

Book review

Taylor, D. and Balloch, S. (eds) 2005: *The politics of evaluation: participation and policy implementation*. Bristol: Policy Press. 261 pp. £22.99 paper. ISBN 1-86134-605-0.

The basis for the discussions presented in each chapter of this book evolved from papers presented by individual authors at a national conference on the ‘politics of evaluation’ (held in 2002 at the University of Brighton). As such, this collection has brought together some of the most up to date and critical research within the field of the politics of evaluation.

The discussions within the book are divided into four main sections, each presenting a set of chapters based around one of the four main themes: Governance and evaluation; Participation and evaluation; Partnerships and evaluation; and Learning from evaluation. By grouping the collection in this way readers are able to follow distinctive paths of discussion whereby complex arguments are developed and made easily accessible. However, by presenting a clear and concise overview of the four main themes within the introduction to the book, the reader is led to recognize and appreciate the intricate links between each theme and how each relates to the other in an integrative way.

A key strength of the book is the fact that it encompasses a broad range of topic areas and in doing so, a discussion of substantial breadth and depth ensues, grounded in a framework of real research projects and evaluation programmes not limited to single specific projects, but focusing on a number of major, relevant and current issues and drawing on diverse experiences and outcomes, ranging from evaluation of interagency working in health and social care, to evaluation of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) initiative, to evaluation of partnerships to cope with winter pressures.

In bringing together contributions from authors from a wide range of academic and research backgrounds, this book explores the key issues surrounding politics of evaluation from a diverse, informed and directly relevant collection of discussions. Furthermore, as the editors themselves point

out, the book progresses from the traditional view which recognizes that ‘*evaluation operates within political constraints*’ to highlight the underpinning theme that ‘*evaluation itself is socially constructed and politically articulated*’. In taking the debate on evaluation research forward and adopting a new approach to evaluation, this book has attempted to critique what are seen as the shortcomings of recent, contemporary discussions of politics in evaluation research.

An over-riding argument seen throughout this book centres on the belief that evaluation, in order to be maximally valuable in establishing the effectiveness of policies and programmes, must do more than simply focus on ‘what works’, which has been the thrust of New Labour’s emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy’. It is argued instead that in order for evaluation to generate real learning, with the ability to replicate good practice and successfully and usefully inform policy development, it is essential to ask the questions ‘why’ and ‘how’ programmes/policies work or are effective. Readers are led through discussions and arguments of how and why this goal can be achieved and the book identifies how evaluation research can progress in order to encompass the politics surrounding evaluation and successfully achieves this aim.

In particular, the book stresses the need for the central actors to which a programme or policy relates to be involved in all aspects of evaluation research. As such, specific examples are presented to demonstrate why this is essential, how it will contribute to evaluation outcome and most importantly how best to achieve useful ‘user involvement’ in evaluation research. Furthermore, problems with the current form which evaluation research has often adopted, that of a cynical eye, emphasizing problems, disadvantages, and shortcomings of programmes and policies are explored. At the same time, the need to adopt a positive approach to evaluation which explores the achievements and successes of programmes and which seeks to identify process by which outcomes are achieved is highlighted.

By addressing factors held as necessary to be considered when planning, conducting and disseminating evaluative research, this book not only becomes

a highly informative, current discussion of the politics of evaluation, but also a practical guide for those intending to undertake evaluative research. Thus, the book is a valuable resource for academics, students, researchers, policy makers, project developers and service providers, as well as those involved in evaluative work in the field of social policy and programme evaluation and those involved in general evaluative research of any kind.

In summary, this book provides a critical discussion of political factors surrounding evaluation research, raising important questions and providing guidance on how to relate evaluations to their

political context. It makes good use of quotes to illustrate key arguments, overview boxes at the end of each chapter and tables to present specific information in an easily accessible way. The book is well written and the information chosen for inclusion is both relevant, interesting and thought provoking.

Jenny Cove

*Research Assistant: Older People's Programme
CRIPACC
University of Hertfordshire*