

## Celebrating the 21st anniversary of empowerment evaluation with our critical friends<sup>☆</sup>



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 16 September 2016

Accepted 7 October 2016

Available online 11 November 2016

#### Keywords:

Donaldson

Scriven

Patton

Alkin

Wandersman

Fetterman

Kaftarian

Empowerment evaluation

Capacity building

History

controversy

Critiques

Theory

Concepts

Principles

Steps

### ABSTRACT

This special topic edition of E&PP presents the insights of luminaries in the field who have helped shape empowerment evaluation with their critiques, concerns, and congratulations. We celebrate their contributions to empowerment evaluation. This special topic edition of E&PP presents their comments about an evaluation approach that, according to president Stewart Donaldson, has “gone viral” across the globe (Donaldson, 2015).

To set the stage for these critical friends' comments, additional context for their discussion is provided. In addition, this special topic edition concludes with a brief comment on their thoughts.

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## 1. Introduction

David Fetterman introduced empowerment evaluation to the field of evaluation during his presidential address 21 years ago (1993). Since that time it has been used in over 16 countries, ranging from corporate offices of Google and Hewlett-Packard to squatter settlements and townships in South Africa. Empowerment evaluation has been used by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US. Department of Education, Stanford University School of Medicine, and Native American tribes in reservations stretching from Michigan to San Diego.

David Fetterman, Shakeh Kaftarian, Abraham Wandersman, and many other empowerment evaluators, have contributed to blogs, presented in professional association panels, published in scholarly journals, and contributed chapters in books and encyclopedia (including Wikipedia). They have published 5 books on the topic of empowerment evaluation. David has even been invited to radio interviews to speak about the use of empowerment evaluation to help bridge the digital divide in communities of color.

This special topic edition of E&PP presents the insights of luminaries in the field who have helped shape empowerment evaluation with their critiques, concerns, and congratulations. We celebrate their contributions to empowerment evaluation. This special topic edition of E&PP presents their comments about an evaluation approach that, according to president Stewart Donaldson, has “gone viral” across the globe (Donaldson, 2015).

To set the stage for our critical friends' comments we provide additional context for their discussion. In addition, we conclude this special topic edition with a brief comment on their thoughts.

<sup>☆</sup> Based on presentations made at the American Evaluation Association, Chicago, IL, November 11, 2015.

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## 2. Brief history

Twenty-one years ago empowerment evaluation was introduced to the field. The atmosphere was electric. Some colleagues embraced the approach immediately. It resonated with their own practice. Others viewed the approach as a threat to the status quo.

“Colleagues who fear that we are giving evaluation away are right. We are sharing it with a broader population. Those who fear that we are educating ourselves out of a job are only partially correct” (Fetterman, 1993, 1994). Colleagues who remember these words also remember [Stufflebeam \(1994\)](#) and [Sechrest’s \(1997\)](#) terse responses, expressing their concern about giving evaluation away. They may also remember Fetterman’s somewhat impassioned and extensive responses in an effort to defend the approach and allay their fears and concerns about what they referred to as a world-wide “movement” (Fetterman, 1995, 1997a; [Scriven, 1997](#); [Sechrest, 1997](#)).

Fetterman also said in his address: “Like any tool, empowerment evaluation is designed to address a specific evaluative need. It is not a substitute for other forms of evaluation inquiry or appraisal.” It is gratifying (and a relief) to see that in retrospect, we were reasonably temperate in our views. However, our position has never wavered. We believed and continue to believe in our mission or purpose: “We are educating others to manage their own affairs in areas they know (or should know) better than we do. At the same time, we are creating new roles for evaluators to help others help themselves.”

At this very early and somewhat tumultuous stage, strong bonds were being created. Shakeh Kaftarian was one of the first colleagues to come up to the podium to thank David and agree with the tenets of empowerment evaluation. At that time, she was deputy director of the Office of Scientific Analysis at the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). Shakeh, along with many of her colleagues, observed the need for development, evaluation, and accountability in communities with major service needs.

Shakeh also played a role in connecting Abe and David. She invited Abe to participate in a panel at the 1992 AEA conference. Abe ran into Len Bickman, a past-president of the association. Len was speaking to a very energetic guy and invited Abe to join him for a walk to get some Seattle coffee with “that guy”. Abe did, and the rest is part of empowerment evaluation history. The energetic guy was David. David and Abe started talking and a few hours later realized how many common interests they shared. Abe shared his work with coalitions and David shared his work with public school systems in the United States and townships in South Africa. A bond was created, lasting over two decades.

While these foundational friendships were being forged, there was “trouble” brewing in the field. In spite of what might appear to have been simple, logical, and reserved comments at David’s presidential address, the response was fast and furious, the flood gates were open. They were interpreted as a “call to arms.” Controversy ensued.

## 3. Initial controversy

[Scriven \(1997\)](#) and [Patton \(1997\)](#) were some of the first scholars to critically engage the text and provide a critique of empowerment evaluation. They were asked to write a book review. However, they immediately decided there was something much larger to engage. According to [Scriven \(1997\)](#): “What began as a book review has thus been somewhat enlarged in scope to become a review and critique of a movement that is now an important part of the evaluation scene.”

According to [Worthen \(1997\)](#), AJE editor, the early critiques ranged from ad hominem personal attacks (which he abhorred and rejected during his tenure) to reasoned scholarly critique. Blaine

single handedly created an environment conducive to scholarly debate and inquiry and thus facilitated both a discussion about empowerment evaluation as an approach and its role as a catalyst for change in the guild ([Fetterman, 1997b, p. 254](#)). [Wild \(1997\)](#) summed up this initial reaction to empowerment evaluation: “Fetterman et al. have nailed their theses to the door of the cathedral. Now the question is: How tolerant is the establishment of dissent?”

## 4. Embracing critiques

Critical friends play an instrumental role in empowerment evaluation. They help facilitate the processes and steps of the approach. Edmund Burke appreciated the value of this role in scholarly work and practice: “He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skills. Our antagonist is our helper.” Our colleagues, serving as critical friends, have helped us shape and refine empowerment evaluation over the last couple of decades.

[Stufflebeam \(1994\)](#) and [Sechrest’s \(1997\)](#) critiques provided an insight into the fear this approach elicited. These colleagues fought long and hard to establish the credibility of evaluation. They felt threatened. One of the positive effects of their critique was that they challenged empowerment evaluators to demonstrate how they met or exceeded the [Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation \(1994\)](#), in terms of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy ([Fetterman, 1995](#); [Fetterman, 2001, p. 87–99](#)).

[Scriven \(1997\)](#) and [Patton \(1997\)](#) also raised meaningful issues and concerns about bias, rigor, and objectivity. They were addressed in large part in AJE ([Fetterman, 1997b](#)). The critique also provided a forum to discuss the significance of process use, devolving responsibility for an evaluation, and recognizing positions of privilege ([Fetterman, 2001](#)). However, one of the most noteworthy aspects associated with our exchanges was the shift in the nature of the discourse itself.

Patton shared his manuscript with David Fetterman before publication, and David provided a long list of corrections and suggestions. He incorporated these, as deemed appropriate, to refine his argument in some instances and strengthen it in others. This back-and-forth process allowed them to focus their attention on crystallized and improved arguments, rather than on errors and omissions. Similarly, Scriven and Fetterman exchanged and disseminated both of their critiques and responses. For example, in response to David Fetterman’s request for permission to place Scriven’s critique on the Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation TIG home page, Scriven responded, “. . . sure, post it and congratulations for doing so: it’s in the best spirit of evaluation (not to mention science)!”

[Chelimsky \(1997\)](#) was more illuminative than critical when she highlighted the multiple purposes of evaluation. Her insights provided a watershed moment in the dialogue ([Fetterman, 1997b, p. 263–264](#)). Many of us were talking past each other before she entered the discussion. Some colleagues were arguing about accountability, while some of us were responding to empowerment evaluation’s contribution to development. Her insights helped make the conversation more efficient, meaningful, and productive.

Alkin and Christie ([Alkin & Christie, 2004, p 58](#); [Christie & Alkin, 2013, p 50](#)) understood empowerment evaluation’s commitment to use, over methodology and valuing. This served to reinforce and help crystallize our commitment to use. [Cousins’ \(2005\)](#) request for greater clarity set the stage for comparing and contrasting stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation, specifically comparing empowerment evaluation with collaborative and participatory evaluation approaches ([Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, Wandersman, & O’sullivan, 2014](#)).

Donaldson (2005) and Donaldson, Patton, Fetterman, and Scriven, (2010) recognized empowerment evaluation's global appeal to both clients and stakeholders and valued empowerment evaluation's commitment to honest self-critical reflection. He also organized a pivotal debate between Scriven, Patton, himself, and Fetterman (Donaldson et al., 2010). It helped to clarify numerous issues and misunderstandings. Building on this pattern of critique and reflection, a special AEA session was conducted. It was titled "Empowerment Evaluation and Traditional Evaluation: 10 Years Later". Panelists included: Drs. Robin Miller, Christine Christie, Nick Smith, Michael Scriven, Abraham Wandersman, and David Fetterman.

The panel provided another opportunity to reflect on the evolution of empowerment evaluation. Several of the presentations were expanded and published in the *American Journal of Evaluation*. In the spirit of dialogue, we responded to these and related comments. The result was the publication of one of AJE's most downloaded articles at the time and to-date: Fetterman and Wandersman (2007). Empowerment evaluation: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.

We structured the discussion in terms of empowerment evaluation's past, present, and future as follows: (a) Yesterday (critiques aimed at empowerment evaluation issues that arise from its early stages of development), (b) Today (current issues associated with empowerment evaluation theory and practice at that time), and (c) Tomorrow (the future of empowerment evaluation in terms of recent critiques). This response to panelists' critiques and comments ultimately served to enhance conceptual clarity, provide greater methodological specificity, and highlight empowerment evaluation's commitment to accountability and producing outcomes.

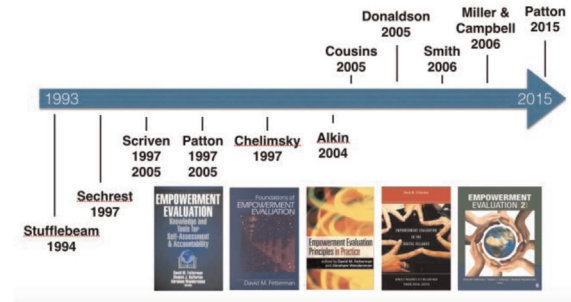
Nick Smith (2006) was a member of this panel and he encouraged us to reflect on our philosophy, as compared with ideology. (Earlier at an American Educational Research Association meeting Nick explained the initial resistance to the approach. He said that giving the tools of the trade away were perceived as a threat to the guild.) Miller and Campbell's (2006) critique encouraged empowerment evaluators to make their principles more explicit, rather than implicit, which is evident in our book *Empowerment Evaluation: Principles in Practice* (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). We listed 10 guiding empowerment evaluation principles to in our book to guide colleagues in practice, included: (1) improvement, (2) community ownership, (3) inclusion, (4) democratic participation, (5) social justice, (6) community knowledge, (7) evidence-based strategies, (8) capacity building, (9) organizational learning, and (10) accountability.

Patton's (2015) more recent comments in *Evaluation and Program Planning* focused on core elements of empowerment evaluation, specifically highlighting empowerment evaluation principles. His critique helped us provide additional conceptual clarity, highlighting the integrated and interrelated nature of the theory, concepts, principles, and steps of empowerment evaluation. It provided a useful springboard into a discussion about how empowerment evaluation is more than the sum of its parts (including "essential" parts) (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015).

These exchanges and insights forced us to improve our conceptual clarity and methodological specificity. These critiques were engaged, contemplated, defended, and ultimately assimilated. The current dialogue in this special topic edition represents the latest step shaping our thinking. It is part of the evolution of empowerment evaluation.

The results of these debates and conversation are shared in our work, from the first book *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-assessment and Accountability* to our fifth book 21 years later in *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for*

*Self-assessment, Evaluation Capacity Building, and Accountability* (Fetterman, Wandersman, et al., 2015). In essence, we have learned a lot from our critical friends along the way. (See Datta (2016) for a historical review of empowerment evaluation and Rodríguez-Campos (2012) for a more detailed description of the historical development of stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation, including empowerment evaluation.)



Map of arguments and critiques in journals

blended into empowerment evaluation books.

## 5. Empowerment evaluation: a brief sketch

A brief sketch about empowerment evaluation is presented to prepares those less familiar with the approach before launching into our critical friend's comments.

## 6. Scope

Empowerment evaluation is a global evaluation phenomenon, practiced in over 16 countries as noted earlier. It has been used by educators to improve schools in academic distress in rural Arkansas (Fetterman, 2005), teachers evaluating their own impact within the internationally practiced Visible Learning model (Clinton & Hattie, 2015), and faculty, students, and administrators preparing for accreditation review in the School of Medicine at Stanford University (Fetterman, Deitz, and Gesundheit, 2010).

Peruvian women have used empowerment evaluation to build small businesses and become more economically self-sufficient (Sastre-Merino, Vidueira, Díaz-Puente, and Fernández-Moral, 2015). Fourth- and fifth grade students have used empowerment evaluation to make their school more inclusive and inviting (Langhout & Fernandez, 2015). Empowerment evaluation has also been used in teen pregnancy prevention and substance abuse prevention programs (Wandersman, 2015). It has been used to help bridge the digital divide in communities of color (Fetterman, 2013) and minority tobacco prevention initiatives (Fetterman, Delaney, Triana-Tremain, & Evans-Lee, 2015). Empowerment evaluation has been used in remote Amazonian regions and squatter settlements in South Africa, as well as high-tech settings like Google and Hewlett-Packard in Silicon Valley.

## 7. Theory, concepts, principles, and steps

Empowerment evaluation is guided by empowerment and self-determination theories. It is also informed by specific evaluation theories, including process use and theories of use and action. In turn, these theories help define 10 overarching principles that provide empowerment evaluation with an explicit direction and purpose, beginning with improvement and continuing to accountability. Key concepts that help define empowerment evaluation

include critical friends, cultures of evidence, cycles of reflection and action, communities of learners, and reflective practitioners.

There are many ways by which to implement an empowerment evaluation including a three-step (Fetterman, 2013) and a 10-step approach (Wandersman, 2015). These theories, concepts, principles, and steps are interrelated and reinforcing. Together they provide a rich and layered map of the dynamic terrain of empowerment evaluation.

## 8. Conclusion

This brief overview of the roots of empowerment evaluation, ongoing debates, controversy, and current practice, represents the prelude to what will certainly be an engaging and informative dialogue or series of collegial comments and critiques, as we celebrate the 21st anniversary of empowerment evaluation. Drs. Stewart Donaldson's comments launch this series of collegial comments, followed by Michael Scriven, Michael Patton, and Marvin Alkin. Dr. Wandersman and David Fetterman make a few concluding remarks following the colleagues comments.

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