

## Book review

**Hoggarth, L. and Comfort, H.** 2010: *A practical guide to outcome evaluation*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 224 pp, £24.99 paperback; indexed – yes; illustrated – a handful of illustrations. ISBN 978 1 84905 037 1  
First published online 24 November 2011

This book does exactly what it says on the cover – it provides a practical guide for staff working in the ‘helping professions’ such as social work, youth work, early years services, probation, and health care to enable them to undertake service evaluation, focusing on outcomes. The authors argue, with some passion, that to be able to secure and maintain funding from commissioners and others, it is imperative that organisations are able to provide evidence for the impact of their interventions.

Before medicine, I worked for a small community mental-health project, and this book would have been the ideal ‘hands on’ guide to those staff, like me, without research methods training. The book is written in a clear and almost conversational style, with chapters entitled: ‘Why should I want to evaluate?’ and ‘So how do I start and what do I need to think about?’ The chapters follow a logical order and guide the reader through the various stages of thinking about, planning, and executing an evaluation, including sections on ethics and data analysis. There are appendices with evaluation report templates and checklists, together with a list of useful websites and a glossary. Although billed as a practical text there are enough references for those who want to explore further the theory and various models of evaluation.

Throughout the book there are case studies, which reinforce the real-world feel to discussions. Activity boxes ask the reader to stop and reflect on aspects of their own organisation, and provide an opportunity for active engagement with the material.

The authors stress the political and economic context and drivers for undertaking outcome evaluation and although these are obviously relevant, there is a worry that what comes across as important is ‘assessing the success’ of projects rather than a more neutral starting point. The motivation of the authors is ‘to contribute to the best work with people a proper profile’ and they urge readers to ‘gather some evidence of the positive difference your scheme makes and build on it.’ Although this enthusiasm is laudable, encouraging those who are offering real benefits to service users to be in a position to demonstrate their positive outcomes, the concern is that the message about the robustness of the methods used, and the objectivity of reporting, becomes less prominent.

The main strengths of this book are its accessible language and the practical ‘how to’ approach. As such it should prove a useful handbook for those thinking about embarking on service evaluation in the health- and social-care field.

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