

Book Review

Rebecca Reviere, Susan Berkowitz, Carolyn C. Carter and Carolyn Graves Ferguson, Editors
Needs Assessment: A Creative and Practical Guide for Social Scientists
Taylor & Francis, Ltd. 1996

Review by Gerald Halpern

The Innovation Journal defines innovation as the first time a new way of doing something, a service, program or administrative technique, an approach or a technology is used in a country. Implicit in this definition is that the old way was deficient in some manner, perhaps because it was not responsive to a real need or because a new way has been found to do things smarter". The appearance of an innovation is a response to the variance between what is and what is wanted to be. To paraphrase, innovation is a response to a needs assessment that demonstrated a gap due to an important weakness in the current way of doing something or due to a recognition that something important was not being done.. It is from that frame of mind that this book was approached. Would it help in the task of determining which needs should be met? Would it offer a creative and practical guide for social scientists for the assessment of program needs and the determination of the presence of gaps to be filled, insufficiencies to be replenished or operations to be improved.

The book's working definition of needs assessment goes beyond the traditional approach of finding out what is needed and by whom. It adopts a more policy oriented approach of providing usable and useful information about the needs of the target population - to those who can and will utilize it to make judgments about policy and program" (p. 6). This focus on using the results of a needs assessment, of not seeing the assessment as an end in itself, is a valuable orientation that will be appreciated by policy makers trying to allocate resources for the satisfaction of unmet needs.

Needs Assessment: A Creative and Practical Guide for Social Scientists promises to provide a step-by-step guide to designing and conducting methodologically sound yet cost-effective needs assessments". The book is organized into an introduction followed by three sections. Of the total of ten chapters, eight were written by one or more of the four named editors. Only the remainder (being two of the three case study chapters) are by other authors.

The section on Understanding and Developing Needs Assessment consists of four chapters. The first situates needs assessment within the context of all social science research and stresses the need for a systematic approach to problem definition and the identification of research questions and data requirements. The careful distinctions between primary and secondary data sources will be useful to many readers. The three other chapters of this section briefly review the relative advantages and complementarity of qualitative and quantitative data as well as survey methodology as a data collection technique.

The middle section, Case Studies: Various Approaches presents four case studies in three chapters. Together they present the reader with a catalogue of issues, of approaches and of generalized resource requirements for needs assessment studies. The case studies do a good job of illustrating (a) the range of methodologies useful for needs assessment, (b) detail on the real life obstacles that face researchers in the actual day-to-day conduct of in situ investigation, (c) the succession of interactions between research issues and program resources, (d) the demonstrated use of complementary methodologies and (e) the linkages that turn findings into conclusions and then into implications for action. This middle section, with its presentation of case studies, is the strongest portion of the book.

The final section, Dissemination and Future Strategies, presents concluding remarks in two brief chapters. The first returns to a theme previously highlighted by the editors: the roles of the audiences and the stakeholders in needs assessment. The need for extensive planning is again reinforced. The final chapter is a less than successful attempt at a synthesis of larger lessons learned about needs assessment".

Does the book fulfill its promise? Is it of value to the social scientist whose task is to provide policy and program decision takers with usable and useful information about the needs of the target population? I would not recommend this book to a social scientist colleague. There is little in this book, other than the four case studies, that would not have already been the object of study by any social scientist and usually in far more depth than is accorded by this book. My judgment of this book is that it has underestimated its target audience. It is difficult to believe that trained social scientists would need explanations of concepts such as sampling, question formulation, and certainly not with the brevity provided by this book. For the trained social scientist, this book is replete with truisms. Worse, there are a number of careless technical errors.

Might the book be instructive for the non-scientist? The preface states that the book is designed for a variety of audiences including administrators and planners among others. These two groups, as well as community-based advocacy groups, would likely find this book to be of value. It provides a useful program planning emphasis and it offers advice on the full range of topics to be considered by a comprehensive needs assessment. As a menu of topics to be considered and as an overview of what to demand of the professional needs assessor, this book can be quite useful.

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