
Health Promotion Evaluation Practices in the Americas

Health Promotion Evaluation Practices in the Americas. Values and Research

Louise Potvin, David McQueen (Editors), 2008. Springer, New York, 300 pages

This book comes 10 years after the WHO/Euro Working Party finished its pioneering work looking at the Evaluation of Health Promotion and as such demonstrates how much further forward the evaluation of health promotion has come since. In the interim health promotion has benefited from interacting with the field of evaluation itself and particularly those disciplines which have developed thinking around how best to evaluate complex messy and contextually dependent social interventions. The book also demonstrates how much further the field needs to go and the barriers that stand in the way of further progress. These include the continued need to justify a non positivist approach to colleagues in public health, but not necessarily to partners in other practical disciplines such as the environment, engineering and transport, who seem much more open to other ways of doing things and integrating the technical with the human. Other factors include neoliberal and new public management agendas which while advocating for accountability, focus on utilitarianism and target setting in a belief that efficiency and effectiveness is a more important value than equity. Potvin indeed rather successfully deconstructs the underlying values inherent in the notion of targets effectively surfacing its essentially warlike notion and the impossibility of its achievement when discussing different approaches to evaluation methodology.

Taking a starting position from Schwandt's notion of evaluation as a social practice is a social practice, a key message is that values lie at the centre of evaluation. It is important therefore to align the values underpinning the methods you use with the social practices you are evaluating. Moreover, understanding how and why an intervention/ programme/process works or does not work is intimately tied up with the values and assumptions of the actors involved, including the evaluator. These actors have different values and will have different perspectives on what the criteria of "success" is. A key value in health promotion is participation. This book deftly unpicks the challenges evaluators face when they wish to align their practices with this core precept of health promotion.

Evaluation like health promotion, which is itself a social practice, is encouraged or hindered by the context in which it is working. The impact of these contexts is shown through the in depth case studies presented in the second half of the book. The first half of the book is devoted to the key issues that have to be addressed in any evaluation, such as what are we evaluating, what is our evaluation question and what methods and tools can best answer those questions. It also provides a useful typology of different ideal types of evaluation practice: evaluation as experimentation, evaluation as negotiation and evaluation as organized reflexivity (p 66). However I would take issue with Potvin as to where she places participatory evaluation, which for me, if practiced with a truly participatory mind, lies very much in the teleological ontological position of the third category, not the second.

Notwithstanding this critique, the book overall is welcome and refreshing on two counts. Firstly it looks in depth at the theoretical and methodological challenges inherent in working in the area of evaluating social change mechanisms, thus providing well refined arguments when negotiating with others on an evaluation framework. It gently but smoothly deconstructs the arguments in favour of the randomized control trial as the height of sophistication providing coherent arguments and excellent case studies of the social processes that actually occur between the lines of any technical treatise. Here the value of Henry Latour's work on the social practice of science is brought to the fore and the value of his actor- network theory (p 108) which itself is a good example of another core theme of the book, the value of theory.

It is refreshing on a second count because it brings to the English speaking world experiences from other parts of the Americas. The emphasis on the collective, the importance of learning as a tool for change, a belief in participatory democracy are values that those working in health promotion in the English speaking world share with their colleagues in Latin and Central America. Indeed, Freire is a continued inspiration for many community development practitioners, some

of whom work in the field of health promotion. However the non English speaking world is also the source of critical theory, largely absent in the pragmatic and utilitarian Anglo American culture. Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu, to name but a few alongside Freire, Latour and Marx all were non English speaking and yet potentially have much to offer the development of health promotion theory the absence of which is the source of much lament by the books editors.

Book collections such as this often arise because of small group of people have got together around a book idea and then, in the search for the right number of authors, their own networks are tapped to expand the number of contributors. Sometimes that is successful sometimes not and the resulting book can often lack the coherence originally intended. One can see the connections here: PAHO, CDC, and the University of Montreal. These connections here have reaped a good harvest. Here we have a critical mass of people who have engaged in depth with the practice of health promotion evalua-

tion, whether with specific marginalized groups on specific issues or in grappling with the technical challenge of measuring equity.

As member of the original WHO/Euro Working party alongside Potvin and McQueen, I currently works in a country (England) that has effectively wiped the word health promotion from the public domain vocabulary and reduced any action under the umbrella of what is now called health improvement and development to behavioural or lifestyle change¹. As such this book was a pleasure to read.

It provides a useful marker in the development of both of evaluation and health promotion bringing as it does, in an authoritative way, ideas and concepts currently scattered throughout contemporary evaluation literature. It demonstrates how, at least in the Americas, health promotion has attained a level of maturity in its sense of self as a complex social practice in an ever changing social world.

References

1. Scott-Samuel A, Springett J. Hegemony or health promotion? Prospects for reviving England's lost discipline. *Journal of the Royal Society of Health* (2007);127(5) 210–3.

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