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Using Research to Save the Anthropocene: A Review of Michael Quinn Patton's Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles

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Abstract

Patton's (2020) book, *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles*, will expand your knowledge of evaluation, research, the Anthropocene, global issues, and the planet. In 2023, it is important that we understand the impact of our past and present actions on the planet and the future of humanity. Patton's principles, supported with comics, figures, and exhibits, will grow evaluators in the knowledge, skills, and mindset to make a positive future difference in our planet and humanity. Methodologists will appreciate a new way to examine evaluation and grow as professionals while professors will have a source to add to their course content.

Keywords

Anthropocene, evaluation, Paulo Freire, research, systems thinking

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Using Research to Save the Anthropocene: A Review of Michael Quinn Patton's *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles*

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Patton's (2020) book, *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles*, will expand your knowledge of evaluation, research, the Anthropocene, global issues, and the planet. In 2023, it is important that we understand the impact of our past and present actions on the planet and the future of humanity. Patton's principles, supported with comics, figures, and exhibits, will grow evaluators in the knowledge, skills, and mindset to make a positive future difference in our planet and humanity. Methodologists will appreciate a new way to examine evaluation and grow as professionals while professors will have a source to add to their course content.

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What Do Blue Marbles Represent?

As students enter the advanced evaluation course, they discover blue marbles on their desks and principles hanging on the four walls of the classroom. The lights are low, and the professor begins the class by asking them to brainstorm what the blue marbles may represent in life. Students quickly read the principles listed on the walls in hopes of discovering a clue to this mysterious opening to a new semester: 1. Global Thinking Principle, 2. Anthropocene as Context Principle, 3. Transformative Engagement Principle, and 4. Integration Principle. Using these principles as a guide, students begin calling out possible answers to the puzzle: sky, ocean, sapphires, eyes, Earth, lapis lazuli, Neptune, gas flames, Uranus, Siamese fighting fish, and many other "blue" responses. As a group, students narrow it down to a planet, ocean, or sky. With this success, the professor quotes Patton (2020, p. 1) by stating, "Blue Marble refers to the iconic image of Earth from space without borders or boundaries, a whole-Earth perspective." This course on evaluation was going to look to the past for a focus on the future by using current data and trends and allowing the four overarching principles to guide the work.

How Are the Four Principles Connected to the Evaluation of Earth?

The terminology "Blue Marble" comes from a picture of whole Earth taken on December 7, 1972, by astronauts on *Apollo 17* (refer to Figure 1 below for the picture). The first overarching principle focuses on global thinking. Blue Marble evaluators must see the interconnections of the global (macro) and local (micro) challenges facing our world. Examples of these challenges include climate change, pollution, and global disparities. Once we have an understanding of our interconnectedness, the second principle addresses the Anthropocene as context. "In a purely scientific perspective, the Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch aimed at indicating the transformative impact of human beings on the planet's ecosystem" (Zottola & de Majo, 2022, p. 1). The term first appeared in 2000 when two scientists, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, attempted to explain the effects of anthropic events on the

environment. By understanding the Anthropocene, evaluators will be able to study past patterns, assess current trends, and make a plan for future success of living on our planet.

Figure 1

The Blue Marble is an image of Earth taken on December 7, 1972, from a distance of 29,000 kilometers (18,000 miles) from the planet's surface.



The third principle exemplifies the importance of our addressing the Anthropocene in a transformative engagement matter, which means we need to see a dramatic and urgent change across the global scale. The Blue Marble evaluation process encourages a participatory process that involves people across the globe addressing this issue to positively affect the local and global environments for the sake of our planet. Lastly, the integration principle stresses the importance of embedding the Blue Marble principles in the evaluation of these types of systems and initiatives. To fulfill this, evaluators must examine the past to make the best decisions for the future based on current events and the present trajectory.

What Are the Eight Blue Marble Operating Principles?

In order to be successful in this type of evaluation, researchers must have an understanding of *systems thinking*, which is essential to Blue Marble evaluation. Arnold and Wade (2015) conducted a study on eight different definitions of systems thinking and synthesized the results. This synthesis of data resulted in an objective definition:

Systems thinking is a set of synergistic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviors, and devising modifications to them in order to produce desired effects. These skills work together as a system. (p. 675)

Under this idea of systems thinking, Patton shares eight operating principles that Blue Marble evaluators should embrace for success: 1. Transboundary engagement, 2. GLOCAL, 3. Cross-Silos, 4. Time being of the essence, 5. Yin-Yang, 6. Bricolage methods, 7. World savvy, and 8. Skin in the game. These principles will be discussed below.

The first operating principle is the *transboundary engagement* principle that focuses on the idea of “Think globally, act globally” (Patton, 2020, p. 39). Some of the current, global issues include global economic turbulence, virulent infectious diseases, global cyberterrorism, and hunger/poverty worldwide. The challenge for Blue Marble evaluators is to embrace the idea of evaluating without borders, as we are all connected on a global scale.

The second operating principle addresses the idea of *GLOCAL* or glocalization (Patton, 2020; Steger, 2013), where local and global processes and scales of change interact. It is important that evaluators examine variations at a local level while keeping in mind the larger patterns globally. Patton challenges readers to think, act, and evaluate *GLOCALLY* based on the Blue Marble principles previously discussed.

Cross-Silos is the third operating principle that addresses the interactions across different problem areas such as education, crime, poverty, income, and economic growth. These issues are interrelated, and it is essential to engage across these areas to achieve a true system change that is needed for the future success of our world. Blue Marble evaluators understand this and evaluates across all sectors and issues to understand the bigger and global perspective.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, “The future depends on what you do today” (as cited in Patton, 2020, p. 74). This quote synthesizes the importance of the fourth principle addressing *time being of the essence*, where evaluators in their program and evaluation design have a sense of urgency in studying and learning from the past, making changes in the present, and forecasting how the respective changes will influence the future. Under this principle, Patton (2020) shares a meaningful story called *The Law of Peace*. The Constitution for the Iroquois in the 12th century shares that chiefs, before making decisions, should evaluate the impact of those decisions on the seventh generation to come. Imagine the difference we can make with our Blue Marble if we begin evaluating our decisions on the impact of future generations. We should all follow the Seventh Generation idea.

Patton’s fifth operating principle that Blue Marble evaluators should address is the concept of the *Yin-Yang* principle. Figure 2 below includes a picture and description of Yin and Yang. Lao Tzu wrote “The Yin-Yang of Life” that summarizes this principle.

At birth, a person is flexible and flowing.
 At death, a person becomes rigid and blocked.
 Whatever is flexible and flowing will tend to grow.
 Whatever is rigid and blocked will atrophy and die.

Figure 2

Yin and Yang is a Chinese philosophical concept that describes opposite but interconnected forces. The black represents Yin, and the white represents Yang. “Within the white Yang is a small black circle, and within the black Yin is a small white circle, symbolizing that within Yin there is Yang, and within Yang, there is Yin” (Patton, 2020, p. 88).



Within in this principle, Patton discusses the previous four principles and how there are Yin-Yang implications for each of them. For example, the *GLOCAL* principle integrates the local and global into one perspective. To extend the thinking of the Yin-Yang principle, Patton shares the concept of “ecopedagogy,” by Paulo Freire, where Freire harmonizes the individual and community, reflection and action, objectivity and subjectivity, and thinking and emotion. All of these ideas are essential traits for Blue Marble evaluation. Some of the last words that

Paulo Freire wrote on April 21, 1997, before his death on May 2, 1997, addressed the premise behind the Blue Marble Evaluation.

How urgent [it] is that we fight for more fundamental ethical principles, such as respect for the life of human beings, the life of other animals, of birds, and for the life of rivers and forests. I do not believe in loving among women and men, among human beings, if we do not become capable of loving the world. Ecology has gained tremendous importance at the end of the century. It must be present in any educational practice of a radical, critical, and liberating nature. (p. 94)

The sixth operating principle addresses the *bricolage methods* principle. This concept is based on eclecticism, an open-minded approach that considers multiple research methods and designs for evaluators to embrace for Blue Marble evaluation. Patton is very clear that this book is not a methods book with core methods or designs to complete this type of evaluation. Patton (2015) wrote a quality methods book titled *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* that could be used for Blue Marble evaluation. However, this principle emphasizes the importance of matching methods to the evaluation situation. Patton shares six criteria of quality to consider in Blue Marble Bricolage Methods: 1. Utilization-focused evaluation criterion (comprehensive framework for a particular situation), 2. Blue Marble principles criterion (evaluation adheres to the principles), 3. Situational-appropriateness criterion (methodology appropriate for situation), 4. Truth (arguments soundly made), 5. Beauty (attainment of coherence), and 6. Justice (attainment of politics fair).

World savvy is the seventh operating principle for Blue Marble evaluators. To be a “world savvy” evaluator, one must be “globally and cross-culturally competent...and knowledgeable about human and ecosystem interdependencies and stewardship” (Patton, 2020, p. 122). To help build this mindset, knowledge, and skillset, Patton shares a “World Savvy Matrix” in his book that addresses the core concepts of values and attitudes, behaviors, and skills. In addition, Patton provides thorough competencies and ongoing development to become a world savvy evaluator. Although this principle can be considered abstract in nature, Patton provides the necessary concrete competencies to gain this skillset.

The last and arguably most interesting principle is the idea of *skin in the game*. Whether some people will admit it or not, all of humanity has “skin in the game” when it comes to the survival of our planet. We are all part of the problem and have the power to be part of the solution to save the Anthropocene. Within this principle, Patton addresses the concept of “posttruth.” As evaluators, it is important that we understand that objective facts are sometimes less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief. When conducting Blue Marble evaluation, we must keep the idea of posttruth in mind because it may be revealed during data analysis.

Reviewer’s Statement

When I was working on my doctorate degree, we used Michael Patton’s *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* for my qualitative research course. Although I was new to qualitative methods at that time, Patton’s book was engaging, clear to read, and very informative. Patton, along with my professor at the time, are the reason I became a qualitative methodologist myself. Because of them, I have critically reviewed qualitative books, used qualitative methods in research, began teaching qualitative methods courses, and currently embed qualitative methods in my curriculum courses. When I saw *The Qualitative Report* had Patton’s new book titled *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles* available to read and critique, I gladly accepted the opportunity. However, I quickly found that this book was

very different from Patton's prior book. To acquire the necessary level of engagement to read and critically review the book, I used the mindset that I was planning to be a Blue Marble evaluator, so I could learn this new knowledge of evaluation from a scholar I highly respect. With that mindset, I was able to enjoy this book and become a stronger methodologist with a global perspective on how to evaluate the needs of our planet.

Final Thoughts

As a professor at the doctoral level, Patton's book is perfect for an advanced methodologist course or a course that addresses issues at the global level. Although this book is a deep read with possible serious implications, Patton wrote the book in his humorous style with comics and visuals throughout the reading to help keep the reader engaged and to explain the concepts more thoroughly. Even though I am not sure if I will ever embed elements of this book into my writings or coursework, I believe my knowledge in methodology, the Anthropocene, and planetary issues has benefited from the reading, and I am thankful to Patton for writing the book. I look forward to reading Patton's future work.

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