Book Review: Fundamental Issues in Evaluation

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Smith, N.L., & Brandon, P.R. (2008). *Fundamental issues in evaluation.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Fundamental issues in evaluation, by Nick Smith and Paul Brandon bring to our attention the complexity of program evaluation and what reoccurring fundamental issues arise in the field. The authors define fundamental issues as “underlying concerns, problems, or choices that continually resurface in different guises throughout the evaluation process” (Smith & Brandon, 2008, p.2). The authors conceptually dissect evaluation as an activity, what purpose does it serve, who is the audience, and how to ensure that it is implemented effectively (Smith & Brandon, 2008). The importance of this book is timely to the field of evaluation, considering the authors recognize that issues in evaluation are fluid, not concrete, and act like a revolving door. With the changing world, the authors highlight the importance of consistently dissecting the fundamental issues in evaluation. The authors contend that fundamental issues are perpetual to the process of evaluation, in hopes of moving the field forward. It gave me the understanding that there is no definitive answer to solve issues in evaluation, still an evaluator has to have the ability to be aware of the fundamental issues and exhibit behaviors and actions that deliver a solution for the issues in that particular circumstance. It is vital that evaluators are mindful that issues will arise continuously within evaluation and the same issues will arise in different contexts. This review will be constructed in three sections. The first section will be an overall summary of the book. The second section will go into additional detail by summarizing the individual chapters and correlate how they are aligned to the topic of the conversation. In each chapter summarization, I will introduce the author and discuss the main ideas in the chapter. The final section will address the contribution that this work can have on the nature of evaluation and to what extent does it impact me and my journey into understanding the field of evaluation.

**Overview**

The overall theme of this book begins the dialogue about fundamental issues in the field of evaluation. The authors assemble and incorporate the scholarly work of individual evaluators, in the field of evaluation, to present their interpretation of the four important themes that the authors have identified as fundamental issues. The authors consider fundamental issues in the field through the categories of discussing the concept and implications for theory, method, practice, and the profession (Smith & Brandon, 2008). Each chapter recognizes a fundamental issue presently in the field of evaluation and proposes one or more strategies in dealing with the issue. As previously noted, the topic discussions of fundamental issues are led by expertise in the field of evaluation. This format, with the insightful knowledge of top expertise in the field, validates the book.

The book is formatted into four main sections. First, the book describes how to construct an evaluation theory using best practices. Next, accepting and being aware of cultural competence in evaluation and how it impacts methods. Then, how to synthesize evaluation research findings and use it in practice. Finally, the book provides illustrations on discovering ways to involve stakeholders in decision making (Smith & Brandon, 2008). The book is a total of eleven chapters in the book.

The organization of the book allows you to easily follow the fundamental issues that the authors have identified in the field of evaluation. It is significant to note that before each fundamental issue, the authors provided you with a background description of the fundamental issue and what to expect in the supporting chapters that examine the issue. The structure of the book is comprehensible and purposeful. While it is impossible to thoroughly explore all topics, the authors did a thorough job on pinpointing four fundamental issues and insuring their alignment. The book also offers you a detailed reference page that provides sources for obtaining additional information. This format is a spotlight to explore key issues in evaluation. The first chapter is the initial foundation that sets the stage or the book. The remaining chapters explain how the issues build upon each other and the approaches from an evaluator’s perspective.

**Book Chapters**

**Part I: Issues in Theory**

In chapter one, Smith and Brandon’s attention is on the issues of theory. Smith and Brandon (2008) delineate theory as the aspect of reflecting our thinking. The authors construct the idea of theory and how implementing a theory, as the status quo, in evaluation can lead to a fundamental issue. The authors clarify that fundamental issues are not new but reoccurring. They describe issues in evaluation to a Mandela. They spell out that fundamental issues will always come around in circles from different periods throughout time. The authors argue that each time the same issue resurfaces; it allows evaluators to reassess their thinking about the issue. With the resurfaced issue, evaluators have the opportunity to develop better practices addressing the issue that can result in a stronger foundation for the field of evaluation. This chapter is written well with clear examples to support their notions. In particular, the authors consider implementation of random controlled trials and how experimental designs have become known to be the golden standard in the field of evaluation. They correlate this action as being a factor in evaluators focusing their attention on theory that support experimental designs, wherein, reemerged the issue of, “to what extent do evaluators use theories in an evaluation?” Chapter one, positions the foundation in the historical literature of theory that ties to chapter two.

Chapter two is written by Thomas Schwandt. The emphasis of this chapter is the relevance of practical knowledge in evaluation practices and how it fits with a theory. The author thinks that it is important to take into account the nature of practical knowledge. The author interprets practical knowledge as, “something expressed by showing (acting) rather than by saying” (Schwandt, 2008, p.31). The author deems that theory does not take into account evaluator’s innate senses of understanding social interactions, communicating with individuals, and personal experience. The author disputes that these constructs cannot always be aligned to a theory. One can understand the notion, that at some level, an evaluator brings to an evaluation their own practical knowledge that cannot always be rationalized with a theory. Be that as it may, the author needs to go into greater depth about practical knowledge and how it is developed. For instance, every innate action that occurs within an individual is a reaction from their life experiences that causes them to develop theories that shape their experiences (paradigm). Moreover, is practical knowledge innate or a result from our experiences? The author concludes that it is vital that an individual’s practical knowledge not be ignored, or more importantly, taken into account, not to be completely erased, only to be replaced with a theory. The idea of acknowledging practical knowledge as an evaluator and being aware of the role to conduct an effective evaluation is further developed in chapter three.

A theory should not be decided by the evaluator in a silo and the only measure to justify good practice. When working in program evaluation, an evaluator should take interest in the stakeholders to decide what works best in the evaluation (Merterns, 2008). Chapter three by Donna Mertens illustrates the concepts of stakeholder representation in culturally complex communities. The author proclaims the need of awareness to be responsive to cultural complexities and communities in which an evaluation is being conducted. The author introduces the application of a transformative lens that will help guide evaluators to possess the ability to make culturally appropriate representation and involvement in an evaluation (Merterns, 2008). This lens will allow evaluators to direct their individual thinking with a theory that will benefit all stakeholders. The author introduces a transformative paradigm. She defines transformative paradigm as an “overarching theoretical framework to guide evaluators who wish to address issues of cultural complexity” (Merterns, 2008, p.43). In summary, this chapter justifies the importance of understanding and being responsive as an evaluator. The author suggests using a transformative paradigm to guide your evaluation and have stakeholders have a voice.

With the increasing issues of theory and how evaluators are rethinking the application of theory in an evaluation, Smith, Schwandt, and Mertens did a thoughtful job in dissecting the fundamental issue and providing relevant feedback to move the issue forward.

**Part II: Issues of Method**

Smith and Brandon make a smooth transition from discussing the fundamental issues in theory to describing the issues of methods within an evaluation. They define methods as, “tools and procedures that evaluators use to practice their trade and meet their goals” (Smith & Brandon, 2008, p.62). This section addresses the debate between qualitative versus quantitative methods and if one is more appropriate in an evaluation over another. The configuration of this section is purposeful and how they tied in the action of the U.S. Department of Education to perpetuate the debate of experimental designs in evaluations is meaningful.

Chapter four by Judith A. Droitcour and Mary Grace Kovar, deal with the multiple threats to the ability of randomized studies. The authors want to explain and improve assessments (Droitcour & Kovar, p.66). The discussion of their work deals with the actions of differential reactivity and how this notion impedes pre-existing beliefs or preferences during the study that can change the attitudes in a randomized controlled experiment. This means the evaluator should be cognizant of the internal /external environment factors that can influence the treatment group. It is crucial to grasp how differential reactivity can impact a study since randomized studies are endorsed by the government through funding. The issue raised in their literature is not only the belief (In conclusion from the actions of the government) that randomized studies are the best methods to incorporate in a study, but how these studies could actually be delivering unreliable results. The authors note, an evaluator must understand that he/she might need to assess and counter reactivity and biasing social interactions.

Chapter five by Susan Labin involves research synthesis toward broad-based evidence. Currently, the author weighs in on the perception, in the field of evaluation, as only using experimental designs as validation in an evaluation (gold standard). The author construes this perception as a fundamental issue that has again risen. The author thinks that an evaluator should have the ability to use nonexperimental methods to collect data (Labin, 2008). The author structures the layout of her dialogue to explain how evaluation is in its current practice of using experimental design. The author describes the background of research synthesis and how it has morphed into the method of a meta-analysis, which embodies randomized studies. To further support her cause for nonexperimental designs, the author discusses the limitations of only using random controlled trials (RCTs). The author addresses the issue of methods and has practical solutions to counterbalance experimental designs.

In chapter six by Melvin Mark, he brings to light the importance of building a better evidence base for evaluation theory. He recognizes that the field of evaluation does not focus enough on the theory of evaluation. He expresses the importance of constantly considering research on evaluation and how the theory can be improved (Mark, 2008). In this chapter, the author recounts the history of evaluation theory and how it has consistently been evolving. For instance, the author uses early research on how it became the foundation for Michael Patton’s utilization - focused evaluation (Mark, 2008). The author states that a focus on evaluation theory will help bring clarity to the field and address current fundamental issues. In general, the more focus put on discussing evaluations, the better organized, aligned, and legitimized it will be for the field.

Chapter four, five, and six bring a broad topic of a fundamental issues of methods and scale down their issues with specific examples from their literature. This section provides strong reasoning to the current issues in methods for an evaluation and the role the U.S. government contributes.

**Part III: Issues of Practice**

Smith and Brandon (2008) describe practice as actual doing of an evaluation. The authors feel that the actual practice of doing an evaluation receives less attention.

Chapter seven by J. Bradley Cousins and Lynn Shula dissect the complexities in setting program standards and providing a collaborative evaluation (practice). The author’s address the concern that programs require judgment about their merit, worth and significance. The question that an evaluator is always asking is, “how good is enough” (Cousins & Shula, 2008, p.139). The issue that develops is the amount of collaboration that should be incorporated in the evaluation. The evaluator has to be strategic to foster and develop a collaborative experience; however, still keeping the merit, worth, and the significance of the evaluation is imperative (Cousins & Shula, 2008). The authors discuss the gravity of developing a framework that can be implemented in a collaborative context. This chapter is an important contribution to the field, with their proposed framework. In the chapter, the authors did not explain in fullness the dichotomy that occurs with collaborating with stakeholders in an evaluation and how it can impact the practice.

In chapter eight by Carlos Ayala and Paul Brandon they grapple with the topic about building evaluation recommendations for improvement. This chapter confronts the issue in practice that evaluators have been debating about the importance of providing recommendations for improvement in an evaluation. One camp believes that recommendations for improvement should be provided in all evaluations. In contrast, another camp is hesitating to support the notion that all evaluations require recommendations for improvements and believe that is based on the type of evaluation that is being implemented. It was not clear why the authors did not devote a deeper analysis of the historical context of the two parties. I am curious to understand why would you not provide feedback as a practice in an evaluation?

This section focus is on the fundamental issues of practice in an evaluation. Smith and Brandon could have considered providing additional chapters to offer clarity for the issues with practice in evaluation. The issues described in this chapter are surface level and require a deeper scrutiny.

**Part IV: Issues of the Profession**

The authors begin this section by describing the history of evaluation and how the field was validated by published journals. This section addresses the nature of evaluation of the profession and how it continues to evolve. With the involvement of the profession, it continues to develop and add fundamental issues for an evaluator.

Chapter nine by Sandra Mathison exchanges views on the variance between evaluation and research and offers a rationale on why we should care. The author explains the history of the two terms of evaluation and research. She reviews how the two terms alone spark conversation year after year with no definitive and agreed upon difference. The author accepts the belief that by defining the difference amongst evaluation and research, it will help further the development of evaluation as a discipline. The author considers, by answering this question, it will aid in identifying the knowledge and skills evaluators require. For example, one distinction that the authors make is that evaluators need to have general understanding in social science research methods, yet must also be able to know how to search for unintended side effects, how to determine differences within points of view, controversial issues and values, and being able to synthesize values (Mathison, 2008). The author maintains that researchers do not require the same level of depth for understanding. The author makes a strong case that a fundamental issue within the profession is the inability to identify the differences between evaluation and research.

Chapter ten by Johnson, Kirkhart, Madison, Noley, & Soloano-Flores (2008) pinpoint the impact of narrow views of scientific rigor on evaluation practices for unrepresented groups. The authors claim that scientific rigor has become the official stamp of accountability and evaluations. They use the example of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, to examine scientific rigor and how it actually isolates underrepresented groups. The authors recognize that the measure of scientific rigor is a variable that should be taken into account, notwithstanding, it is not the only variable that should be practiced. The authors review the significance of implementing the variables of “social capital, race, ethnicity, social economic status, and early exposure into consideration when evaluating and assessing academic outcomes” (Johnson, Kirkhart, Madison, Noley, & Soloano-Flores, 2008, p.199).

Chapter seven examines the practice, in the profession of evaluation, of improving evaluations of indigenous cultures by incorporating their values and methods (Kawakami, Aton, Cram, Lai, and Porima, 2008). It is essential to remember that this section is about the issues of the profession. This article addresses the concepts of evaluation as a framework and how it is influenced by Western Culture. The Western Culture, which is the dominant culture, does not take into account how western theories and methods fail to provide an appropriate evaluation for non-Western cultures, specifically indigenous cultures. The authors explain how to address and implement evaluations within a culturally appropriate framework by meeting the needs of all stakeholders involved. The authors give historical, circumstantial reasoning on indigenous cultures and evaluation to validate the need to develop new approaches in the field of evaluation. What's more, the authors reiterate the importance of an evaluator understanding that the Western framework, in which an evaluator is mostly likely learnt, is not a truly effective protocol for indigenous cultures. In the profession of evaluation, when working with indigenous cultures, evaluators must construct a framework that incorporates an indigenous design and this design will permit a truly effective means in conducting a proper evaluation.

**Discussion**

The book, fundamental issues and evaluation by Nick Smith and Paul Brandon set out to evaluate the fundamental issues in evaluation. The authors actually embrace a clear understanding and acceptance of the fundamental issues in evaluation. When evaluating the implications, the book has on the changing nature of evaluation, it provides a perspective of reasoning. To put it in another way, fundamental issues in evaluations are like the seasons in a year. Throughout the year, the seasons will change, nonetheless the season will always arrive. With this in mind, fundamental issues are the core of the evaluation cycle. Year after year, they will arrive, nevertheless, it is how they chose to interpret the issues and strive to provide clear solutions for the issues, that the field of evaluation will strengthen and evaluate. I feel that this is an important piece of literature for an evaluator to read. The literature continues the conversation about the field of evaluation and the competing viewpoints about evaluations. This book only enhances the awareness of all evaluators to look at the fundamental issues in evaluation and reflect on their individual participation in how they are personally addressing the fundamental issues in evaluation. For evaluators, this book brings into focus, “Am I adding to the field in a positive manner that helps move the field forward or am I a barrier to moving the field forward?”

This book is a resource to my study in the EDRS 820 program and my graduate research. In EDRS 820, this book was instrumental in guiding my thinking to develop my evaluation plan. It allows me to discover and foresee the obstacles/issues in developing my plan. As an individual who is considering transitioning from a research base approach to a client driven approach with evaluation as my foci of research, I need to be aware of the perceived pitfalls and short comings in the field. I need to understand the issues that are associated with evaluations. The book provides me with a great understanding of the overall themes that are emerging in the field of evaluation. This is a great framework to begin to structure my foundation in evaluation. It provides me with a historical context to understand the overarching themes that are in the field of evaluation. I look forward to continuing this adventure in the field of evaluation.

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