

## Rezension zu:

Greve, Bent (Ed.): *Handbook of Social Policy Evaluation*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017. 542 Seiten, £ 175,50, ISBN 978-1-78536-323-8

Frans L. Leeuw<sup>1</sup>

The “Handbook of Social Policy Evaluation” counts 542 pages and 26 chapters. It is an interesting and important book, but it also is a bit fragmented. Many topics are covered, dealing with examples of social policies, methods and designs of evaluation, ethical issues and interest issues. However, the Handbook does not address questions like where social policy evaluation currently stands after many decades of work, whether or not evaluations have contributed to the growth of knowledge in this field and which challenges lie ahead, now that societies are confronted with data-ification, digitization and a whole range of other developments that directly or indirectly influence social policies (like the role of social neurosciences in developing and evaluating interventions).

First, the positive aspects of the volume. Next to different designs of evaluation like Randomized Controlled Trials and Quasi-Experimental Designs that both are a pleasure to read, one can find chapters on participatory evaluation, systematic reviews-approaches, cost-benefit analysis and other economic evaluations of social policies. Also, interventions like social impact bonds, labour market interventions, poverty interventions, social integration and family policies are discussed. Several chapters discuss utilization and the impact of evaluations, including evidence-based policy making and the uses and misuses of evaluation in social policies. The chapter on (10) critical perspectives on using evidence in social policy should also be mentioned here.

In the final chapter, the editor, Bent Greve, summarizes his three ‘core’ perspectives of the book: “possible ethical issues related to the use

of evidence; technical issues in undertaking research and analysis and the issue of impact of pressure and interest groups on the gathering of knowledge and the possible interpretation of that knowledge” (p. 516). This threesome offers something of a framework of the book.

Also positive is that the volume contributes to the idea that evaluation is an important aspect of society. In fact, Greve starts his final chapter with such a statement: “Without doubt, evaluating and use of evidence are here to stay”. I will come back to this point, but let me first raise several critical points.

– *Fragmentation*. Although it may be an old-fashioned idea, Handbooks should in my opinion be more than a collection of chapters. Why a chapter on participatory evaluation, but not on theory-driven evaluations? Why a chapter on performance management but not on performance auditing? Why chapters on health (policies/organizations) but not on delinquency or social isolation? Why neglecting digital policies and programs, and big data analytics? The editor’s final words in chapter 26 on the three ‘inter-linked issues’, although interesting as such, do not address this problem in depth. I also raise this point from an educational perspective: students, junior evaluators and junior faculty, commissioners of evaluation may be in need of *some guidance* when doing and/or organizing evaluations. Think of questions like which evaluation problems to tackle first and how, how to deal with (the numerous) types and subtypes of ‘evaluation theories’ that can be found in the literature

1 University of Maastricht and National Justice Research Center WODC, Den Haag, The Netherlands

and to some extent resemble Rolf Klima's (1972) 'pseudo-pluralism' in sociology (Leeuw/Donaldson 2015); how to carry out systematic reviews that also build on the realist evaluator's Context-Mechanisms-Outcomes perspective and how to incorporate Big Data in evaluations? The contributions of the book to these and similar questions are not available, or not very clear.

- *Added value of the book.* Related to the fragmentation issue is the question of the added value of the volume. For sure, there is added value, given its focus on *social policies* and the book's *accessibility*. But focusing more on innovative policies and programs would have increased this value. Think in terms of what social neurosciences/brain and cognition-studies have to offer to developing and evaluating new social policies (for example regarding loneliness, social isolation, resilience of people, attachment, behavior modification of juvenile delinquents, drop-out problems of pupils etc. (Cacioppo/Cacioppo 2013); see also: <https://www.hersenenen-cognitie.nl/contents/1109?locale=en>). And think in terms of the role of Big Data for social policy evaluations (Bamberger 2016; Petersson/Breul 2017).

Finally I would like to point to a few *missed opportunities*. One concerns the issues of growth of knowledge: given the fact that social policies have existed for decades as have evaluations (see the USA's Golden Years when Johnson's Great Society was evaluated), it would have made a fascinating chapter summarizing which (behavioral/other) mechanisms made certain policies/interventions (more) successful than others, taking into consideration the contexts in which they operate. A second one concerns the interesting question Calman/Douglas raise in their chapter on evaluating new medicines: "Whether evaluative activity of medicines and healthcare is any different from any other social policy arena?" (p. 319). Although the authors' sociological analysis on how in different countries (including Cuba!) medicine evaluations are carried out and in which contexts is interesting, the more fundamental question, on which Ray Pawson currently is working, unfortunately remains unanswered. In line with Pawson's work-in-progress, at least one fundamental difference can be mentioned: the timeline for medical-pharmaceutical development and evaluation is often 10 to 15 years and the one for social policy making and evaluation often less than 3 years. A third and last critical point refers to the chapter on systematic reviews in social policy

evaluation. Although it is written in a coherent and elegant way, and it also pays attention to the debate between Systematic Review researchers and Realist synthesis-oriented scholars, the missed opportunity is that Realists not only are working on guidelines how to review & synthesize research ([http://www.ramesesproject.org/Home\\_Page.php](http://www.ramesesproject.org/Home_Page.php)) but also that several authors have developed and used approaches combining Systematic Reviews à la Campbell and realist evaluations (e.g. Van der Knaap/Leeuw/Bogaerts/Nijssen 2008; Vaessen et al. 2014). It would have been wise to present these and other examples to the readers, showing them that it is not a yes or no issue.

## References

- Bamberger, Michael (2016): Integrating Big Data Into the Monitoring and Evaluation of Development Programmes. New York: Global Pulse/Rockefeller Foundation.
- Cacioppo, John T./Cacioppo, Stephanie (2013): Social Neuroscience. In: Perspectives on Psychological Science, 8 (6), pp. 667-669.
- Klima, Rolf (1972): Theoretical Pluralism, Methodological Dissension and the Role of the Sociologist: The West German Case. In: Social Science Information, 11 (3-4), pp. 69-108.
- Leeuw, Frans L./Donaldson, Stewart (2015): Theory in Evaluation: Reducing Confusion and Encouraging Debate. In: Evaluation, 21 (4), pp. 467-480.
- Petersson, Gustav J./Breul, Jonathan D. (Eds.) (2017): Cyber Society, Big Data and Evaluation. Comparative Policy Evaluation, Volume 24. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Vaessen, Jos/Rivas, Ana/Duwendack, Maren/Palmer Jones, Richard/Leeuw, Frans L./Van Gils, Ger/Lukach, Ruslan/Holvoet, Nathalie/Bastiaensen, Johan/Garcia Hombrados, Jorge/Waddington, Hugh (2014): The Effects of Microcredit on Women's Control over Household Spending in Developing Countries: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. In: Campbell Systematic Reviews, 8 (1), pp. 1-205.
- Van der Knaap, Leontien/Leeuw, Frans L./Bogaerts, Stefan/Nijssen, Laura T. J. (2008): Combining Campbell Standards and the Realist Evaluation Approach. The Best of two Worlds? In: American Journal of Evaluation, 29 (1), pp. 48-57.