

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

Trevisan, M. S., & Walser, T. M. (2015) *Evaluability assessment: Improving evaluation quality and use*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 181 pages. ISBN 978-1452282442.

Reviewed by Sandra Sellick

An important premise in this book is that evaluability assessment (EA)

has grown in use across disciplines, programs, contexts, and purposes. This welcomed expansion has also pushed the limits of broad understanding of how best to develop and implement EA in a unique situation or use EA in an alternative manner. The lack of understanding around this expanded use has also challenged quality and rigor when implementing EA, and it continues to foster misunderstanding of what EA really is and what it can offer. (p. 151)

Authors Michael Trevisan and Tamara Walser have done a commendable job taking on these issues and addressing them in a thorough, well-documented contribution to the literature on EA.

What is EA? Trevisan and Walser conceptualize it as an evaluation approach, which they define as

the systematic investigation of program characteristics, context, activities, processes, implementation, outcomes, and logic to determine (a) the extent to which the theory of how the program is intended to work aligns with the program as it is implemented and perceived in the field, (b) the plausibility that the program will yield positive results as currently conceived and implemented, and (c) the feasibility of and best approaches for further evaluation of the program. (p. 14)

Who should read *Evaluability Assessment*? Ironically, the answer is not someone new to program evaluation. Since [Joseph Wholey \(1979\)](#) introduced the construct of EA as a precursor to undertaking an evaluation, it has been considered to be the first step, but this book definitely moves the concept of EA beyond that preliminary step of determining whether a program is ready for evaluation. Trevisan and Walser advocate the use of this book by students and faculty as “a supplemental text in an introductory program evaluation course, as a main text in an advanced evaluation course or seminar, and as resource for conducting EA projects ... including thesis and dissertation studies” (pp. ix–x). They also identify

Corresponding author: Dr. Sandra Sellick; sandra@sellick.org

their targeted readers as “evaluation practitioners,” “program administrators and policy makers,” “program officers at both government and private funding agencies,” and “evaluation trainers and staff developers” (p. x).

In my opinion, this book is not for novices in evaluation. It assumes prior knowledge of evaluation concepts even though it provides a list of key terms at the start of all but one of the chapters. The introduction of each term is relatively brief and there is no glossary, but there is a very comprehensive index.

One of the strengths of the book is that it provides a much needed new take on EA. A review of the reference list for the book indicates that 77% of the references are more than five years old (i.e., published before 2010). It is also a topic for Canadian evaluators to consider in relation to lessons learned and shared in their own practice because only one item in the reference list refers to an article published in the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* (Casebeer & Thurston, 1995). Trevisan and Walser do a credible job in describing the resurgence of EA in recent years and its purposes beyond being simply an evaluator's first step before embarking on an evaluation.

A second strength is the book's elegant design. Chapter 1 provides a short history of the evolution of EA. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between EA and program evaluation. The authors introduce a new, four-part EA model in Chapter 3, and a single part is explored in each of the next four chapters. The book concludes with a final chapter about what Trevisan and Walser refer to as “Additional Considerations.” This section comprises brief discussions suitable for more advanced discussions or seminars. Fifteen short case studies have been included in Chapters 4 through 8 to illustrate the concepts discussed. These case studies are drawn primarily from the fields of prekindergarten to postsecondary education and public health, but there are a couple of case studies from other sectors to add depth to the text.

As a textbook, the book is well structured. Each chapter includes a list of keywords and concepts near the beginning and ends with a chapter summary. Tables and figures are placed liberally throughout the book. One table that is particularly useful is located in Chapter 1. It provides an explicit comparison of four models of EA. Another table in the same chapter traces the history of EA development and use. This is excellent contextual information for students of EA.

The authors have used large exclamation marks in shaded boxes throughout the text to flag key concepts that they want to emphasize for their readers. Some of these are simple, such as “Stakeholder involvement is an essential element of EA” (p. 20) and “Protection of participants from any kind of harm is essential to the success of an EA” (p. 44). However, others are more nuanced, such as “Evaluation assessment fosters both findings use and process use” (p. 19) and “Our first recommendation is not to modify the EA” (p. 153). I see these statements as thoughts to explore through face-to-face class or forum discussions.

Readers outside the American context will find that some information flagged with exclamation marks may not be as relevant in their countries, as shown in this example: “The Government Performance and Results Act or GPRA is a key reason

for increased use of evaluability assessment at the federal level” (p. 8). However, these nation-specific references are few, and Canadian readers will be interested to see that Case Examples 10 and 15 are set in Canadian contexts.

A third strength is the connection made by the authors between EA and the standards published in *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994). Although a more recent version of this book has been published (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011), the underlying standards have endured. The Canadian Evaluation Society formally adopted the standards in 2012, and they have become an important part of current evaluation practice.

In the opinion of this reviewer, both authors are well qualified to present a timely new textbook on EA. Michael Trevisan completed his Ph.D. at Washington State University in 1990 and is currently Dean of the College of Education and Professor of Educational Psychology at that university. Tamara Walser completed her Ph.D. in Research and Evaluation at Utah State University in 2000. She is currently Director of Assessment and Evaluation, and Associate Professor of Educational Research and Leadership in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

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