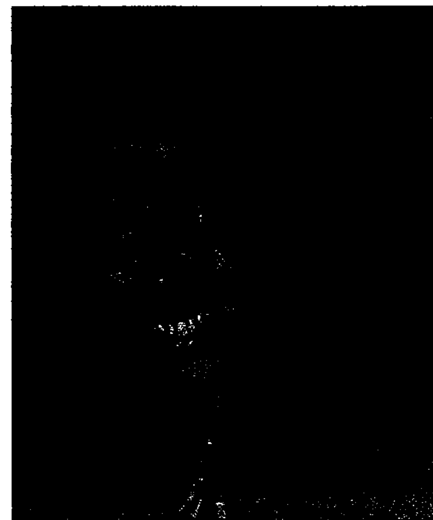
EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

By Judd D. Antin

This article will focus on the practical application of the principles and methods of empowerment evaluation. Empowerment evaluation, conceptualized by Dr. David M. Fetterman, is described as "the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (Fetterman 1997). (For a complete description of the empowerment evaluation model, see Fetterman's 2001 book *Foundations of Empowerment Evaluation*). While that description tends towards the abstract, the practical sum of the debate between proponents and critics appears to be that empowerment evaluation is somewhere between classical evaluation and evaluation training. It is unabashedly "customer-oriented," and it shares the burden of evaluation with the evaluated group. Because it straddles the boundary between evaluation and training, to many empowerment evaluation represents a controversial new twist on established evaluation ideas.

The foundation for this article is a nine month long empowerment evaluation conducted in 2003. I was hired by Dr. Fetterman to act as a fieldworker for the empowerment evaluation of a coalition of non-profit groups in a medium-sized East-coast city that for the purposes of this article we will call Eastville. In the process of the evaluation I used a wide variety of ethnographic methods. I participated in program meetings and had numerous individual meetings with program staff. I observed and reported on program activities. I helped to elicit ideas and develop evaluation tools such as surveys and interview protocols and I analyzed and presented the results. While these were immeasurably valuable experiences, they are not the focus of this discussion. This is a special issue on applied ethnography; as such, I have chosen to take a broader view, and to look at some elements of the sociocultural environment that was created when empowerment evaluation met a program group in Eastville, when an applied ethnographic method met the real world. Acting as any ethnographer would in the field- participating, observing, taking fieldnotes, and writing up- has provided me with the most valuable insights of my experience. Working with empowerment evaluation in this context has given me a profound respect for the values at its core. Moving away from external determinations of worth, promoting a sense of self-responsibility through capacity building, collaboratively building evaluation results- it seems difficult to suggest that these are not valuable directions for evaluation practice to travel.

But *practicing* the empowerment evaluation model has also instilled in me a sense of caution based on the specific challenges I faced. Empowerment evaluation, I have come to believe, is universally useful in theory, but less so in practice. Empowerment evaluation's complex nature, along with the idiosyncrasies of the evaluation environment, can create an environment different from the ideal one in which the theory of empowerment evaluation exists. Certainly there are many situations to which empowerment evaluation is ideally suited. This article, however, aims to provide useful and practical insights drawn from a challenging—but by no means failed—attempt at applying the model.



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The Problem of Definition

Within the evaluation community there has been a healthy debate regarding the definition of empowerment evaluation. Some of the marquee names in the field, including Scriven (1997), Sechrest (1997), and Patton (1997), have weighed in. Scriven, for instance, in his review of Fetterman, Kafterian, and Wandersman's 1996 book *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability,* argues that it is difficult to argue either that empowerment evaluation is a new form of evaluation or that it represents evaluation in the traditional sense at all. Other critics have suggested that empowerment evaluation is simply a new face on any number of older evaluation methodologies.

This kind of criticism does not seem to address a controversial issue. No proponent of empowerment evaluation would argue with the fact that it can take many forms. Empowerment evaluation does not seek to define itself by a set of methods or processes; rather it defines itself largely with theoretical goals, namely "fostering improvement and self-determination" through collaboration, capacity building, and in general lending evaluation expertise in a way which aims to co-opt an emic point of view. One of the model's greatest assets is its ability to react and adapt to the contexts of individual evaluations. This, Fetterman has suggested, may be startling to more traditional evaluators who hold fast to the replicability of methods and techniques as assurances of reliability in evaluation.

A clear, consistent definition of what empowerment evaluation is, then, is not a precondition of its employment as an effective evaluation technique.

As a practical matter, however, the fluidity with which empowerment evaluation defines itself was problematic in the Eastville evaluation. Patton (1997) has suggested that the most ideal cases for empowerment evaluation are where its language and practices match those of the evaluated organization—where program and evaluation viewpoints and processes are in line. The ideal situation for empowerment evaluation, perhaps, is where a group has, through self-reflection, identified a need for increased capacity and empowerment, researched available strategies, and decided *internally* on empowerment evaluation as the right method to achieve its goals. In the case of the Eastville evaluation, however, the organization entered into an empowerment evaluation through the mandate of its funding organization and not through an internal decision based on its appropriateness as a model. Group leaders adopted empowerment evaluation without a clear idea of how to define it—it did not mesh well with their existing ideas about evaluation. Several times during fieldwork group members pointed to the evident mismatch between the need they expressed to their funding organization and the services which empowerment evaluation could provide. Empowerment evaluation requires that the evaluated group be active participants in the process—the evaluator is less of a "doer" and more of a "coach." This did not sit well with the Eastville group.

Given this conflict, group leaders attempted to understand the model through the frame of their own organizational culture. I was asked repeatedly what the "deliverables" of the evaluation would be. My ill-received response was usually, "Well, it's not that simple." But as I tried to explain the collaborative process- one that relied on their thought, action, and initiative as much as my own in order to produce results- I watched their frustration growing. As a cash and resource strapped group, an evaluator who could not do and produce autonomously appeared to be of little value to them. Group leaders continued to expect that the evaluation work would be done for them, without the "meaningful contribution" which the empowerment evaluation model suggests. As a result, I began to cast myself as a willing and able consultant, practically begging them to let me help with any project at all. But each new meeting inevitably began with the question, "So what is it you're doing again?"

The Question of Findings

Empowerment evaluation, unlike many traditional evaluation methodologies, does not focus exclusively on questions of merit or worth. Rather it suggests that an evaluator is ill equipped to decide what constitutes significant findings or how those findings should be achieved without the meaningful collaboration of the evaluated group. By doing the evaluation together and incorporating the group's own goals, empowerment evaluation also attempts to make capacity building its chief objective. But as I found in the Eastville evaluation (and as critics have suggested), relying on stakeholders to define findings is problematic in that it may introduce a bias towards evaluation goals and activities which are likely to produce favorable results. Together we brainstormed many evaluation strategies over the course of the evaluation, but because I had to rely on the everyday presence of program staff to administer the evaluation materials, only a few of them were ever completed.

Program staff were most eager about completing a proficiency survey which was administered before and after a computer training program. Because the training involved taking novice computer-users and teaching them the basics of computer use, it seemed highly unlikely that results would show anything but significant improvements, a fact which may have made program staff more willing to provide the assistance we needed to complete the survey. Interestingly, however, the survey was entirely created and designed by the evaluation team, with little or no collaboration from program staff. In another case, we designed a survey in order to assess the potential impact of that program. The process of designing this survey was a great example of collaboration. Based on needs expressed by a primary informant, we worked together to create a survey that provided information to serve those needs. But though both the process and the product were hailed as a success by program staff, the survey was never implemented.

A lack of available time and manpower resources on the part of program staff combined with a general lack of buy-in to the evaluation (largely, I think, due to the problem of definition) likely played a role in this situation. However, the reluctance to execute the impact survey may also have been due to the potential for negative results. Program staff may have perceived that survey data which showed their program was not achieving the desired impact might have reflected badly on all involved, creating an obvious incentive to avoid implementing the survey.

Though empowerment evaluation argues that imposing an external definition of worth on the evaluated group is problematic, doing so tends to establish a framework for findings which are both comparable with the results of other evaluations and familiar and comprehensible to program staff and evaluators alike. The previously mentioned emphasis on "deliverables" in the Eastville evaluation was an indication of what the form and content of evaluation findings were expected to be. Empowerment evaluation, however, suggests that an evaluator cannot produce "deliverables" solely on the basis of his or her own initiative, a fact which must have been frustrating to a resource-strapped group with drastically different expectations. Producing data, however relevant and collaborative, not perceived as evaluation findings may also have had an impact on the perceived efficacy of the evaluation.

"Corporate Folk" and "Community Folk"

Critics of empowerment evaluation have suggested that empowerment

evaluators often end up doing evaluation not on behalf of disadvantaged groups but on behalf of the philanthropic organizations that serve them. This seemed especially true in the case of the process evaluation conducted in Eastville, where program outcomes were not yet measurable and clients were few due to the early stage of program implementation. The executive board with whom I had primary contact consisted mostly of the CEOs of established philanthropic organizations, politicians, and high level administrators. Only a few were involved with service delivery on a daily basis. One such community worker was the primary informant with whom I developed the impact survey mentioned above. The survey was developed with the needs of community members in mind, but perhaps was not well received by the board because it did not serve their own needs. In addition, my informant had a relatively small amount of influence because of his youth and relative lack of seniority, which prevented him from promoting his cause to the top of the agenda.

One community member I interviewed expressed her perception of this problem in what became one of the most salient moments of the evaluation. She explained her feeling that there are two types of people who do philanthropy in Eastville: "corporate folk" and "community folk." "Corporate folk" have access to money and resources, and have the skills necessary to develop and implement programs, but are often hopelessly out of touch with the real needs of the community. "Community folk," she went on, know exactly what the community needs, but lack the resources and skills to do anything about it. As we continued to talk, the implication became clear: our evaluation was out to empower the wrong people.

Environmental Assessment

I began this article by suggesting that empowerment evaluation can be a powerful tool in situations to which it is well suited, but a challenge in situations where it is not. I felt this especially in the case of the Eastville evaluation. Fetterman has wisely pointed out that one person can never empower another; rather, a person must empower his or herself. This is the cornerstone upon which empowerment evaluation lies, but it is a principle that is obviously difficult to follow without willing and available participants. Empowerment evaluation doesn't work in every situation- no evaluation methodology does. But an effort could be made to identify the criteria under which empowerment evaluation is most effective, and then to use those criteria to do a preliminary analysis of a proposed evaluation site. In the case of the Eastville evaluation, I suspect that even a cursory attempt to assess the program environment would have revealed many of the barriers we encountered. Having done so, we could have identified the mismatches in approach, needs, and expectations. Such findings, even if they had led to the selection of a different evaluation methodology, would certainly have been both a valuable service and a fulfillment of empowerment evaluation's goals. Below is a list of criteria which empowerment evaluators might reasonably seek to understand before entering the field. Note that they are not so different than they would be for any evaluation methodology:

- The empowerment evaluation model is adopted willingly from within an organization.
- The organizational structure of the evaluated group is such that time, energy, and manpower is available to devote to evaluation needs.
- The organizational culture is one that recognizes the complex nature of collaborative work—it does not stress the importance of 'deliverables.'
- The organization has educated itself to some degree as to the evaluation process, and is aware of the ways that empowerment evaluation differs from traditional evaluation.
- All stakeholders are meaningfully involved in the evaluation process so as to avoid biases towards goals, methodologies, or outcomes that serve only some of the program clients and participants.

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The Use of Ethnographic Information

Fetterman has described empowerment evaluation as a form of ethnographic/advocacy evaluation. But the degree to which empowerment evaluation is ethnographic may be more a function of who is doing the evaluation than of the model itself. After all, an

evaluator need not be an anthropologist to arrive at a field site and adapt a model through his or her experience on the ground. Understanding local contexts and adapting to emergent processes are important elements of both long-term evaluation and ethnography. But is engaging in these kinds of work in and of itself enough to constitute ethnography? I would argue no.

Though empowerment evaluation makes valuable use of certain aspects of ethnography, especially in grounding evaluation in emic knowledge, I would argue that it should incorporate some of ethnography's other characteristics. My experience has convinced me that empowerment evaluation can do a better job of making use of specific ethnographic methods and viewpoints, not just ethnographic practice in the general sense.

The empowerment evaluation model does recognize the value of case studies, especially for documenting impact. In the case of the Eastville evaluation, we completed case studies at the end of the evaluation in order to communicate personal experiences of impact to the funding organization. And while this was a valuable use of case studies, it was perhaps not the most useful in an evaluation context. Case studies executed in a pre/post model could have been especially useful both because of the time-lapse element and because they could be completed collaboratively. Furthermore, pre/post case studies could describe not just the presence or absence of impact or change, but also provide information as to their quality and causes. Program staff could be taught how to synthesize personal experiences and conversations into detailed case studies of people and programs which are rich with ethnographic detail. This kind of qualitative measure of impact can be extremely compelling especially in combination with quantitative pre/post tests. It could provide a mechanism to supplement quantitative approaches that don't always convey the rich details which can best communicate impact.

A second appropriate place for specific ethnographic methods could be in helping to define and operationalize program vocabulary. The Eastville evaluation suffered frequently from unclear definitions of important program terms. Without clear definitions of the terms and ideas which the group used to frame its measures of success, it was difficult to assess the potential for programs' impact. Any number of methods could have helped clear up these ambiguities, such as free listing, pile sorting, and agreement statements, just to name a few. These methods could be used with targeted groups and results could be compared with those of program staff. They also have the added benefit of being relatively easy to teach. Combined with the ethnographic experiences of the evaluator, these data could produce powerful information for assessing program goals.

Armed with this kind of information, I could have done a better job of answering when program staff asked, "What good can this evaluation do for me?" I could have explained the benefits of defining goals more clearly (concretely showing results), clarifying mission-related vocabulary (proving that programs are achieving an impact that is in line with the mission), or using specific language to identify program processes.

Empowerment evaluation is designed to be flexible, so each of the suggestions I have mentioned could be undertaken within the empowerment evaluation model at the discretion of the individual evaluator. But perhaps in recognition of the fact that the challenges faced in the Eastville evaluation may not entirely uncommon, they ought to be explicitly included in the model. The thoughts and suggestions I have provided are an attempt to consider empowerment evaluation as practice rather than theory, and to address some of the issues that, while they may stay hidden in ideal evaluation situations, are glaringly obvious when challenges are faced. Each obviously requires more research and thought in order to create concrete directions for practice, but empowerment evaluation's proponents, I believe, should consider undertaking such formal development, especially if they continue to brand it as "ethnographic advocacy evaluation."

I want to reiterate my profound respect for empowerment evaluation as a model. Indeed, this mandate for development is evidence of my belief in the value of empowerment, and also in the fact that doing so would bring the powerful tools of empowerment evaluation to a wider range of evaluators and situations.

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