

What's Happening in AJE (2003-2004)

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“The *American Journal of Evaluation* (AJE) publishes original papers about the methods, theory, practice, and findings of evaluation. The general goal of AJE is to present the best work in and about evaluation, in order to improve the knowledge base and practice of its readers. Because the field of evaluation is diverse, with different intellectual traditions, approaches to practice, and domains of application, the papers published in AJE will reflect this diversity. Nevertheless, preference is given to papers that are likely to be of interest to a wide range of evaluators and that are written to be accessible to most readers.”

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The *American Journal of Evaluation* (AJE) is the flagship publication of the American Evaluation Association, the world's largest organization for professional evaluators. As such, AJE plays an important role in defining the relatively young discipline of evaluation and influencing the work and thought of many practicing evaluators, many of whom have never had any formal training in evaluation.

In the *Evaluation Thesaurus* Scriven (1991) provides an analogy for understanding how various disciplines, and the levels of activities within those disciplines, relate to one another. In this analogy, he suggests we think of disciplines as estates in the

“country of the mind.” He explains, “The houses on an estate have a ground floor representing applied work; a floor above that which is devoted to developing instruments, methods, and techniques, and a top floor where the theoretical work is done. Up in the attic, out of sight for most of the time, is the den of metatheory” (pp. 13-14).

I used this framework to analyze the contents of *AJE* articles (from Spring 2003 through the present issue, which is Autumn 2004). I categorized the articles (65 in all) according to whether they focused on practice, methods, theory, or metatheory, and one additional category—history. The breakdown is shown Figure 1. Below I describe these categories and summarize the articles associated with those categories, highlighting what I believe to be the most important articles.

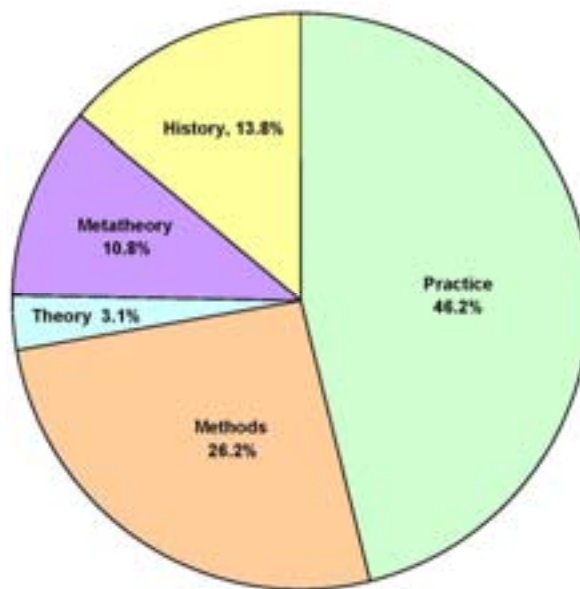


Figure 1. Focus of 2003-2004 *AJE* articles

Practice

“Practice” articles deal with ways of working with stakeholders and clients, ethical challenges, evaluation contexts, managerial aspects of evaluation, and evaluation use. Almost half (46.2 percent) of the articles published in *AJE* since 2003 focus primarily on such practical aspects of the evaluation profession.

Eight of the 30 articles in the Practice category are part of *AJE*’s “Ethical Challenges” series, in which the section editor, Michael Morris, presents a brief scenario in which an evaluator faces an ethical challenge. In response, two commentators, in two separate articles, analyze the nature of the ethical problem and describe what they believe to be the appropriate response by the evaluator in the scenario, especially in light of the American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles for Evaluators and *The Program Evaluation Standards* by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994).

Seven articles in the Practice category focus on evaluation use, with five of these appearing as a series in a single issue. These use-oriented articles explore the many facets of evaluation utilization. They provide exemplars of useful evaluation, identify factors that promote and impede evaluation use, and weigh the sometimes conflicting values of evaluation utility and scientific rigor. Evaluation is an inherently applied discipline—intended to be used—but it is something that many people shy away from, or downright fear. Given these conflicting conditions, it is no surprise that many evaluators are interested in improving evaluation utilization. I categorized two other use-oriented articles (by Henry [2003] and Henry and Mark [2003]) in the “Metatheory” category, because they go beyond the practical issues related to use and venture into a theory about evaluation influence, which I discuss in greater detail in that section.

The remaining articles that I included in the Practice category address a variety of issues that have emerged out of the experience of real people engaged in the practice of evaluation—for example, how certain evaluation contexts present particular challenges or opportunities, the managerial aspects of evaluation (e.g., contracts, resource constraints), and how to communicate effectively with stakeholders. One article that stands as particularly useful is by Bamberger, Rugh, Church, and Fort (2004). They offer several practical solutions for common problems that evaluators face when working under severe constraints. Their recommendations are most relevant for impact evaluations in which the use of control groups, baseline data, and random sampling would be ideal but not feasible due to timing, resources, and/or availability of data.

Articles focusing on practice offer readers insights into the real world of evaluation, where textbook methods and theory meet politics, red tape, ethical dilemmas, and stakeholders and clients who may or may not be interested in participating in evaluation or using its results. These types of articles provide readers with opportunities to learn from others' mistakes and successes in the uncertain world of evaluation practice. They offer students and established evaluators insights into how evaluation happens in the real world—lessons often not provided in textbook expositions on theory and methods.

Methods

“Methods” articles focus on a particular approach to data gathering and/or analysis. Seventeen of the 65 AJE articles (26.2 percent) deal primarily with methods. Such articles typically describe an innovative method or a modification of an existing method. These articles were equally divided between qualitative (8) and quantitative methods (8), with one article featuring a blend of both.

The qualitative methods covered by the articles include concept mapping, site visits, qualitative phone interviewing, the “most significant change” technique, methods for reconstructing and analyzing program theories, the Delphi technique, methods of values inquiry, and methods for formatively evaluating educational technology.

Four of the seven articles on quantitative methods discussed methods used to overcome problems associated with randomized controlled trials, including the use of longitudinal data on program outcomes to estimate program effects, two different methods for analyzing impacts on beneficiary subgroups, and an approach for blending experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Other articles focused on the development of intervention-specific measures, techniques for assessing the quality of program implementation, and the use of post-plus retrospective pretests for measuring change.

The one article that focused on a method that incorporates the use of both qualitative and quantitative data described the development and use of a rubric for evaluating collaboration.

Methods articles highlight innovative and cutting edge approaches to evaluation data gathering and analysis. Journal articles and professional conferences are probably the most important ways practicing evaluators learn about new and useful methods. The methods are typically described in the context of a particular evaluation, which may help readers to discern the method’s applicability to the areas in which they work.

Theory

“Theory” articles center on the use of a particular evaluation approach or model. Evaluation theory was the focus of just two articles (3.1 percent) published in *AJE* since 2003. One provides an in-depth look at an evaluation that blended two approaches to evaluation—theory-driven and utilization-focused. The other theory-focused article offers an adaptation of Michael Fetterman’s empowerment evaluation model (by Carolyn Sullins, a Senior Research Associate at The Evaluation Center). Both deal with practical applications of theory, but the emphasis is on the applied theory, rather than the specific methods or findings. (There are other *AJE* articles that feature the use of a particular theory, but the thrust of these articles is on practice, not theory.)

No articles in the timeframe examined (2003-2004) focused exclusively on an evaluation theory/model/approach in its pure form. As Christie and Alkin (2003) remark in their article about using a theory-driven approach in a user-oriented evaluation, “theories are rarely, if ever, flawlessly translated into practice” (p. 381). Given this, “in order to develop a deeper understanding of how evaluation theories are best applied in practice, it is important to describe cases where evaluation theories have been used in practice” (p. 381). That, indeed, is the nature of these two Theory articles.

It was somewhat surprising to me that only 2 articles out of 65 focused purely on evaluation theory. It is an important area of inquiry would seem to warrant more space in *AJE*.

Metaethy

Scriven (1991) defines metatheory as a “‘theory’ about the nature of a field of inquiry, engineering, or craft. It deals with matters such as the definition of the field’s boundaries, its differences from neighboring fields or disciplines, the reason

why certain methods work well for it and others are inappropriate.....it is the self-concept of the discipline” (p. 232). Seven (10.8 percent) articles in *AJE* directly discuss or contribute to the evaluation discipline’s self-concept, or metatheory.

Two of the Metaethery articles focus on use. Both articles address the issue of evaluation use not simply as a practical matter, but as a sort of lens through we can view the role of evaluation discipline. Henry and Mark (2003) address the shortcomings in the existing literature on evaluation use, particularly the “inattention to the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and society change processes through which evaluation findings and process may translate into steps toward social betterment” (p. 294). They urge evaluators to look beyond immediate use of findings as the primary utilitarian purpose of evaluation, and instead focus on social betterment as the ultimate desired outcome. They outline a general theory of evaluation influence. Similarly, Henry (2003) offers several examples of evaluations that have been influential and offers a “clearer picture of what evaluation should look like in the future” (p. 515).

Two articles that I placed in the Metatheory category have to do with evaluation education. These articles do not directly contribute to the metatheory of evaluation in terms of content, but the way in which and what students and others learn about evaluation—its practice, methods, and theory, and history—is probably the primary vehicle by which evaluation metatheory develops. One article provides an overview of a one-year evaluation course that employs a mentoring approach. The other, by Christie and Rose (2003), provides an account of an informal discussion group. This group, facilitated by Marvin Alkin at UCLA, includes both students and faculty members who meet every other week to discuss an article in a recent issue of the *American Journal of Evaluation*. In addition to providing a venue in which members can share and test ideas, relate theory to practice, refine thinking,

and hypothesize (among other things), the group also promotes socialization into the field. Such groups, write Christie and Rose, “are an alternative mechanism for encouraging the kinds of dynamic dialogue that facilitates the advancement of both theoretical and practical notions of a field, such as evaluation, that is so dependent up on the interchange of ideas” (p. 238).

In his article on the Joint Committee evaluation standards, Stufflebeam (2004) addresses the applicability of the Program, Personnel, and Student Evaluation Standards to other cultural contexts. These are essentially standards for evaluation practice, but they have played an important role in shaping the field’s self-concept. At issue is whether the Standards can or should be transferred to other cultural contexts, and Stufflebeam argues they should not. The widespread interest in doing so is a testament to the Standard’s relevance to the discipline’s self-concept.

Stake (2004) addresses the role of advocacy in evaluation. He outlines six types of advocacies found to some extent in most evaluations. Roughly, they are advocacy for (1) a program’s success, (2) the evaluation discipline, (3) rationality, (4) evaluation use, (5) the alleviation of underprivilege, and (6) democracy. He argues that these advocacies shape evaluators’ interpretations of findings, which are “are enriched by personal experience” (p. 107). He concludes the article by stating, “Comprehensive, idiosyncratic interpretations are small steps toward saving the world” (p. 107).

The final article dealing with metatheory views evaluation itself as an important object of inquiry and provides a framework for researching the processes, contexts, obstacles, and knowledge claims in public sector evaluations. In this article, Segerholm (2003) reviews existing research on evaluation and concludes that it is “fairly scarce” and tends to focus on particular aspects of the evaluation cycle (i.e.,

initiation, implementation, results, and utilization) (p. 356). Likewise, she notes, metaevaluations (evaluations of evaluations) usually focus on a single evaluation. Segerholm argues that we need more research on evaluation to “gain knowledge and a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon and practice of evaluation *in general*” (p. 357).

History

In addition to Scriven’s disciplinary categories of practice, methods, theory, and metatheory, I added History as a fifth category. I found this to be necessary because articles that focus on the development of the evaluation field cut across all the other categories, dealing with evaluation practice, methods, and theory, as well as influential personalities in the field; groundbreaking evaluations; important books; and key agencies, organizations, and educational institutions. These articles also contribute to the development and refinement of evaluation’s metatheory, since they help interpret and shape the field’s self-concept. Nine (13.8 percent) of the *AJE* articles since 2003 delve into the history of evaluation.

Most of the articles included in this category (6 out of 9) are oral history accounts of evaluation leaders collected for The Oral History Project—an effort by Robin Miller, Jean King, Melvin Mark, and Stacey Stockdill to document the “genealogy” of program evaluation. These oral history articles have featured interviews with Lois-ellin Datta and William Shadish, as well as brief articles by Laura Leviton, Roger Straw, Charles Reichardt, and Melvin Mark, who reflect on their experience in the Methodology and Program Evaluation program in the Psychology Department at Northwestern. Additional evaluation leaders will be featured in future issues, leading to the compilation of a rich and detailed history of the development of the evaluation field.

Margaret Mead's evaluation of the 1947 Salzburg Seminar on American Civilization is the focus of the three other History articles.

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