

Program Evaluation

Pragmatic Methods for Social Work and Human Service Agencies

Be prepared for your future role in a service-oriented agency. This textbook provides practical guidance on program evaluation while avoiding replicating other course material. Drawing on over forty years of subject knowledge, Allen Rubin describes evaluation methods and designs that are feasible for service-oriented agencies and that match the degree of certainty needed by key users of outcome evaluations. The utility and easy calculation of within-group effect sizes are outlined, which enhance the value of outcome evaluations that lack control groups.

Instructions are also given on how to write and disseminate an evaluation report in a way that maximizes its chances of being used. Conducting focus group interviews and capitalizing on the value of non-probability samples will become second nature after following the effective and pragmatic advice mapped out chapter-by-chapter.

Allen Rubin has been teaching courses on program evaluation for over forty years. He is the Kantambu Latting College Professor of Leadership and Change at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work, past president of the Society for Social Work and Research, and a fellow in the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83599-2 — Pragmatic Program Evaluation for Social Work
Allen Rubin
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ALLEN RUBIN
University of Houston

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[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/rubin
DOI: 10.1017/9781108870016

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First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rubin, Allen, author.

Title: Pragmatic program evaluation for social work : an introduction / Allen Rubin, University of Houston.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019059898 (print) | LCCN 2019059899 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108835992 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108870016 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Social service — Evaluation. | Evaluation research (Social action programs)

Classification: LCC HV11 .R824 2020 (print) | LCC HV11 (ebook) | DDC 361.3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019059898>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019059899>

ISBN 978-1-108-83599-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-79909-6 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/rubin

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Preface

During the nearly half a century that I have been teaching courses on program evaluation I have not found a textbook that fit my course as well as I preferred. The main problem has been that some books cover too much research methods content that duplicates what students learn in their research methods courses, while other books don't have enough of that content. The problem is understandable, because program evaluation is carried out using research methods. Another reason why I have been dissatisfied with the books with heavy doses of research content is that so much of that content is pitched to well-funded evaluations of national and international projects for which program evaluation is a key component of the program from its outset. Very sophisticated research designs are not only feasible in such projects, they are expected. Program evaluation in local social and human service agencies – where most of my students begin their careers – is unlike program evaluation in those projects in several important ways.

First, the need for program evaluation activities tends to emerge later, after the agencies have matured. Instead of being a key program component with the charge of evaluating all aspects of program activities beginning with the birth of the program, the program evaluation activities tend to be less ambitious and more circumscribed around a particular agency need that arises. Consequently, the evaluation – and its evaluator – are more likely to be viewed as alien outsiders to agency personnel who feel that they have been doing just fine without a strange new evaluation annoyance that they probably don't understand. In turn, the evaluator is likely to encounter significant constraints that limit the kinds of evaluation designs and data collection methods that are feasible in a service-oriented agency setting. Thus, a book that implies that they should strive to implement gold- or platinum-standard-type research methods and randomized control trials risks setting them up for disappointment and perhaps failure. Moreover, if they have already learned about rigorous research methods and designs in a previous research methods course, they can resent the redundancy if the coverage of those methods is excessive.

Students about to start their careers in social and human service agencies should not be led to expect that the program evaluation assignments awaiting them in their careers – especially early in their careers – will require heavy adherence to many of the attributes and criteria that make research studies rigorous but that also can be less feasible in agencies that are committed to service provision. For example, the agency's routine and long-standing measurement

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and record keeping procedures might not meet standards of measurement reliability and validity and might not fit the variables a program evaluator hopes to assess. Moreover, agency practitioners might resent and resist a program evaluation plan that requires additional measurement instruments, data collection, or record keeping. Not to mention the notion that some “unlucky” clients will be assigned to a control group that does not receive the same interventions that are provided to other, “luckier,” experimental group clients.

Although methodological rigor is desirable in program evaluation, students should learn how to design feasible evaluations that have value despite lacking ideal levels of rigor.

Therefore, this book attempts to balance the need for methodological rigor with the need to have realistic expectations consistent with becoming a successful evaluator in service-oriented settings. That’s why the word *pragmatic* appears in this book’s title. Being pragmatic can be compatible with being idealistic. In that connection, the following phrase appears in Chapter 6 of this book: “Don’t let the perfect become the enemy of the good.” Similarly, that chapter points out that the degree of internal validity in outcome evaluations should match the degree of certainty needed by primary users of the evaluation. Insisting on conducting ideally rigorous but infeasible evaluations and refusing to make pragmatic compromises can result in accomplishing nothing of value beyond gratifying the evaluator’s own egocentric quest for purity. Conversely, it can be more idealistic to put aside the need to feel pure so as to accomplish something good by not insisting on perfection but instead making the pragmatic compromises required to accomplish the best evaluation that is realistically possible and that fits the degree of certainty needed by stakeholders.

Guided by the foregoing conception of idealistic pragmatism, this book will focus on the practical aspects of what students need to learn to be successful in performing evaluation tasks in social and human service agencies. Some content typically covered in research methods courses will be included, but with an effort to minimize the degree of overlap and redundancy with research methods courses that typically are prerequisites for program evaluation courses. Likewise, the length and complexity of this book will not exceed what instructors and students in social work and the human services prefer for their courses on evaluation. Instead of attempting to prepare students to work as evaluators as part of major new national or international program or policy initiatives, the book will be pitched to agency-level evaluation activities and maximizing the value of feasible evaluations that may lack ideal levels of rigor or internal validity. For example, one new and unique feature of the book will be the attention it gives to the easy calculation and utility of within-group effect sizes in outcome evaluation designs lacking control or comparison groups.

Key Challenges for Program Evaluation Instructors and Students with Which This Book Aims to Help

- Minimizing redundancy between research methods course content and program evaluation content
- Matching the focus and level of the book's content with the needs, capabilities, and interests of students whose aptitudes and needs call for an approach that emphasizes practical utility and application regarding their eventual practice roles in local service-oriented agencies.
- Gearing the content to more feasible types of program evaluation that commonly can be conducted in service-oriented practice settings and that fit the degree of certainty needed by key intended users of the evaluation.
- When covering data analysis, not exceeding student aptitude levels and the basics of what social work and human services students *must* know.

Organization

This book's chapters are organized into four parts. Part I contains two chapters that provide an overview of program evaluation and relevant ethical and cultural issues. Part II offers two chapters that discuss quantitative and qualitative methods for formative and process evaluations.

Part III contains five chapters that cover outcome evaluations in service-oriented agencies. Chapter 5 looks at how to select and measure outcome objectives. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss feasible outcome designs that may not meet all the traditional criteria for ruling out threats to internal validity but that meet the degree of certainty needed by intended users. Chapters 6 and 7 also will discuss how to strengthen the logic and value of the various designs. Chapter 8 is devoted to the use of single-case designs. Although those designs are geared primarily for practitioners to use in evaluating their own practice, they can be aggregated for evaluating programs. Because the latter use of these designs is infrequent, some instructors might want to skip Chapter 8. However, some other instructors feel very strongly about including this chapter, and some prefer even more coverage of the topic. The latter instructors might want to use the chapter on single-case designs that appears in my research methods textbook (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Part III concludes with Chapter 9, which discusses practical and political pitfalls that can hinder outcome evaluations.

Part IV provides three chapters. Chapter 10 addresses how to analyze and present quantitative and qualitative data produced by formative and process evaluations. Chapter 11 covers analyzing data from outcome evaluations. Chapter 12

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discusses how to write and disseminate an evaluation report in ways that maximize its chances for utilization.

Finally, an Epilogue provides tips for becoming a successful evaluator – tips pertaining not only to steps to take throughout the evaluation process, but also to people skills that can foster the success of an evaluation as well as help evaluators throughout their careers. I particularly enjoyed writing that part of the book.

Pedagogical Features

Each chapter of the book will include shaded boxes with examples and brief case studies. Many of the boxes will ask questions that can be used by instructors in class discussions. A list of the chapter's main points will appear at the end of each chapter, as will exercises and a list of additional reading.

Supplemental Resources

- Chapter-by-chapter **PowerPoint** slides will be available to instructors who adopt the book. The slides will include experiential learning exercises that reflect the major content areas of the book.
- An **Instructor's Guide** that provides in-class exercises and exam or quiz questions and answers.

I hope you find this book useful. I'd like to hear from you regarding what you like about this book as well as about any suggestions you have for improving it. My email address is arubin2@central.uh.edu.

Allen Rubin

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been written without the support and encouragement of Stephen Acerra, my editor at Cambridge. The helpful support of Emily Watton, Senior Editorial Assistant at Cambridge, is also greatly appreciated. Thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers who made valuable suggestions for improving an earlier draft of this book.

Special thanks go to my delightful daughter-in-law, Heske van Doornen, for her help in constructing infographics. Finally, I want to thank my wife of more than forty-six years, Christina Rubin, to whom this book is dedicated. I owe all of my career successes to her love, support, and sage guidance.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83599-2 — Pragmatic Program Evaluation for Social Work
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