

Cousins, J. B., & Chouinard, J. A. (Eds.). (2012).
*Participatory evaluation up close: An integration of
research-based knowledge.* IAP. Available in paperback
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Reviewed by Beth Peddle

The past few decades have seen strong evidence of participatory approaches improving the relevance and use of program evaluations. In tandem, a plethora of participatory approaches, rationales, methods, and resources have emerged. Evaluators and novice theorists must weed through a sea of information that may be diverse, ambiguous, or contradicting. In this comprehensive review, editors Cousins and Chouinard take on the daunting task of presenting and synthesizing existing research about participatory evaluation. The result is *Participatory Evaluation Up Close*, an important contribution to practice and scholarship.

In the first section of the book, the authors lay out the foundations of participatory evaluation. They outline the many types of collaborative inquiry and possible justifications for those approaches, and they define the two primary streams of participatory evaluation (practical and transformative). Further, they elucidate several conceptual frameworks that are used to situate different approaches and purposes of participatory evaluation, including the dimensions of form in collaborative inquiry (Cousins, 2003; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) and a comprehensive framework of the nature, contextual conditions, and consequences of participatory evaluation. For the reader, this section borders on overwhelming; decades of important texts are synthesized in fewer than 35 pages. However, upon reading it a second time, the reader realizes how beneficial this introduction is to the rest of their reading experience.

The second section is where Cousins and Chouinard compile their impressive and all-inclusive summary table: a review and thematic analysis of 121 studies published about participatory evaluation from 1996 to 2011. Most studies originate in the United States or Canada, but span many sectors including education, health care, community development, and international development. The authors analyze the studies by the dimensions of form, by the types of consequences, and by theme. For me, the thematic analysis is the strongest part of the book. The authors discuss seven main themes: training leading to meaningful participation; relational processes and dimensions of voice; dealing with multidimensional contexts; evolution of evaluator identity, role, and “positionality”; stakeholder selection and consequences of participation; learning as a basis for practice and change; and

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relational, political, and discursive locations of power. Particularly, the authors illustrate the role of power in evaluation, and how participatory approaches interact with, influence, and are influenced by existing power structures. Despite managing an immense data set, the authors present their analysis in a very organized way, assembling the empirical research and allowing it to speak for itself.

The third section of the book offers important methodological contributions. Cousins and Chouinard use a different system here, whereby they describe and discuss the methodological design of the 121 studies without presenting them in a summary table. They couple this discussion with a summary table and more detailed review of 10 studies from their own program of research (4 of which were included in the original 121). As a reader, I was a bit surprised at this decision, as I was otherwise pleased that the authors crafted the book without a heavy focus on their own contributions to the field. However, it seems that the authors wanted to present some examples of research designs that could be modelled, in contrast to their critique of the 69% of studies that were case narrative. They present this as a “call to action,” calling for participatory evaluation researchers to move away from retroactive, reflective findings, and toward proactive, well-designed empirical studies. For those who skim articles’ methods section on their way to the conclusion, this section is a bit dry. However, for those who scrutinize studies for methodological rigour, this section is enlightening, situating research about participatory evaluation on the spectrum of strength of evidence, and offering models for future research.

The fourth section is shorter than those it follows, but plays an important role in positioning this book as a catalyst toward more, and more conclusive, research on participatory evaluation. Titled “The Way Forward: Implications for Research and Practice,” this section first offers suggestions for future research questions, including deeper exploration of unintended consequences, relational dynamics, and process use. The authors then offer methodological considerations, recommending that researchers develop a program of research, go beyond case narrative, and use longitudinal designs. Cousins and Chouinard round off the book by offering practical tips to evaluators interested in using participatory approaches, emphasizing dynamism and the importance of preparing participants for evaluation activities and evaluation capacity building generally. The authors close with an inspiring word about the growing field of evaluation and their optimism about the research body that supports it.

From a graduate student’s perspective, this is a book to take out of the library and not return until convocation (I’ve had my copy for eight months now!). Once students digest the heavily concentrated first section, this is an invaluable resource for everything concerning participatory evaluation. Those studying evaluation theory will benefit from the review of foundational conceptual frameworks and studies, as well as the synthesis of key themes in the literature and suggested research topics. Those training as evaluators will benefit from the book’s discussion of how participatory approaches can improve evaluation quality and use, in addition to its examination of the power dynamics that affect participation.

The limitations of this book stem more from the nature of existing research than from anything else. Thematic analysis and conclusions drawn from the data are limited by the overrepresentation of North American studies, the predominance of studies from the education sector, and the choice to exclude studies written in languages other than English. Otherwise, the authors are careful to include a diversity of authors in the data set, which they then analyze with a rigorous set of criteria. As such, their conclusions stand on solid ground and provide an incredible bird's-eye view of the current field of participatory program evaluation.

By writing *Participatory Evaluation Up Close: An Integration of Research-Based Knowledge*, the authors have created both a time capsule and a prophecy about participatory evaluation. They summarize the empirical evidence of the previous 15 years, drawing important insights about recurring themes and methodological strengths and gaps. Importantly, they update the reader about the present state of this field, and then suggest informed directions for advancing both research and practice. With this book, Cousins and Chouinard have created an invaluable educational and research tool.

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