

**Huey T. Chen. (2015). *Practical program evaluation: Theory-driven evaluation and the integrated evaluation perspective* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 443 pages.**

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**Reviewed by Michele Tarsilla**

When I first read the title of this book, I was not quite sure what to expect. I was initially tempted to believe that this would be one of those ordinary evaluation textbooks providing an overview of some of today's most commonly used evaluation approaches and methods. However, my first impression quickly dissipated once I looked more carefully at both the author's name and the book subtitle. First, the book's author, Huey Chen, is a well-respected figure within the evaluation community. His articles and books on theory-driven and bottom-up evaluation approaches have always been popular, as attested by the number of awards conferred on him by several professional associations. In addition, the "integrated evaluation perspective" mentioned in the book's subtitle spurred my interest, at a time when the adoption of holistic and systemic approaches seems to be the key to address many of the issues that we evaluators encounter in our day-to-day work. My new expectation that, by reading the book, I would learn tricks of the trade to "make it all come together" then encouraged me to delve into it with great enthusiasm.

Through a cursory glance at the book's table of contents (a total of 411 pages divided into 15 chapters), I quickly gathered that, following a review of the fundamentals of program evaluation and a quick presentation of evaluation program theory (Part I), I would learn not only about approaches and tools to help stakeholders develop a program plan (Part II) but also about implementation evaluation (Part III), and program monitoring and outcome evaluation (Part IV). I was glad, too, to find out that toward the end of the book (Part V), I would be exposed to an in-depth analysis of some cutting-edge evaluation topics, including bottom-up evaluation and dissemination approaches as well as strengths and limitations of formal and stakeholder theories. After gaining a better understanding of what I was in for in reviewing this book, I started reading its first few chapters and ended up completing them all in less than four days. After taking a couple of extra days to digest and think about the thought-provoking ideas featured in the book, I can assert with confidence that Chen's new book is indeed worth a read for four main reasons.

First, I found it both inspiring and refreshing that the author is constantly trying to improve some of the most popular contemporary evaluation paradigms by

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testing and questioning some of their basic assumptions. In his effort to go beyond the limitations of the classic distinction between formative and summative evaluation (Scriven, 1967), for instance, Chen makes two important alternative sets of distinction: first, between constructive and conclusive evaluation and then, within this initial categorization, between process and outcome evaluation. Overall, the development of these four categories is theoretically appealing as it addresses a hiatus in evaluation theory and definitely paves the way for further work in this area. However, and this is one of the few critiques that I have about this book, such effort to “label” current evaluation practices according to this new categorization has its own limits, too. For instance, when I got to Chapter 7 and learned more about the corollaries of such distinction in terms of actual evaluation practices and methods, I found the explanation a bit intricate and difficult to retain. In particular, my concern in this area is double-fold. On the one hand, I am afraid that evaluation students might get confused vis-à-vis such hyper-sophistication of a simpler argument (i.e., the classic separation between formative and summative evaluation is a bit spurious as there are formative evaluations that indeed play a summative function, by yielding information that informs the closing or further replication of a given component/activity of a program). On the other hand, I suspect that more seasoned evaluators, although intrigued by Chen’s innovative categorization, might find it challenging to give up their methodological creativity and adopt the list of specific practices meticulously organized by Chen as a function not only of each one of the four categories discussed above but also of each one of the specific project planning stages to which any evaluation is expected to contribute. In this vein, some of the tables presented in the book (e.g., Table 2.1), whose primary intention is to serve as a practical aid to evaluation professionals, might risk becoming a bit too prescriptive.

Second, I particularly appreciated Chen’s constant preoccupation with the inclusion of context-related analysis and stakeholders’ views into evaluation planning, implementation, and dissemination. One of Chen’s most popular arguments is that there is indeed a viable strategy that could be adopted to address the tension between what he calls “scientific credibility” and “stakeholder credibility” (pp. 22–23). On the one hand, scientific credibility is driven by technical rigour and conformity to the dominating scientific orthodoxy (e.g., promoting the conduct of randomized controlled trials and high-powered studies as well as the dissemination of effect sizes and statistically significant results). On the other hand, stakeholder credibility, which somehow reminds me of the assumptions behind face validity (Nevo, 1985), is grounded on the principle that those who participate directly in an intervention (be they implementers or direct intended beneficiaries) or who live in proximity to it (members of the community where the intervention takes place) often have better knowledge than researchers, not only of what works (including why and how this is the case) but also of how to measure it. A fervid supporter of well-structured and well-reasoned participatory evaluation approaches, Chen even goes further than many of his predecessors and talks about “stakeholders’ theory-based evaluation.” This is a pretty radically new

concept, as the more commonly used expression “theory-based evaluation” is normally associated with evaluations based on scientifically tested theories, such as Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977) or Fishbein and Ajzen’s Reasoned Action Theory (1975).

Third, I found it very useful that Chen, instead of simply presenting two different and opposite sides of any given theoretical or methodological evaluation issue, always strives to suggest a possible way out of any existing conundrum. Chen’s *integrated evaluation perspective* is a perfect illustration of that, and so is his *holistic effectuality evaluation approach*, which builds upon the real-world evaluation approach (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012) and aims to solve the tension between the experimentation evaluation approach (associated with the randomized-controlled trials movement) and the nonexperimental exploratory approach. In line with his effort to rehabilitate the role of participatory approaches in both well-structured planning and evaluation, Chen also proposes a framework of credible evidence that aims to become complementary—and not alternative at all costs—to the experimentation evaluation approach: the *cogency model for evaluative evidence*, founded on three main principles (effectuality, viability, and transferability). Likewise, Chen goes beyond the traditional distinction between a theory of change and a logic model and suggests a closer operationally relevant link between them by putting forward two relevant concepts that borrow from the theory of action and the theory of change (Funnell & Rogers, 2011): the *action model* and the *change model*. On the one hand, the action model, aimed at clarifying what will be done during the intervention and how, is not simply a visual description of the implementation strategy (as is the case for the results chain) but rather a rich representation of six factors—either inherent or peripheral to the implementation—that greatly influence the intervention results: (a) implementing organizations, (b) implementers, (c) community partners and associate organizations, (d) ecological context, (e) intervention and service delivery protocols, and (f) target population. On the other hand, the change model, made up of three main components (intervention, determinants, and outcomes), clarifies the causal link existing among them and helps identifying *ex ante* any incongruence in the way the intended results are expected to manifest themselves.

Fourth, Chen shares in-depth reflections on evaluation topics that have not yet been discussed thoroughly in many other popular evaluation textbooks. Due to my recent work with Michael Bamberger on unintended results of development interventions, I got quite excited to read Chapter 11 (and the whole fourth section of the book), as it explains to readers how to uncover interventions’ unexpected results during an evaluation endeavour and even how to identify them *ex ante* by integrating stakeholders’ theories into program design and evaluation. Similarly, I particularly enjoyed reading Chapter 13 (*What to do if your logic model does not work well as expected*), as I found Chen’s discussion on the shortcomings of the logic model, always supported by a list of pertinent cases, a very enriching one. Furthermore, I found Chapter 7 quite memorable, as it thoroughly assesses the construct of fidelity, which most evaluators tend to associate only with implemen-

tation, by also demonstrating that a conclusive process evaluation (one of the four main types of evaluation approaches, according to his original categorization) could focus on many other forms of fidelity, such as referral fidelity, target population fidelity, and service delivery fidelity.

In conclusion, I found this book a very enjoyable and useful read that caters quite well to a variety of audiences. Although the book is expected to provide less seasoned evaluators and evaluation students with a better understanding of practical evaluation approaches and tools, it is the mid-level and more experienced evaluators who I believe are going to benefit the most from reading it. As it is hard not to recognize the innovative thinking permeating the whole book and Chen's thought-provoking reframing of certain classic evaluation paradigms, I am not suggesting that novice evaluators should not read this work, though. What I would like to recommend instead is that evaluation students and less seasoned evaluators read such a dense and extensive piece of work after becoming familiar with the content of a more foundational and less questioning or argumentative textbook on evaluation. Far from being a book for evaluators only, I am also confident that this second edition of the book would be an enriching and gratifying read for several planning specialists, especially those with a keen interest in facilitation and participatory evaluation approaches.

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