

Book Review

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C. Smith (2021). *Nonprofit program evaluation made simple: Get your data. Show your impact. Improve your programs*: Portland, OR, USA. ISBN: 978-0-578-80388-3.

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I am an academic who also works with not-for-profit organisations in Australia and in low-income countries to build their program evaluation systems. I have observed in the last two decades that interest in program evaluation and outcomes measurement within the not-for-profit sector has heightened around the world. Largely driven by funders, governments, politicians, academics, civil society bodies (including the media) and boards, the trend is about demonstrating the difference the sector makes in people and local communities they serve. As a result, books on how not-for-profit organisations can build their program evaluations culture and frameworks are opportune.

It is against this backdrop that I find Chari Smith's *Nonprofit program evaluation made simple: Get your data. Show your impact. Improve your programs* very timely. At a first glance, the book is not for evaluation theoreticians – it is practice-based at its core providing readers with 'step-by-step directions from the beginning of the evaluation process to the end'. The book combines process and outcome evaluation and discusses ideas on using data to improve program implementation and demonstrate overall success and impact. It is written by a very experienced evaluation professional who has worked in the industry for decades as a trainer and coach. The book comes with a link to a companion website giving readers access to evaluation examples, case studies, templates and processes: www.evaluationintoaction.com/getyourdata.

Smith's book has four parts. In Part One, readers are introduced to the rudiments of program evaluation. The section discusses the definition and key terminologies of program evaluation as well as the need to embed program evaluation into the not-for-profit organisational landscapes and culture. Smith dedicates six chapters to evaluation planning in Part Two. The topics discussed include the importance of and formula for defining measurable outcomes, how to create logic and impact models (which I reflect on below), determining the methodology and timelines. Although Part Three has only two chapters, it presents an in-depth methodical approach to managing program evaluation data collection and ethical considerations. Smith dedicates four chapters in the last part of the book to data analysis and reporting for internal and external purposes.

Three key aspects of Smith's book stood out for me and are worthy of further commentary. First, the book is so easy to read. The language is down to earth and would make sense to a novice to program evaluation. The systematic approach to program evaluation presented in the book will be valuable to students and managers of program evaluation. Smith did a great job with embedding tables, diagrams, vignettes as well as case studies to corroborate the claims of the text. Although majority of the cases appear to be situated in Western and the Anglosphere contexts, the principles presented in the book are congruent with good evaluation practice and are transferable to other settings with some adjustments.

The next area of focus is the *Impact Model* Smith has created as an alternative to program logic. Smith explains the rationale:

some clients don't like logic models. When they hear the term, a nervous quiver runs down their spine, perhaps post-traumatic stress from a bad experience. These clients want a visual summary, but they don't like the logic model's cookie-cutter approach (pp. 65-66).

Smith argues further that the impact model has a pictorial superiority advantage over logic models. Smith discusses the three core sections of the impact model on pages 74–75. *Structure* is about what the program does, its goal, who it is meant for and those involved with delivering it.

Activities define what exactly is being provided to participants, while *Outcomes* describe measurable change expected to occur as a result of program activities.

In my opinion, Smith's attempt to distinguish the impact model from logic models is less convincing. For evaluation thinkers and practitioners, it would have served readers well to have presented a synoptic view of the two models to establish their similarities and differences. While it is encouraging to see new ideas emerge in the field, theoretical justification for 'new' and other ways of doing program evaluation are critical especially when they seem to criticise 'old' and current ways of doing evaluation. More publications and perhaps critical evaluation on the impact model and its adaptability to different contexts would be essential as there appears to be little independent critical commentary in the literature.

Last but not the least area relates to Smith's comments on pages 212–215 on 'presenting negative findings'. Reporting negative outcomes in a sector that relies largely on external funding can have its trepidations. However, Smith re-assures not-for-profit program evaluation practitioners not to panic about reporting negative findings, noting that 'innovation often requires failure' (p. 214). Smith normalises occurrence of negative outcomes in program evaluation stating that 'it happens all the time'. Smith calls on the sector to be honest to funders and not attempt to sweep negative outcomes under the rug. The courage to report negative findings is an ethical issue. Ethical evaluation is at the core of evaluation practice and for a sector that tend to 'require' reporting positive outcomes to 'remain funded', this is an important point. As Smith notes, negative data or outcomes could trigger the need to review how a program

was designed and implemented, and action plans for improvement while establishing the organisation as a learning one.

Overall, Chari Smith's book is an insightful text for program evaluation practitioners, its limited focus on evaluation theory notwithstanding. The book's methodical presentation of program evaluation would make sense to almost anyone including those who would be reading about program evaluation for the first time. Future editions of the book should consider including more examples and case studies from indigenous communities and non-Western contexts.

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