

Donaldson, S. I., Christie, C. A., & Mark, M. M. (2015). *Credible and actionable evidence: The foundations for rigorous and influential evaluations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN 978-1-4833-0625-4.

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A fundamental issue facing evaluators, particularly new evaluators, is how to attend to quality within one's craft. Through coursework and on-the-fly training, new evaluators strive for proficiency in current evaluative practice, but may fail to position this learning within a bigger picture of the "how" and "why" of what evaluators do. This book invites readers to consider deeply and critically the many factors impacting evidence quality—including how one can promote accurate and meaningful evaluation use.

OVERVIEW

As a whole, the book is a call to expand the contemporary concept of evidence in evaluation beyond one determined solely by method choice. The authors demonstrate the theoretical need for such an expanded focus and discuss how various methods impact evidence credibility. Taken together, the chapters facilitate a renewed examination of the concept of evaluation evidence and lay the groundwork for translating this call into action.

Part I provides a primer on the debate surrounding the definition and operationalization of quality in evaluation. The introduction addresses the history of the debate (Chapter 1, Donaldson), the nature of quality relative to the philosophy of science (Chapter 2, Christie/Fleischer), and "peripheral factors" impacting judgements of credibility (Chapter 3, Miller). The theoretical foundation offered in Part I positions evidence quality relative to context, research questions, stakeholder values, and guidelines for evaluation (utility, feasibility, accuracy, and propriety). Because credibility must be established with respect to the impact (p. 28) and influence (p. 41) of an evaluation, "peripheral factors" above and beyond "the facts" influence credibility judgements. Thus, evaluators can provide rigorous and influential evaluations (p. 23) by considering critically the relevant factors impacting evidence generation and use.

Part II focuses on experimental designs, specifically the strengths and limitations of the randomized controlled trial (RCT) design. An illustration

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of the political backstory surrounding RCTs (Chapter 4, Henry) is followed by a discussion of susceptibilities, practical issues, credibility, and causality related to RCTs (Chapter 5, Bickman/Reich). The section concludes with an explanation of causal concepts and underlying logic, myths, and alternative designs (Chapter 6, Scriven). Some in the field consider RCTs the “gold standard”—the most credible design for establishing causality. While RCTs are tremendously feasible research designs (Chapter 4), they are susceptible to numerous threats (i.e., generalizability, practical considerations, ethical concerns). Besides, not all research questions can be informed by experimental designs. Therefore, judging research credibility cannot be without consideration of contextual information: the purpose of the study, the research questions, and details regarding what evidence is generated, how it is generated, and for whom it is generated (Chapter 5).

In Part III the focus shifts to the use of qualitative methods for producing credible and actionable evidence (Chapter 7, Rallis), delving into how nonwritten artifacts (i.e., images) may serve as credible evidence (Chapter 8, Mathison). Finally, evaluation synthesis is described as a methodology for answering evaluation questions with the intent of maximizing the perceived credibility of findings (Chapter 9, Chelimsky). After scrutinizing credibility in experimental designs, Part III argues that the potential for evidence to be credible and actionable concerns more than methodology. Evidence quality results from the ethical and rigorous application of methods in alignment with the purpose of the evaluation in such a way that the reasoning behind method selection is transparent (pp. 137–138). Analysis of the use of images as evidence demonstrates that “any evidence may be credible, truthful, and useful” (p. 174), given sufficient alignment between the evidence and the evaluation questions and criteria. Overall, Part III makes the case that methodological credibility is merely one facet of credible evaluative evidence (p. 181) and that evaluators should be mindful of how additional factors, such as evidence presentation (p. 184), can influence perceived credibility.

Part IV broadens the discussion by highlighting nonmethodological factors impacting evidence, followed by a discussion of context-dependent relationships and interactions affecting credibility (Chapter 10, Greene), five dimensions of context (Chapter 11, Julnes/Rog), and the importance of a practical orientation (Chapter 12, Schwandt). The final chapter (Chapter 13, Mark) offers a thematic synthesis and framework for attending to evidence quality. While Parts II and III focus on evidence credibility, Part IV elaborates evidence actionability and provides practical guidance for evaluators. Actionability comprises four criteria (credibility, inferential potency, relevance, and comprehensiveness of evidence) and should impact method selection (Figure 13.1, p. 279). Many aspects of context and tiers of processes influence these four criteria (Figure 13.2, p. 288), establishing a “threshold of actionability” for deciding to act in response to evidence. The text concludes by offering a 7-step process for addressing evidence quality and suggesting further research studies.

RELEVANCE

The authors make a case for advancing the credibility dialogue beyond discussion of methods to a more nuanced interrogation of factors impacting evidence quality. The overarching idea is that rigorous methods used to generate information are necessary but insufficient to ensure quality—other factors matter. Further, because evaluations inform real-world situations, deference to methodological purity and a detached researcher mentality is not possible. Instead, the evaluator must recognize that “all evaluation is *interested* evaluation, serving some interests but not others” (Greene, 2006, p.135). To create high-quality, useful information, evaluators must navigate responsively rather than follow plans rigidly, must recognize values rather than adhere to technical processes, and must negotiate options rather than dictate the meaning of results.

The discussion of experimental and nonexperimental approaches highlights the specific role of evaluators in addressing context, stakeholder plurality, and diverse information needs throughout the entirety of an evaluation. Though evaluators are not necessarily experts in the content of the programs they serve, they are regarded as experts in the use of methodologies for doing evaluation. Thus the evaluator has an obligation to educate their client apropos which modes of inquiry best facilitate gathering and examining evidence, given the context and aims of the evaluation. In assuming this responsibility, evaluators shoulder the additional obligation of staying abreast of contemporary developments and discussions in the field of evaluation methodology. By giving a thorough treatment of contemporary views around the production of evaluation evidence by leaders in the field, this volume presents practicing evaluators a strong defense against the normative pressure to use a methodology not because of its ability to generate useful findings in the context at hand, but because of opinions and assumptions about the general value or rigour of certain methods over others. The book presents a strong case for method selection based on the needs and capacities of the evaluation context, as opposed to method selection based on decontextualized assumptions about the general strength or utility of one method compared to another.

CONTRIBUTION

Overall, this book provides a valuable resource for various audiences. For *students*, the text offers an opportunity to contemplate the purposes and implications of evaluation, the myths and misunderstandings within the field, and the role of evaluators in contemporary society. *Instructors* will find this text a useful tool for introducing students to the field. Readings will acquaint students with key issues in evaluation and will engage students in critical analysis of ontological, epistemological, and practical factors impacting evidence quality throughout evaluation design, implementation, and use. The text offers *practitioners* an analysis of credibility in light of various considerations and sound guidance on how to select those methods that yield credible and actionable evidence in context. Furthermore, it prompts practitioners to engage in careful thinking about evaluation assumptions

and encourages readers to embrace a broader, more holistic consideration of the concept of evidence in evaluation.

REFERENCE

- Greene, J. C. (2006). Evaluation, democracy, and social change. In I. F. Shaw, J. C. Greene, & M. M. Mark (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Evaluation* (pp. 119–140). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848608078.n5>