

4-1-2018

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Recommended APA Citation

Anderson, A. W. (2018). Truckin' Down the Principles-Focused Evaluation Road: A Review of Michael Quinn Patton's Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(4), 774-778. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss4/4>

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Abstract

This review of Michael Quinn Patton's *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE* (Patton, 2017a) examines the organizational structure of Patton's book and notes the contributions of other evaluators who share their experiences in using principles-focused evaluation with a variety of programs, including ones serving homeless youth, ones seeking solutions to global food issues, and ones working to change journalism. *The GUIDE* provides a wealth of informative material about Patton's model, an evaluative tool based on the acronym GUIDE—principles must Guide, be Useful, Inspire, be Developmental, and be Evaluable—plus practice exercises to encourage reflective processing of the material and numerous charts and tables. Patton also cautions readers to avoid a “best practices” mindset by embracing uncertainty, even toward evaluation.

Keywords

Principles, Principles-Focused Evaluation, Developmental Evaluation, Best Practices

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Truckin' Down the Principles-Focused Evaluation Road: A Review of Michael Quinn Patton's *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE*

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*This review of Michael Quinn Patton's *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE* (Patton, 2017a) examines the organizational structure of Patton's book and notes the contributions of other evaluators who share their experiences in using principles-focused evaluation with a variety of programs, including ones serving homeless youth, ones seeking solutions to global food issues, and ones working to change journalism. The *GUIDE* provides a wealth of informative material about Patton's model, an evaluative tool based on the acronym *GUIDE*—principles must Guide, be Useful, Inspire, be Developmental, and be Evaluable—plus practice exercises to encourage reflective processing of the material and numerous charts and tables. Patton also cautions readers to avoid a “best practices” mindset by embracing uncertainty, even toward evaluation. Keywords: Principles, Principles-Focused Evaluation, Developmental Evaluation, Best Practices*

Anyone who frames an academic tome with Grateful Dead lyrics has my immediate attention. Michael Quinn Patton does just that in his most recent book, *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE* (Patton, 2018), heading his preface and his conclusion with this lyric from the Dead's 1970 song “Truckin’”: “Lately it occurs to me what a long, strange trip it's been” (p. vii). Patton's journey through the field of organizational evaluation, a journey which began in the mid-1970s at about the same time the field itself began, has, indeed, been long. An award-winning sociologist, Patton was a faculty member with the University of Minnesota for eighteen years, served as president of the American Evaluation Association soon after its formation in 1986, was co-chair of the 2005 International Evaluation Conference in Toronto, and has worked as an independent evaluation consultant at the local, national, and international levels since 1978. *The GUIDE* is the latest in a string of books by Patton, most of which have traveled the same organizational evaluation road and each of which has explored the highway from a slightly different, ever evolving perspective. *The GUIDE*, however, cuts to the heart of an organization's reason for being and considers, by articulating and evaluating its principles, whether it is on the journey it intended or if it somehow has strayed from the road.

Patton's principles-focused evaluation (P-FE) approach differs from summative evaluation, that evaluates organizations in terms of products and outcomes, and formative evaluation, that considers the processes leading to those products and outcomes. Both formative and summative evaluations tend to be externally focused, whereas developmental evaluation, which considers organizations as complex and in flux, and P-FE, which considers the principles that drive an organization, tend to be internally focused.

A Knowledgeable GUIDE for the P-FE Journey

Patton (2018) notes that The Joint Committee on Standards in Educational Evaluation includes, as its fourth standard, one particular to “values identification and articulation” (p. 124). However, Patton continues, even “many evaluators, well trained in social science methods are much more comfortable with technical discussions than values discussions” (p.

124). *The GUIDE* seeks to familiarize evaluators, scholars, and world-changers with values discussions by offering an everything-you-need-to-know-and-then-some compendium of information about developing, implementing, and evaluating principles that guide an organization and its programs. Patton first defines and discusses the importance of principles in general, explains various ways in which programs and organizations can be evaluated, and then positions principles-focused evaluation (P-FE) within the larger field. Next, he walks readers through the process of developing effective principles—as opposed to rules, assumptions, or even so-called “best practices,” the concept of which, Patton (2018) claims, “poisons genuine dialogue about both what we know and the limitations of what we know” (p. 215). He then explains the processes of evaluating the principles themselves and of evaluating the effectiveness of principles. Patton’s model is based on five questions that *GUIDE* the determination: Do the principles provide **Guidance** for making decisions rather than being just rules to follow? Do the principles provide **Useful** guidance? Do the principles **Inspire** and motivate members and others to keep working despite obstacles? Are the principles **Developmental**, that is, can they adapt to changing contexts and situations—as opposed to best-practices models which promote the idea that one-size-fits-all? Are the principles **Evaluable**? In the last two sections, Patton focuses on principles and P-FE tools as they guide evaluators conducting evaluations.

Patton (2018) writes in an authoritative but conversational tone for which I was grateful, as my initial skimming through *The GUIDE* left me daunted by the sheer amount of material, including more than a hundred tables, charts, and lists. He also is mindful that readers bring varying levels of expertise to the book. “To help you get oriented,” Patton (2018) writes in the first paragraph of the Preface, “I thought it would be useful to provide a brief overview of the journey.... In so doing, I should note the book assumes some familiarity with program evaluation basics [gulp!] like traditionally defining evaluation as rendering judgments of merit, worth, and significance....” (p. vii). In other words, the book may assume familiarity with basics, but Patton does not. Instead, he immediately provides a definition of *evaluation*. Similarly, Chapters 4 and 5 trace the development of the evaluation profession and review different approaches to evaluations other than P-FE, again providing contextual background to readers less familiar with program evaluation and refreshing the memories of more experienced readers. The practice exercises at the end of most chapters take the form of reflective, open-ended prompts that allow readers to work through the material presented in the chapter, usually in terms of their own experiences and/or fields of interest. One exercise, at the end of Chapter 11, invites students to think more expansively as they evaluate the principles contained within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. Teachers may find these exercises useful for starting discussions, guiding group projects, and/or shaping written assignments, while consultants may use them to guide clients and their staffs through a process of reflection, articulation, and organizational self-appraisal.

But the book isn’t all definitions, charts, lists, how-to information, and assignments. Every chapter begins with a pithy quote from literature, pop culture, or an historical figure, what Patton terms “garnishes, seasonings, and a bit of *amuse-bouche*” (p. xiv), designed to pique readers’ interests and to frame the chapter. As noted, even the preface—and do not skip the preface—begins with a Grateful Dead quote, and I, for one, found myself standing beside Patton, ready to truck on down the road through his P-FE journey. The journey is both local and global. In Chapter 9, for example, Patton takes us into the world of adult education and to a dialogue with Stephen D. Brookfield, Distinguished University Professor and the John Ireland Endowed Chair at the University of Saint Thomas in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota, about the essence and origins of principles. In Chapter 25, Patton discusses using the *GUIDE* model to evaluate the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which was endorsed by more than 100 countries and organizations around the world. Three chapters, 28

through 30, examine the ways principles can drive programs concerned with global food issues, crop research, and agroecology.

Other Evaluators, Other Voices Along the Way

While Patton is a knowledgeable guide through the material, he also is a storyteller and creative non-fiction writer who understands the power of narrative to help readers, as Abbott (2008) put it, “grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well” (p. 10). Woven throughout *The GUIDE* are bits and chunks and even whole chapters of story, often told by others in the field. Of the 399 pages of text, 76 pages, or almost twenty percent, feature the voices of others telling their sometimes quite personal stories as evaluators, as program directors, and/or as colleagues. Hearing these people share how P-FE worked in specific situations at specific times illustrates the extent to which P-FE can be applied.

For example, Chapter 19, which focuses on the Developmental aspect of P-FE, is co-written by Yve Susskind, a professional evaluator in Washington state, and Peggy Holman, a systems change practitioner who co-founded Journalism That Matters (JTM), a non-profit organization working with people from across the information ecosystem to consider how news can support community.¹ Holman and Susskind take turns telling how they “made sense of the experience we shared in designing, hosting, and developmentally evaluating” a conference based on purposeful disruption in order to spark innovative thinking. In Chapter 32, Ricardo Wilson-Grau, an international evaluator based in Brazil and developer of an evaluation method he calls Outcome Harvesting, explains how Outcome Harvesting works to identify social change and how his and Patton’s work have interconnected. In one of the most poignant chapters, Chapter 34, Nora F. Murphy, a Minneapolis-based evaluator, recounts how the death of one of her young sons led her into a journey of defining her own principles to guide her in her work as a professional evaluator. Murphy also teams up with Heather Huseby, Ed.D., executive director of YouthLink, an organization working with homeless young people, to describe, in Chapter 13, how they used evaluation to guide stakeholders toward “transitioning YouthLink to a principles-driven organization” (p. 104). P-FE isn’t necessarily limited to organizations, either. I could easily see myself using it as a tool for individual self-reflection. What, after all, are the principles that guide any person’s life and how closely do the actions of the person match those principles?

Visually Conflicted and Winding Road

As informative as *The GUIDE* is, I also found it visually at odds with itself and in need of pruning. Earlier I mentioned the number of tables, charts, diagrams, and lists in the book. Patton (2018) packs 142 of these exhibits in his 399 pages of text, not including the multitude of numbered, bulleted, and other lists within the prose writing. Stretches of explanatory narrative in a conversational tone are interrupted with charted, tabled, framed, and shaded declarative statements often in an authoritative tone, and the two types of text did not mesh smoothly. The visual impact became overwhelming, and I found myself becoming argumentative. Were there really, for example, only five steps to basic extension processes and basic evaluation processes (Exhibit 10.2, p. 79)—how could Patton be so certain? Some of what Patton called principles sounded an awful lot like rules to me. For example, Exhibit 31.11 lists ten principles for in-depth interviewing, but each of the ten begins with an imperative

¹ Being mindful of the journalistic principal of transparency, I disclose here that I met Peggy Holman briefly in 2009 when I participated in two JTM-organized conferences. I still receive an occasional email from JTM, but I have not been in contact with Holman or with the organization for a number of years.

direction—a rule? The first is “Ask open-ended questions” (pp. 304-305). But open-ended questions may not be appropriate during all parts of an interview. “When and where were you born,” for example, ensures particular information will be given, information that may be needed depending on the research questions. The more open-ended question “What can you tell me about your early years?” may not elicit that information. Perhaps the principle should have been stated as “Ask different types of questions appropriate to the type of information you need.” But then I think of Holman and Susskind’s work with journalists where they deliberately sought to throw participants off by using disruptive strategies. Would the principle there be to ask inappropriate questions? Despite Exhibit 7.3’s illustrating the difference between principles and rules by comparing the principle of seasoning to taste to the rule of adding a set amount of salt to a dish without considering whether those invited for dinner were on low-sodium diets (p. 51), was P-FE just another step-by-step rules-based methodological recipe?

These questions crystallized as I read Chapter 21, “Evaluable Principles: Methods and Measures for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Principles” (p. 179). Patton discusses both quantitative and qualitative coding and analysis, and he provides a chart of sample interview protocols (Exhibit 21.2, pp. 182-184), a Likert-scale ratings instrument (Exhibit 21.3, p. 185), and two matrices used to evaluate the Paris Aid Declaration (Exhibits 21.5 and 21.6, pp. 188-189). Chapter headings and subheadings use the language of objectivist, post-positivist research: conceptual triangulation (Chapter 10), principles focused sampling (Chapter 22), rigorous thinking (Chapter 23), validating (Chapter 26). Such language presumes the existence of objective principles that can be proved and/or used as a standard by which actions can be measured, a winding road presumption with no clear destination and which begs the question of whether Patton has unwittingly positioned PF-E as another “best practice.” Earlier, however, Patton claimed that a best practice carries an inherent danger, as it “easily becomes a new orthodoxy, and then a mandate, when that alleged best practice aligns with the ideological preferences of the powerful” (p. 216). Who, after all, determines which values and principles an organization should adopt, and at what point does P-FE become unprincipled?

Embracing the Uncertainty of the Journey

Patton (2018) acknowledges the importance of ethical considerations in P-FE, as he devotes the last section of *The GUIDE* to chapters examining the principles that guide evaluators and the evaluative process. For example, Patton writes that “principles, or potential principles, don’t often come ready-made” (p. 297) and that “principles-focused evaluators have to be able to recognize embedded and nascent principles, gently extract them, then *mold and shape them* until they constitute principles” (p. 297, emphasis added) that then can be tested using the GUIDE model. Yet Patton never quite addresses the line between an evaluator guiding an organization to discover and articulate its principles and an evaluator subtly imposing his/her own principles or the principles of a dominant culture or system on an organization. Rather, Patton claims both in the very beginning of the first chapter and at the very end of his twenty-page epilogue that there are two types of human guidance principles, “Moral principles tell us what is right. Effectiveness principles tell us what works” (p. 5, p. 396), and that *The GUIDE* “has been concerned primarily with evaluating effectiveness principles” (p. 396). Patton also might respond that his discussion on so-called “best practices” includes best practices as applied to evaluation, that he has cautioned that “there’s pridefulness in proclaiming that one is practicing what is ‘best’” (p. 217), and that embracing uncertainty—even in the long, strange road that is evaluation—might be the best practice of all.

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Author Note

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Article Citation

Anderson, A. W. (2018). Truckin' down the principles-focused evaluation road: A review of Michael Quinn Patton's principles-focused evaluation: The GUIDE. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(1), 774-778. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss4/4>
