

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Evaluation: A Systematic Approach

by Peter H. Rossi, Mark W. Lipsey, and Howard E. Freeman
(7th ed.; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2004, 469 pages)

Program evaluation has its historical roots in the 17th century, becoming more fully entrenched at all levels of government and nongovernmental organizations and agencies by the 21st century. It uses social research methods to study social interventions that address social issues. Its lofty goals are to make judgments about the value of these interventions as well as modify social policies, practices, and programs designed to improve the human condition.

The central purpose of Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman's revised comprehensive edition is to extend coverage of previous editions and concurrently elaborate on critical issues. These are many and detailed: Chapter 7 discusses outcome measurement and monitoring, Chapter 8 examines the impact of randomized field experiments, Chapter 9 explores assessment of alternative designs, Chapter 10 looks at analysis of program effects and meta-analysis, and Chapter 11 discusses measurement of efficiency. In addition, the authors never lose sight of the theme of the book, which is to provide an introduction to the field of program evaluation for those who want to learn how to conduct program evaluations.

As well, five domains contributing to an evaluation framework are outlined and expanded in the 12 chapters of the book. The framework includes identifying issues, formulating questions, and assessing the need for a program in Chapters 3 and 4; evaluating program design and program theory in Chapter 5; assessing program process, implementation, and service delivery systems in Chapter 6; determining programs impact and/or outcomes in Chapter 7; and examining programs efficiency in Chapter 11 (i.e., cost-benefit analyses). Further, a discussion of social science research methods, whose purposes are to produce valid, reliable, credible, defensible evidence to make decisions and judgments about social interventions, includes information on systematic observation, measurement, sampling, research design, and data analysis.

Evaluation is not only a social science but also a human endeavour; it is more art than science because one of its aims is to meet the goals of program decision makers and stakeholders. Thus, understanding the social context of evaluation (Chapter 12), including its politics, is imperative. Evaluators are often in the precarious role of balancing competing factors and inherent tensions in the field and making judgments about the results of evaluation to meet the needs of the many stakeholders. As well, constraints on human and non-human resources

require funders to choose where to allocate scarce resources in order to demonstrate the worth of programs and/or to dismantle ineffective and inefficient programs. An evaluation plan thus requires negotiating among competing forces, including optimizing the situation for research purposes; minimizing disruption to program delivery routines; providing useful information that the political context, program constraints, and resources allow; and interpreting results for benefits among competing stakeholders. Evaluators must balance between emphasizing procedures that facilitate valid and reliable findings and those that are timely, meaningful, and useful to consumers. Trade-offs are often required as utility for decision-makers and scientific rigour compete with the advancement of knowledge about social interventions.

Another often-overlooked critical aspect of evaluation is program theory (or logic model, program model, outcome line, cause map, or action theory). Program theory consists of three interrelated components—the service utilization plan, impact theory or cause and effect sequence of the program activities, and the program's organizational plan (see Chapters 5 and 6). Program theory assessment often entails evaluating the often-implicit understandings of the feasible, plausible, and defensible description of the conception, assumptions, goals, objectives, and expectations that constitute the rationale, structure, and operation of programs designed to improve the social conditions of target audiences.

Finally, as well as providing knowledge to understand and conduct evaluations, the book is replete with the authors' hands-on experiences in conducting evaluations, including numerous examples, case studies, chapter summaries, and definitions of key concepts. There is also a glossary and an extensive reference list. Although the context is American, the content crosses all borders. Those who conduct evaluation, commission it, and consume it will want to own this book. Students from various disciplines engaged in the study of evaluation, professional evaluators, practitioners, policy makers, program planners, those who administer and manage human service programs, and administrators will find this a highly readable, useful, and invaluable text that covers all the evaluation bases and more. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* provides sufficient knowledge of evaluation concepts and methods for judging what kinds of evaluations are appropriate for programs and for understanding the results of evaluation studies. The authors point out, however, that although studying evaluation is critical to effective practice, there is no substitute for experience.

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