IEP. It begins with a description of IEP and its frameworks and principles, followed by how it applies to evaluation, and concludes with its underlying theories. Within Part I the authors work early to gain buy-in from the reader by framing the importance of IEP, highlighting that interactive skills will impact virtually all aspects of the evaluation process from beginning to end, and that these skills are versatile and may also be used in everyday settings. In regards to theory, King and Stevahn argue that attention in evaluation has not been primarily concerned with “developing and testing theories to inform evaluation practice ... [and that i]nstead, methods-oriented issues ... have dominated the field of program evaluation since its inception” (p. 45).

Part II is devoted to the skills and strategies of IEP and delves deeper into many of the *Who, What, When, Where, and How* questions that evaluators may ask. *What are IEP strategies? Why should I use IEP? When should I use these strategies? Where will these strategies work best? How can I facilitate IEP?* In this part King and Stevahn provide a host of charts and templates that the evaluator may learn from and use. For example, the authors help the reader understand and appreciate the diversity of program evaluations by identifying “four components of every evaluation conversation: (1) a context in which the discussion occurs, (2) a client or intended user, (3) the content of the evaluation process or its results, and (4) an evaluator” (as cited by King & Stevahn, p. 71). Understanding these four components may assist an evaluator to make an informed decision on how to interact with stakeholders. Part II also outlines several overarching goals to evaluation conversations and ties them together with previous frameworks and concepts introduced in Part I. The authors argue that IEP will help facilitate three major roles of the evaluator: the decision maker, the actor, and the reflective practitioner. As part of IEP, the authors discuss approaches to manage conflict and how to respond to unexpected events in program evaluation, as well as how to create a feasible IEP within your own evaluation context. These conflict approaches to unexpected events in program evaluation were based on experience and were guided by two theories: conflict strategies theory and constructive conflict resolution theory.

Finally, Part III allows readers to consolidate and apply what they have learned in previous parts by practicing and critiquing three

different cases. Each case varies by context, stakeholder personalities, and practice (i.e., evaluator-directed, collaborative, and participant-directed), and includes a variety of reflection questions and case study tips. For those who learn well through application and/or repetition, these cases provide opportunities for readers to test their understanding, apply their knowledge, and reflect on their thoughts.

For an instructor, there are many useful features of this book that would make it a valuable textbook in an evaluation course. Features that support learning include its format, learning aids, and resources offered. King and Stevahn present their chapters in a logical format that begins with basic concepts and key foundational principles to IEP. The authors build on this foundation by connecting it with more advanced concepts and IEP strategies. Throughout each chapter King and Stevahn offer a variety of learning aids, such as tables, diagrams, bullet lists of key points, and scenarios that help illustrate concepts. The authors also provide an abundance of resources, such as interactive templates, sample conversation questions, generic exercises, a wide selection of references for further reading, an informative glossary of all key terms used, and appendixes delineating the standards and practices of program evaluation as well as IEP tools.

As a graduate student and newcomer in the field of evaluation, I found this book included helpful and thoughtful questions and was easy to read. The writing was clear and did not include a lot of jargon that a novice would not understand. When reading this book I was forced to pause on several occasions to reflect on both my own experience conducting a program evaluation and my previous course work in evaluation. It was refreshing to read this book because not only did it explain and teach a valuable skillset that was rarely taught in the literature, but it also acknowledged potential unexpected events and suggested several approaches to prevent or overcome conflict. While the authors acknowledge that the list of scenarios and solutions are not exhaustive, they try to provide the most likely cases that may be encountered by an evaluator. Furthermore, I really appreciate how IEP is derived from two theoretical frameworks that are easy to understand and empirically supported, and which are also complementary to the theories regarding unexpected events and conflict resolution.

While this book is a good teaching tool for interactive evaluation practice, one limiting factor is that some activities in this book are tailored to those who are either in a classroom setting or who are cur-

rently immersed in the field of evaluation. As an independent learner who is currently not involved in coursework or in an evaluation project, I found my ability to practice some interactive strategies to be limited. Future editions of this paperback would benefit by including several options on how one may practice techniques and strategies in both a small (e.g., pairs) or large group evaluation setting, or an everyday setting.

Overall, the authors achieved their goal of developing an accessible resource that helps foster the development and refinement of interaction skills in various evaluation settings. The text provides added value to the current literature, as it is one of the few resources available that offer insight and teaching tools to interpersonal evaluation skills and practice. This book would be considered useful to aspiring evaluators, students, practitioners, and researchers who would like to improve and learn more about an interpersonal practice that is both grounded in theory and thoughtfully guided by decades of evaluation experience.

REFERENCES

- Canadian Evaluation Society (2013). *Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice*. Retrieved from <http://cjpe.ca/site.cgi?s=5&ss=11&lang=en>

