

Book Review

Fetterman, David M.. *Empowerment Evaluation and Social Justice: Confronting the Culture of Silence*. The Guilford Press, New York, 2023. 154 pp. \$41.51-\$42.70 (paperback). ISBN: 9781462551958.

Reviewed by: Fredrik Ludwik Jhon Wanimo , Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Erny Riana Wafumilena , Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Karmina Soumena , Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
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Empowerment evaluation is an approach that emphasizes self-assessment, accountability, and capacity building across various contexts, such as education, public health, and government programs (Fetterman et al., 2015). This approach highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement and the value of community knowledge, thereby influencing mainstream evaluation practices, particularly in capacity development (Donaldson, 2017). Empowerment programs have been shown to positively impact outcomes in health, development, education, and employment, as biological growth, development, and social factors significantly influence these domains (Catalano et al., 2019, as cited in Ruhr & Fowler, 2022). This approach, grounded in ten key principles, fosters accountability and internal sustainability. By focusing on accountability, internal evaluation, and emancipatory outcomes, empowerment evaluation has the potential to create sustainable positive impacts on communities and organizations (Rossingh, 2021).

The book *Empowerment Evaluation and Social Justice: Confronting the Culture of Silence* by David M. Fetterman provides a comprehensive analysis of how empowerment evaluation can serve as a transformative tool to address structural social injustice. The book emphasizes the importance of equipping communities with the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate their own programs, empowering them to determine their own futures. Inspired by Paulo Freire's principles of Freirean pedagogy, Fetterman explores how empowerment evaluation can challenge the "culture of silence," in which marginalized populations are voiceless due to societal structures, while stakeholders become agents of change.

At the heart of the book is Fetterman's detailed exposition of the theoretical foundations and core principles of empowerment evaluation. He defines empowerment

evaluation as "the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (p. 3). Unlike conventional evaluation methods that often rely on external experts, empowerment evaluation prioritizes the active involvement of community members. This approach aims to enhance the likelihood of program success by strengthening stakeholders' capacity to plan, implement, and evaluate their programs, producing measurable and sustainable outcomes.

The framework is built on ten fundamental principles: improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability (p. 24). Collectively, these principles aim to create inclusive, credible, and sustainable evaluations that enhance programs. Fetterman argues that this method not only aids communities in improving their initiatives but also contributes to broader social transformation. As he states, "Empowerment evaluation helps people help themselves by taking greater control of their lives and improving their life trajectories" (p. 3). This participatory approach places control in the hands of communities or individuals, fostering capacity building and confidence within these groups.

Fetterman explicitly links the concept of empowerment evaluation with Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1974, 1985, as cited in Ruhr & Fowler, 2022), which emphasizes critical dialogue as a means to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures. In the same spirit, empowerment evaluation encourages communities to critically assess their circumstances and take decisive action to effect meaningful change. Fetterman writes, "Empowerment evaluation and Freirean pedagogy share a common belief: 'Everyone, regardless of being immersed in a 'culture of silence', can critically view their world through a process of dialogue with others'" (p. 6).

Through this lens, empowerment evaluation transcends being merely a tool for planning, implementing, and evaluating programs independently; it becomes a mechanism for enlightenment, education, and liberation. It enables communities to reclaim their voices and challenge dominant narratives that have perpetuated their marginalization. By fostering critical reflection and action, this method aligns with Freire's vision of education as a pathway to social transformation.

Fetterman pays significant attention to real-world applications of empowerment evaluation, illustrating its practical impact through compelling case studies. One example involves work with Feeding America, a nonprofit initiative addressing food insecurity in the United States. Empowerment evaluation played a critical role in helping food banks improve their operational effectiveness, particularly in addressing racial inequities in food distribution (p. 44). This process engaged local communities in monitoring and controlling interventions, ensuring that solutions were not only effective but also inclusive, responsive, and sustainable.

Another case study focuses on USAID/REACH's efforts to combat tuberculosis in India. Empowerment evaluation was seamlessly integrated into the initiative's work plans, enabling community members to monitor their performance, make mid-course corrections, and ultimately achieve their goals (p. 67). This participatory approach yielded better health outcomes and fostered multisectoral collaboration involving governments, communities, and healthcare providers, all taking ownership of ongoing tuberculosis prevention and treatment efforts. These case studies demonstrate the flexibility of empowerment evaluation, showcasing its adaptability to address diverse issues, from public health to social justice. By actively involving communities in the process, this method ensures that solutions are impactful and enduring.

While the book offers profound insights and actionable strategies, Fetterman acknowledges certain limitations of his approach. One major challenge is its inherent complexity. Empowerment evaluation requires a deep understanding of evaluation methods and community dynamics, which may pose a barrier for organizations or groups unfamiliar with these processes. Fetterman candidly notes, "The complexity that is the strength of this book can also limit its readability and impact" (p. vi).

Fetterman highlights the pivotal role of technology in empowerment evaluation, focusing on core tools such as video conferencing software and online spreadsheets, along with supplementary tools like data visualization applications and social media for remote evaluation. He underscores the importance of user-friendly, free, or low-cost technology aligned with empowerment principles, facilitating active participation and effectively supporting evaluation processes. Concluding this discussion, Fetterman emphasizes that technology, when wisely used, can serve as a powerful means of amplifying community voices and significantly broadening social impact.

Moreover, the successful implementation of empowerment evaluation depends on the sustained commitment of all involved parties. It is a resource-intensive process requiring time, effort, and dedication to yield meaningful results. Fetterman also stresses the importance of tailoring these principles to specific contexts, acknowledging that not all communities or programs can adopt this methodology directly.

Such adaptability necessitates patience, flexibility, and a willingness to embrace iterative learning.

Fetterman addresses frequently asked questions in empowerment evaluation, from philosophical to technical aspects, providing insights into best practices for implementation. With a practical and reflective approach, he underscores that empowerment evaluation functions as a tool for both learning and accountability, focusing on empowering communities to self-evaluate, monitor performance, and design programs for the future. With an inclusive and evidence-based style, Fetterman conveys that the success of empowerment evaluation lies in collaboration, adaptation, and respect for local cultures.

In conclusion, empowerment evaluation is a dynamic process that blends objective assessment with subjective perspectives to produce more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Fetterman illustrates how empowerment evaluation combats social injustice by empowering marginalized communities through various programs and initiatives, such as tobacco use prevention, comprehensive sex education, quality education improvement, food insecurity alleviation, bridging the digital divide, and tuberculosis eradication. He provides concrete examples from diverse global contexts, demonstrating the positive impact of empowerment evaluation in enabling communities to address their social challenges.

Ultimately, *Empowerment Evaluation and Social Justice: Confronting the Culture of Silence* by David M. Fetterman is a significant contribution to the fields of evaluation, education, and social justice. By combining theoretical insights with practical case studies, Fetterman demonstrates how empowerment evaluation can challenge systemic inequities and foster sustainable community development. This book is invaluable for academics, practitioners, and activists seeking innovative ways to tackle complex social challenges. It offers a roadmap for integrating evaluation into broader efforts to promote equity and justice, providing conceptual clarity and actionable guidance.

In an increasingly interconnected yet divided world, Fetterman's work serves as a timely reminder of the transformational potential of participatory evaluation. By emphasizing empowerment, community ownership, and social justice, *Empowerment Evaluation and Social Justice* inspires readers to view evaluation not merely as a process but as a tool for creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

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ORCID iDs

Fredrik Ludwik Jhon Wanimbo  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6535-5576>

Erny Riana Wafumilena  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3134-8520>
Karmina Soumena  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0274-8235>

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