

Effectiveness of Empowerment Evaluation Approach in Community Programs

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Abstract

With evident growth in the popularity and credibility of stakeholders' involvement approaches to inquiry, it is increasingly important to consider ways to advance the field along theoretical and practical lines. Empowerment approaches in evaluation are increasingly recognized as important in the development evaluation as well as the evaluation contexts in developed countries. Although considerable literature has been published concerning the efficacy and legitimacy of the empowerment evaluation (EE) approach, little documentation exists regarding the empirical application of this approach. There is therefore need for a systematic evaluation of the empowerment evaluation process to investigate the extent of its contribution to the program's success. This paper discusses the results of an evaluation conducted to explore recent empirical literature on application of empowerment evaluation approach in community-based programs. The review was guided by two objectives, namely; (1) To examine the extent to which empowerment evaluation leads to self evaluation of community programs and (2) To identify research gaps in the existing literature on EE'. The authors purposefully located and reviewed five recent empirical studies and used them to elaborate on the topic of study. A desk review study was used to critically review the articles adherence to the principles of the evaluation model. Results indicated that stakeholders were empowered to conduct their own evaluation from the evaluation skills and knowledge gained during their close interaction with the evaluation experts. Follow-up evaluations confirmed stakeholders self determination to evaluate their own performance. The paper therefore concludes that, notwithstanding social bias emanating from self reporting procedures, EE can be used to foster program improvement and develop self determination and therefore recommends its adoption by community social programs..

Keywords: Empowerment Evaluation, Monitoring, and Evaluation, community participation

1. Introduction

While the concept of Evaluation Empowerment is not new, its actual adoption in community programs has fallen short in comparison. Program evaluation is one of the many roles community psychologists may assume in their work with organizations and communities. Although there are many theoretical approaches to conducting program evaluation, participatory methods, such as empowerment evaluation, may be especially useful to community psychologists. Consistent with the values of community psychology, participatory evaluation emphasizes collaboration, capacity building, empowerment, and community development.

In contrast to traditional methods of evaluation whereby evaluators often function independently, participatory methods favor shared power, control, and decision making. Multiple stakeholder groups are brought together to plan and conduct an evaluation. The voices and perspectives of program staff shape all aspects of the evaluation, from design to utilization. Empowerment evaluation is a specific participatory evaluation approach whereby the evaluator provides training and consultation to program staff so that they can conduct their own evaluations. The programs--not the evaluator--own and control the evaluation. Empowerment evaluation seeks to build capacity within organizations and promote social change.

The parallels between community psychology and empowerment evaluation are striking. Community psychologists and empowerment evaluators try to make their values explicit. In empowerment evaluation, value is placed on empowering organizations through information and skills that can be learned by conducting evaluation. Indeed, Fetterman (1996, 2001a) has drawn empowerment research from community psychology in his articulation of this alternative evaluation method. Fetterman (2002) argues that the techniques of evaluation must be shared with organizations to build their evaluation capacity.

1.1 Background to Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment evaluation is an evaluation approach that was introduced by David Fetterman in 1993 (Miller & Campbell, 2006) during the American Evaluation Association conference. Its primary aim is “to help people help themselves” (Fetterman, 1996, p.5). Thus, it endeavors to improve existing policies and programs, in addition to providing capacity and skills for community growth. Empowerment evaluation can essentially be classified as a model which falls within the realm of Critical-emancipatory approaches to programme evaluation (Potter, 1999) since it aims to challenge the status quo via its recognition of social problems.

Empowerment evaluation was initially defined as ‘the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination’ (Fetterman, 1996, p.4). Other scholars have added their understanding on the same. Wandersman et al (2005, p.28) defines empowerment evaluation as an evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by:

- a) providing stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and
- b) Mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization.

Programme participants are encouraged to perform their own evaluations with the assistance, guidance and coaching of the evaluator (Fetterman, 1996). Essentially, it involves group cooperation. It does not overtly empower any particular group but rather teaches skills to foster self-empowerment. In essence, it is democratic (Fetterman, 1996) since it encourages active participation in the evaluation process and provides a platform for discussing relevant concerns.

Furthermore, it aims to alter the evaluation context. Thus, the assessment of the programs worth is not the final stage (Fetterman, 1996). This is because the merit of a programme is fluid and will change as the context transforms over time. Programme participants develop evaluation skills and learn to critically appraise their progress continually through the evaluator’s supervision and training (Fetterman, 1996). Thus, philosophically, self-determination is intended to be a fundamental outcome keystone of this approach (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007).

1.2 Ten principles of empowerment evaluation

Wandersman et al (2005) identified ten principles that aim to guide empowerment evaluation practices and form a conceptual framework. These are: Improvement, Organizational Learning, Community Ownership, Inclusion, Democratic participation, Social Justice, Community knowledge, Evidence-based strategies, Capacity building, and Accountability. These principles are suggested to be associated with the process of an empowerment evaluation (Miller & Campbell, 2006). These principles are essential means for guiding empowerment evaluations.

- a) **Improvement.** This means that through empowerment techniques, the evaluator aims to help the programme (beneficiaries and other stakeholders) achieve positive and/or successful outcomes as decided by the relevant stakeholders
- b) **Organizational learning** augments improvement if there is both a process and a structure to facilitate learning. In order for organizational learning to effectively occur, the environment must be receptive to transformation and be committed to engage in long-term solutions through systematic inquiry into consequential changes in order to promote new knowledge through problem-solving
- c) **Community ownership** refers to the democratic principle that the community has the right to make decisions about actions that affect their lives. The underlying rationale is that an evaluation will be most beneficial to a community where it enables them take command of choices which affect them
- d) **Inclusion**, in this instance, is the invitation and encouragement of legitimate stakeholders. participation in terms of decisions to be made

- e) Democratic participation is based on the premise that with appropriate access to information, relevant stakeholders are able to make rational, informed decisions about what action needs to be taken. Thus, in order for this to be attained, deliberation and genuine collaboration are crucial activities which need to occur during the evaluation process. Additionally, the democratic ideals of fairness, due process, and transparency are also vital
- f) Social Justice implies a commitment to just and equitable distribution of resources, prospects, responsibilities, and authority. Empowerment evaluators need to recognize that societal inequalities are present in many contexts and it is their role to help restructure these conditions and improve the lives of communities
- g) Community knowledge in empowerment evaluation relates to the recognition that information known by relevant stakeholders is valuable and useful and should be shared because it is an essential resource. Thus, the evaluator should develop a variety of methods to uncover, validate, disseminate, and alter knowledge within the evaluation context.
- h) Evidence-based strategies. Empowerment evaluation values evidence-based strategies. Accordingly, empirical information is viewed as an important source for developing interventions to address community needs; although such strategies should not be employed without considering the contextual issues within the community
- i) Capacity building is one of the main aims of empowerment evaluation. The goal is to enhance stakeholders' abilities to conduct their own evaluations in order to improve programme development and execution. This principle enhances the mainstreaming of evaluation and demystifies the process. Consequently, the evaluator's involvement will decrease over time as community's capacities are enhanced.
- j) Accountability. Through gathering information on the program's processes, results-based accountability can be achieved. Thus, programme staff can be held responsible for their plans and actions in terms of self-driven evaluations.

1.3 Five facets of empowerment evaluation

The five facets of empowerment evaluation include the following features: Training, Illumination, Facilitation, Advocacy, and Liberation. These concepts are intended to be outcome-based principles (Miller & Campbell, 2006) and they shall be described below.

- a) Training is the first facet. It involves teaching stakeholders to conduct their own evaluations with the intention of promoting self-reliance (Fetterman, 1996). The underlying rationale is that doing so should explicate the evaluation process. The end-goal is to promote the use of evaluation methodology and principles for future programme development (Fetterman, 1996).
- b) Illumination refers to the idea that the processes, techniques, and the underlying philosophy of evaluation are revealed to stakeholders since they are regarded as active scholars in empowerment evaluations (Fetterman, 1996).
- c) Facilitation relates to the role the evaluator plays. The evaluator aims to coach, guide and supervise stakeholders in evaluation techniques and teach them evaluation processes (Fetterman, 1996). The main motivation is to empower individuals and organizations so that they can begin to utilize evaluation in the long run especially with respect to important programme decisions (Fetterman, 1996).
- d) Advocacy relates to the evaluator's role to allow programme personnel to decide on the nature and purpose of the evaluation (Fetterman, 1996). Additionally, since program personnel are assumed to be capable of rational decision-making that they should determine their own solutions through active participation and social transformation (Fetterman, 1996).
- e) Finally, Liberation relates to the progression of stakeholder empowerment. Through the philosophies underpinning empowerment evaluations, programme personnel should develop new capacities and skills to allow them to redefine their future roles and objectives (Fetterman, 1996). Thus, empowerment evaluation can be viewed as a resource for programme personnel to improve their lives in the long-run.

1.4 Steps for empowerment evaluation

Fetterman (1996) suggests a few steps that can be useful when conducting an empowerment evaluation. It is worth noting that these steps act as a guide for evaluators but not the only means for conducting empowerment evaluation.

1. The first is taking stock of the program. This includes determining the program's current position in light of its strong points and its limitations.
2. The second suggestion put forward is establishing goals in relation to future outcomes that are geared toward program improvement (Fetterman, 1996).
3. Thirdly, selecting and developing strategies to enable programme personnel to achieve their desired outcomes.
4. Finally, deciding on the kinds of documentation programme personnel would need to produce in order to monitor progress and eventual outcomes (Fetterman, 1996).

2. Theoretical Framework

Over the past two decades, several evaluation researchers have studied the adoption of new evaluation model. As a result, theories have been built on the adoption and the intention-to-adopt the innovation. One important theory that has greatly informed the extent to which a new innovation is accepted by the users is innovation diffusion theory by Rogers (1973) who proposes that, for an innovation (new idea) to diffuse in the existing system, it should be of relative advantage, simple and easy to use and that its results must be observable to attract the population concerned. The adoption of innovation work of Rodgers (2003) focuses primarily on product-related issues (perceptions) about innovations.

Although many studies used Rogers' theory as their theoretical framework, few studies among them have considered evaluation models for self evaluation (Isleem, 2003). Using Rogers' diffusion theory, Blankenship (1998) employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods in studying the factors that were related to computer use by instructors in teaching. From the findings, faculty attitudes toward using computer-based technology, support, resources, and training were the selected factors needed to use these technologies effectively.

Less' (2003) quantitative research study used Rogers' (1995) diffusion of innovations theory to investigate faculty adoption of computer technology for instruction in the North Carolina Community College System. Anderson et al. (1998) studied the attitudes, skills, and behaviors of the faculty members related to their IT use at a large Canadian research university. Based on Roger's (1995) two major adopter categories, they defined the faculty members as "earlier adopters" and "mainstream faculty" and provided strategies for reducing the gap between these two groups.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose and Methodology

The study systematically reviewed empirical literature on relationship of empowerment evaluation and program improvement in order to have a clear portrait of the scientific contribution on the topic constructs. Two objectives were pursued through the review study namely: (a) To examine the extent to which E.E leads to improvement of community programs and (b) To identify research gaps in the existing literature on E.E. The study applied a desk review method to critically review five articles on empirical studies on E.E. The five articles were purposefully selected guided by the research key terms; Empowerment Evaluation, Adoption and Self Evaluation all derived from the study topic. The key objective was to study empowerment evaluation adoption as the independent variable and self evaluation as the dependent variable.

3.2 Study Participants.

The case studies included in the reviewed articles used samples that varied in size having been sampled through diverse methods. Census sampling and non probabilistic technique especially purposeful reined the sampling procedures with only one case study that simple randomly selected the participations team. In all the case studies participants were the program staff and the technical assistants (external evaluators).

3.3 Research design

The articles reviewed were either single or multiple case studies. Most of the case studies in all the five articles reviewed applied both qualitative and qualitative approaches, integrating several evaluation designs .Longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys were prominently used across the case studies. Related studies (Taut (2008) suggested use of experiment design in which a treatment or variable is manipulated under controlled circumstances to assess its impact on an outcome of interest. This would provide credible answers to causal questions.

Majority of the case studied in the articles on review utilized survey questionnaires, interviews, and observation to extract data from the participants. Self reported data of survey and interviews are open to bias and thus invalid and incredible results. Data collection instrument triangulation would minimize biased related flaws. Common themes like training, incentives, and organizational support were analyzed thematically while percentages and tables were used to analyze survey items. Studies looked at EE as interaction between stakeholders and evaluators ie. General involvement in evaluation planning, implementing, and reporting of the evaluation results.

4. Findings

Most of the case studies in the reviewed articles reported multiple results and displayed a reasonable level of diversity with respect to their sample and methods, as well as the constructs they examined and how they measured them. A summary of the overall findings are indicated below:

1. The study review of the state of the empirical research on empowerment evaluation approach observed a body of work that is far more limited than desirable, use of fairly simple designs and data collection methods, and occurrence mostly in a few professions or disciplines like health discipline.
2. An inductive analysis of interview data indicated that stakeholders felt that their participation in evaluation contributed to increasing their perception of self-efficacy within the organization and had enabled them to acquire new evaluation related skills and information.
3. The findings confirmed that evaluators were engaged in teaching/coaching the stakeholders to conduct their own evaluations which according to the findings left them more self sufficient. This credits the evaluation for its adherence to EE principles of building the capacity of the stakeholders which indeed demystifies evaluation for organizations to internalize evaluation principles and practices, making it an integral part of program planning.
4. For the groups involved in evaluation, there was enhanced group cohesion as well as recognition which well tallied with Whitmore (2000) suggestions that stakeholders should gain knowledge, training, experience, and insights critical to the technical aspects of conducting program evaluations.
5. Stakeholders reported increased credibility with the organization interest, usefulness, and confidence.
6. Stakeholders and evaluators shared and appreciated each other's knowledge and expertise.
7. Evaluators utilized a variety of designs with persistence of case study design which paved way for results biasness.
8. Positive outcomes of involving diverse stakeholder groups were reported including obtaining input from those directly in the projects, inclusion of a variety of views and prioritization of issues based on stakeholders' perspectives.
9. In one of the reviewed study, the stakeholders reported the lowest or no involvement in identifying evaluation planning team members, writing evaluation reports and analyzing data which led to disempowering effects in perceived lack of outcomes.

5. Discussion

The results obtained closely met the expectations of the authors as per the stated objectives. Majority of the stakeholders across the articles reviewed confirmed the effectiveness of the EE approach. On whether the EE approach results were being used for program improvement, the overall answer was affirmative. Of the five critically reviewed empirical studies, none reported contrary results from the evaluations' objectives.

6. Lesson Learned

The literature reviewed revealed some ne knowledge in that Empowerment Evaluation is designed to contribute to sustainability, because it puts evaluation tools in the hands of community members thus enabling them to continue to monitor and assess their performance. It also helps people maximize their potential;

By involving stakeholders' participation from the beginning through until the end of the evaluation process, it could reduce strong opposition since the public could be involved before the decision has been made; resolve conflict and lessen anger among them; and, enhance the trust and credibility of the authority or developer.

7. Gaps Identified For Future Research

In the process of study synthesis, some grey areas on empowerment evaluation model were identified which may warrant further exploration.

For future research on the EE process researchers could incorporate a mixed-method approach to study stakeholders' experience of empowerment by pairing open-ended questions with Likert-type scale items exploring, for example, the degree of control stakeholders felt they effectively exercised over the E.E process and the degree to which specific evaluation skills have been acquired or perfected.

A worthwhile and potentially interesting study would be an investigation into the actual impacts of empowerment approaches to international development evaluation (e.g contrasting a empowerment evaluation approach with that of a utilization focused approach). Such a study would move beyond perceived impacts and would scientifically document real impacts. The relative lack of discussion of some topics, such as evaluation quality, equity and cultural competence, and the degree to which stakeholders are involved, suggests deficits that researchers might consider addressing. Validity of data collection methods should further be studied to ensure that recipients voices, when included are accurately represented especially in evaluations where this is the only way recipients are involved.

8. Recommendations and Suggestions

Guided Empowerment Evaluation Process is an effective tool for organizations to use to foster the program improvement process. When the people who do the work are active in creating the plan for improvement, they are more likely to carry out the plan. For an empowerment approach to be successful, stakeholders as well as evaluators have to be able to devote fairly significant amounts of time and energy to the evaluation process. Stakeholders must find it useful to commit to a level of responsibility for the evaluation effort that may be greater than that required in approaches that are more traditional. It is important to assess the stakeholders' perceptions and understanding related to evaluation. It is essential to assess how the various stakeholders see themselves as participants in the evaluation.

9. Conclusion

To conclude the work synthesized, the empowerment evaluation approach was conclusively found adaptive in the social context of evaluation. There was a good fit in the programs social environment and empowerment methodology applied. Program participants learnt essential process skills and were trained in democratic decision making through participation in all aspects of the evaluation including the more technical data analysis phases.

Participants with diverse skills and experiences have a common interest as stakeholders in a given project and therefore the goal should be to attempt to utilize this diversity in a positive manner. If stakeholders have an active role in determining, what questions are asked to how the data are analyzed and interpreted, the evaluation findings will have more meaning for them, and they will be more likely to use the findings for continuous self-evaluation and determination for program improvement. An empowerment model, in which self-determination is fundamental, creates a synergistic force in communities to do well – pursuing a social justice agenda. Teaching evaluation logic and skills is a way of building capacity for ongoing self assessment– enhancing the capacity for self determination. Finally Patton (1997a) suggests that the empowerment approach is a useful evaluation tool, but one that must be used thoughtfully and with great care if it is to be maximized.

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