Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

Chris Fox, Robert Grimm, and Rute Caldeira. (2017). *An Introduction to Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. 305 pages. (ISBN: 978-1-4739-0286-2)

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An Introduction to Evaluation represents an important contribution to the introductory evaluation literature because of two strengths: first, its practical focus, and second, its focus on what may be called emerging topics. Before discussing these contributions, I will briefly present the order of topics in the text.

The text is divided under five principal headings: Part I, Getting Started; Part II, Undertaking an Evaluation; Part III, The Practice of Evaluation; Part IV, Using Evaluation Findings; and Part V, Evaluation Paradigms, including a concluding chapter that synthesizes the main themes of the book. Each chapter features a summary of its content, and a glossary of key terms appears at the end of the book. A little section at the outset offers useful guidance on how to use the book for everything from planning an evaluation to bridging the gulf between evaluation findings and the world of policy and program delivery.

Chapter 1 addresses the question of how evaluation should be characterized as a domain of theory and practice. The authors distinguish evaluation from related forms of activity, such as monitoring and audit, and offer a brief history of evaluation. What ultimately distinguishes evaluation, the authors contend, is the judgment of value. Following this rather philosophical chapter, Chapter 2 explores ethics in evaluation. Wherever human beings interact, as they do in evaluations, questions of rights and duties inevitably arise. The topic of ethics and professionalism has been taken up recently by leading figures in the field, such as Thomas Schwandt (e.g., 2013), so it is only fitting that it appear in an introductory text.

Chapter 3 offers a new and interesting look at an old question: How should we connect program elements—core activities and outputs—to the intended program outcome or impact? The authors argue that traditional approaches, logic models for instance, tend to run aground on the reality of change. They propose an alternative approach called the theory of change (TOC). TOC acknowledges two pivotal dimensions of change: complexity and emergence. It thus furnishes a more realistic approach to picturing the relationship between a program and its intended impact.

Chapters 4 to 6 deal with general types of evaluation: process, impact, and economic. Students of evaluation will recognize the first two; economic evaluation, however, is not standard fare in introductory texts. The authors review the

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principal approaches: cost effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis, and social return on investment. Each encompasses its own panoply of analytical methods, not to mention its own attendant subtleties. Ours is an era in which economics enjoys professional hegemony in the social sciences, so it is only prudent that evaluators be acquainted with economic evaluation.

Among the truly daunting aspects of evaluation, especially for students and novice practitioners, is the sheer number and complexity of evaluative methods. Chapter 7 describes many of the tools of the trade, as well as their respective advantages and limitations. The authors urge evaluators to resist the temptation of omniscience: No one can master all methods; no one should pretend as much.

Chapter 8 gives special emphasis to planning evaluations with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, program funders, and service users. Chapter 9 offers practical advice on getting evaluations done. Evaluations are themselves projects, and project management can help evaluators deliver on time and on budget, seldom an easy task. It too comes with its own methods of planning, costing, and monitoring. A word to the wise is in order here: Just because we can track everything does not mean that we should.

Chapter 10 on systematic reviews is particularly instructive. Such reviews provide a methodical approach to navigating the vast and often turbulent sea of evaluation research. The authors differentiate systematic reviews from other, more casual approaches to reviewing and assessing prior research results. The chapter addresses the challenges and benefits of systematic review as a means of ensuring that evaluative questions and issues are understood within the broader context of the research tradition. This method is relatively new to evaluation.

Evaluators have long lamented that much of their work ends up in administrative limbo and thus void of impact. Chapter 11 argues that submitting evaluative reports, formative or summative, is not enough to circumvent this fate. Knowledge, the authors contend, must be mobilized, especially in what they call polarized contexts. In other words, we cannot simply assume that the evaluation audience will share or understand the dedication to rationality that characterizes evaluation as an intellectual discipline. The point seems quite significant at a time when anti-rationalist tendencies are evident. Mobilizing knowledge means adopting practices that improve evaluation impact. The authors recommend, among other steps, engaging evaluation beneficiaries, translating research findings in an idiom appropriate to the “policy context,” and encouraging ownership of results among policymakers.

Chapter 12 elucidates three rival paradigms of evaluation as a domain of theory and practice: post-positivism, responsive constructivism, and scientific realism, each of which is sketched out in some detail. Selecting one paradigm over another, the authors point out, has direct implications on the choice of evaluation approaches and methods. Philosophical choices, in short, have practical consequences.

This discussion of paradigms takes us back to Chapter 2, which deals with a different kind of philosophical issue, the issue of evaluation ethics, mentioned

earlier. Although the topic belongs in an introductory text, it seems poorly placed in the second chapter. The discussion of ethics would, I believe, have more context, and thus more of a grip on practice, if it were placed toward the end of the book, alongside the other philosophical topic of paradigms.

In conclusion, *An Introduction to Evaluation* is a text for our time, reflecting many of the issues and questions that practicing evaluators face in the here and now. Reading the book will provide the reader with a rich sense of the diverse skills and competencies, not to mention the innumerable methods and approaches that an evaluator needs to bring to the task of evaluation.

REFERENCE

[Schwandt, Thomas. \(2013\).](#) *Evaluation foundations revisited: Cultivating a life of mind for practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.