

Review

Michael Quinn Patton. (2018). *Principles-focused evaluation: The GUIDE*.
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In introducing his most recent contribution to the field of evaluation research—*Principles-focused evaluation: The GUIDE*—Michael Quinn Patton does not explicitly state, as authors of authoritative works often do, who he has written it for! Indeed, there is no need to do so! For, from the first word, it is clear that this book is essential reading for anyone involved in any kind of work where quality of life is the primary concern and who is interested in the quality and effectiveness of what is done in the name of enhancing individual, community, and societal wellbeing.

As an undergraduate student of psychology, I was introduced to Patton's careful and caring thinking through his second edition of *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (Patton, 1986). It struck home at the level of values; it taught me how to conduct evaluation research ethically, holding those whose needs and aspirations are intended to be met always at the centre. Now, as a community psychologist and teacher of undergraduate and graduate students, I find his

latest offering no less profound. I will use it in my teaching and my research. It will be invaluable for students, teachers, and researchers alike. It would also be valuable for social support organisations, their managers, and their practitioner staff. This is because Patton is able to illuminate so well why evaluation is important whenever work intended to be life-enhancing is done. In this book he articulates, in particular, the very special place of evaluation that is focused on principles in the challenging niche of complex dynamic situations. Patton points out these are becoming more common as the complexity of the world increases.

The book is divided into five parts covering: (1) what Patton means by principles in the context of social initiatives, interventions, or programmes and their evaluations; (2) the GUIDE framework for considering the effectiveness of principles in these contexts; (3) examples of principles-driven initiatives and their principles-focused evaluations; (4) principles for evaluations and evaluators; and (5) tools and a checklist for use by principles-focused evaluators.

In setting out the notion of principles, Patton distinguishes between natural principles, moral principles, and effectiveness principles, focusing his attention in the book on the latter. His main idea is that principles-focused evaluation fills a niche in the evaluation spectrum that is currently not catered for. Principles-focused evaluation enables programmes to be evaluated when there is a good deal of complexity, change, and uncertainty, as principles provide a constancy—often the only constancy. He notes that, therefore, an important role for evaluators is to ensure that the principles themselves are well developed and that this process itself can be invaluable developmentally for organisations. A good deal of material is provided that would help the evaluator carry out this role. The front section of the book ensures the reader has a strong sense of what principles are and where principles-focused evaluation fits in the

evaluation spectrum: what it is, what it is not, what distinguishes it from other forms of evaluation.

Patton's propositions are based on his extensive and detailed previous work which includes development of evaluation theory and theory-based practice and vast personal experience in undertaking evaluations and evaluating evaluations. He interweaves theory and experiential knowledge, successfully illuminating his ideas about evaluation, their foundations, and what they look like when used. Patton's extensive knowledge and experience mean that multiple examples are provided, in turn enabling the reader to gain a finely nuanced understanding of each element of the approach to principles-focused evaluation he expounds.

The GUIDE framework is the focal point of the book. GUIDE is a series of criteria which, together, provide a framework for assessing evaluability, applied to principles. High-quality effectiveness principles, as presented by Patton, are able to provide guidance on what to do, are useful and inspiring, adaptable and enduring, and evaluable. The framework guides the undertaking of evaluation where the focus is on principles while serving multiple evaluation purposes: formative and summative; accountability; knowledge generation; and developmental. Patton's clear (plain English) explanations and his sense of when reminders are needed aid the reader in understanding the framework and its use and value, its location within the broader field of evaluation, and its relationship to, and distinctiveness in relation to, other evaluation tools and frameworks. Importantly, terms are used consistently, and nuanced examples are given throughout. Every question that came to mind as I read was answered—usually no sooner than I had thought of it! The six real-life exemplars which follow further illuminate the framework and its use and value. Overall, the GUIDE and its examples-in-use provide rich material which helps the reader make sense of principles and their role and

provide an explanatory resource that can be returned to again and again. The tools presented in the final section put a stamp on the usability of this book.

The book is superbly written, a standout strength of the book. The style of writing is such that it is easy to follow Patton's points of view, his explanations, and his arguments. He is a master of linking and looping: he brings the reader with him as the ideas are presented and the grand plan unfolds. Each chapter builds easily and seamlessly on what has been before: reminders of key points already presented appear in a sufficient and timely manner. Combined with tantalising glimpses of what is to come, key point reminders help the reader make forward-focused connections such that a coherent whole emerges. Practical exercises provide opportunities to bring the material to life in a directly meaningful way for the reader, which may be of value to individual evaluators as they develop their evaluative skills or to an organisation as it considers its information needs and plans an evaluation.

Another standout strength of the book is its acknowledgement and embracing of the role values play in life. Patton directly engages in the business of acknowledging the value-laden nature of all human endeavour. He illustrates in his propositions how values operate in evaluation and in contexts that are evaluated and why it is critical that those who work to enhance life do not ignore or attempt to nullify their presence but rather celebrate the richness they offer for the benefit of all of humanity.

Principles-focused evaluation: The GUIDE is a complete book in my view. It describes, in a very accessible way, a theoretically sound and experientially tested approach that has clearly been valuable to programmes and organisations. It contains a balance of theoretical rigour and practical application such that evaluators and programme providers alike, particularly those working in such complex, dynamic

situations as Patton identifies, will be well served in their endeavours to enhance quality of life in the work they do in their communities.

Patton himself invites critique of his book as a final practice exercise, using the GUIDE criteria. This is another example of the fullness of the coverage of this book. It may be that users find that there is too much complexity and nuance in its pages to keep more than a tenuous grasp on the ideas Patton puts forward. Alternatively, like me they will find that it is a rich resource to which to return time and again, finding new insights in each revisit of this part, then that. This book must be utilised to discover its full and true value. Patton invites us to join him in the journey of further developing the field by testing out, adapting, and revising the ideas he offers to deepen understanding for the benefit of all.

Reference

Patton, M.Q. (1978). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.