

## Summary of American Journal of Evaluation, Volume 25(4), 2004

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In the first paper, **Robert Orwin, Bernadette Campbell, Kevin Campbell, and Antoinette Krupski** examine the effect of the 1997 termination of the Social Security Administration's Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits for persons diagnosed with drug or alcohol addiction. The paper describes and illustrates innovations and recent developments in quantitative methods for evaluation, including a combination of the interrupted time series with growth curve modeling; propensity scoring analyses; the use of alternative ways to estimate the counterfactual; and sensitivity analyses to empirically assess the plausibility of validity threats. Importantly, Orwin and his colleagues go further, carefully conducting and considering the implications of a set of post-hoc exploratory analyses. These analyses suggest a far more nuanced interpretation of the effects of benefit termination than did the primary, state-of-the-art tests. The paper is a valuable example of the principled examination of quantitative data that can move us beyond overall, global estimates of an intervention's average effects.

In the second paper, **Katherine Ryan** describes, illustrates, and critiques three approaches which fall under the broader umbrella of "democratic evaluation approaches". The three are the seminal democratic evaluation approach of MacDonald, the deliberative democratic evaluation approach of House and Howe, and the emerging notion of communicative evaluation advocated by Niemi and Kemmis. Ryan compares and contrasts these three approaches, in part by presenting for each a vignette describing a case in which the approach was implemented. Ryan goes beyond simply examining the three democratic evaluation approaches in the abstract. Instead, she considers the implications of these approaches in an environment in which educational accountability has been shaped by the No Child Left Behind legislation and related forces. In effect, Ryan asks how evaluators can contribute to more democratic forms of educational accountability.

In the third paper in this issue, **Christine Leow, Sue Marcus, Elaine Zanutto,** and **Robert Boruch** address the question of whether taking advanced courses in math and science improves performance on basic achievement tests. Leow and her colleagues use propensity score methods in an attempt to control for the biases that otherwise would result because of the systematic differences between students who take advanced courses and those who do not. The paper thus will be of interest to readers who would like to learn more about propensity score analyses. Perhaps of more interest, Leow and her colleagues illustrate a kind of sensitivity analyses, which allows them to examine how susceptible their findings are to what is called hidden bias, that is, the bias that might arise from background factors that are not controlled for in the analyses. Sensitivity analyses should be an important technique in the tool kit of quantitative evaluators, as a way of helping assess how much uncertainty one should ascribe to evaluation findings.

As one outcome of the evidence-based practice movement, there seems to be a growing trend whereby mandates, recommendations, or incentives are put into place in an effort to lead practitioners to use programs that have passed some evaluative threshold. But this trend raises several questions, among them: How do practitioners learn about so-called evidence-based programs? What are the processes by which they adopt such programs and eliminate their current programs? Are the evidence-based programs likely to be implemented with sufficient fidelity that one would expect good outcomes? **Tena St. Pierre** and **D. Lynne Kaltreider** address these and related questions, in a replicated case study investigating school adoption and implementation processes of an evidence-based substance abuse prevention program. The findings should be noteworthy to those interested in program implementation, in the way schools choose to adopt and adapt programs, and more generally in how mandates for evidence-based practice play out in real life.

**Huilan Yang, Jianping Shen, Honggao Cao, and Charles Warfield** address "multilevel evaluation," which arises, for example, when there are multiple site-level projects within a broader programs or, as in the example Yang and colleagues discuss, three levels: project, cluster, and initiative. The authors of this paper lay out a process to facilitate multilevel evaluation alignment, that is, to facilitate congruence, compatibility, and efficiency across the evaluations at the different levels. In one sense, the process can be seen as the application of sound evaluation planning in the multilevel program context. However, Yang and her colleagues argue that the literature on multisite evaluation demonstrates the need for an alignment model specifically focused on multilevel evaluations.

In the final paper in the *Articles* section, **Tricia Leakey, Kevin Lund, Karin Koga, and Karen Glanz** address an issue of considerable importance to those who

evaluate programs based in schools or, more generally, who work with participants who are minors: obtaining parental consent. Leakey and her colleagues describe a case from their own evaluation experience examining a smoking prevention program. They employed different consent procedures at different times, and describe their experiences in this article.

In the *Method Notes* section, **Henry May** addresses a classic and continuing concern for evaluators: How can we best communicate our results, especially statistical findings, to those who need to make sense of and use evaluation findings? May discusses and illustrates the use of three guidelines for formulating and presenting more meaningful statistics. These are understandability, interpretability, and comparability. May also offers several interesting and valuable examples for reporting a variety of statistics, both simple and complex, in more meaningful ways.

This issue includes an atypical contribution in the *Exemplars* section. In the past, this section has presented a series of interviews with evaluators who discuss a specific evaluation they had conducted. In those interviews the section editor, Jody Fitzpatrick, questioned the evaluator to understand more about the various choices he or she made throughout the evaluation, from the initial steps in planning, to the involvement of stakeholders, to the data collection methods and evaluation approaches employed, and to the steps taken to disseminate findings and facilitate use. With the naming of a new editor for the *Exemplars* section, I invited **Jody Fitzpatrick** to reflect on the numerous interviews she had conducted. Such an effort to "sum up" previous work in a section of *AJE* is not completely new. Two years ago, Michael Morris (2002), section editor of *Ethical Challenges*, invited Lois-ellin Datta (2002) and Nick Smith (2002) to examine previous commentators' responses to 10 ethical challenges Morris had previously posed in the section. As

was the case with the Datta and Smith reflections, Jody Fitzpatrick has provided a fascinating piece. In essence, she treats the interviews from *Exemplars* as a set of case studies, allowing her to examine similarities and differences across a set of evaluators in terms of such important characteristics as preferred evaluation role, the purpose of evaluation, the factors the evaluator used to organize and frame their work, the nature of stakeholder involvement, and method choices.

Finally, after too long a delay, the *Book Review* section reappears. **Shirley Copeland** reviews a recent book by Martha Feldman, Jeannine Bell, and Michelle Berger on the process of gaining access and qualitative research. Thanks to Shirley for an informative review.

## References

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