

# Review of New Directions for Evaluation, Volume 106: Theorists' Models in Action

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The summer 2005 issue of *New Directions for Evaluation*, “Theorists’ Models in Action”, edited by Marvin C. Alkin and Christina A. Christie is, in part, inspired by the “Radnor Middle School” case study conducted in the early 1980s (Brandt, 1981). In the Radnor case study notable theorists including Scriven, Stake, Eisner, and Popham were asked to explain how they would evaluate Radnor’s humanities curriculum.

In this issue Alkin and Christie asked four contemporary theorists—Jennifer C. Greene, Gary T. Henry, Stewart I. Donaldson, and Jean A. King—to describe how they would evaluate the case of the “Bunche-Da Vinci Learning Partnership Academy.” The Bunche-Da Vinci Learning Partnership Academy is essentially a “unique partnership between the [school] district and a nonprofit educational company specializing in innovative school interventions for low-performing students” (Eisenberg, Winters, & Alkin, 2005, p. 5).

Jennifer Greene (2005) is the first theorist to tackle the Bunche-Da Vinci evaluation. Greene, as anticipated, takes a value-oriented (engaged) approach.

Herein Greene tells the story via e-mail communiqués with various stakeholder groups to determine *just what is being evaluated* (“anchored in the important concerns and issues of priority in this context,” p. 31), *identifying the key evaluation questions*, and *establishing the criteria for making judgments of program quality*. She then proposes an evaluation design consisting of three parts: (i) overall design (“an interpretative case study with multiple and mixed methods for purposes of understanding the selected phenomena more comprehensively and with greater insight and value consciousness,” p. 37); (ii) methods and samples [including curriculum review, classroom and school observations, teacher and administrator interviews, information on teacher quality, parent interviews, and test and test score analysis], and (iii) reporting. Greene concludes her overview of how she would conduct a values-engaged evaluation of Bunche-Da Vinci by describing in detail the evaluation process itself and she also proposes a “modest meta-evaluation,” (p. 44) including an (meta)evaluator with differing philosophical and practical positions from her own. All in all, Greene does a fine job of describing the logic of her theoretical approach and enumerates in detail the rationale for how and why she proposed to evaluate the program as she describes in the chapter.

The second theorist to contribute to the Bunche-Da Vinci case example is Gary Henry (2005). Henry advocates a contingency-based approach to evaluation with the ultimate purpose of social betterment. According to Henry (p. 47) contingency-based evaluation does not align itself with a particular method, quantitative or qualitative data, particular way of involving others, or commit itself to a particular group’s needs or interest. In his proposed design for evaluating Bunche-Da Vinci Henry draws on values inquiry, program theory, and quasi-experiments to evaluate program processes, outcomes, and to a lesser extent causal inferences in how

variations in program implementation would produce variations in student outcomes; all with the overarching aim of influencing attitudes and actions. While Henry's line of argument is compelling, I, however, would caution that social betterment should not be a [the] *prima facie purpose* of evaluation, although it is often, or can be, a *result* of evaluation.

Next in the line of theorists to address the Bunche-Da Vinci case study is Stewart Donaldson (2005) with his Program Theory-Driven Evaluation Science. Donaldson proceeds to describe the steps that he would take in evaluating the Bunche-Da Vinci from negotiating a realistic and fair contract through planning the evaluation. The evaluation plan entails three basic steps; (i) developing program theory, (ii) formulating and prioritizing evaluation questions, and (iii) answering evaluation questions. Donaldson describes the development of program theory as identifying and clarifying how the program is expected to improve student performance (i.e., the program's objective/goal) using either or both stakeholder and/or social science theories. While Donaldson does imply that unintended outcomes and side-effects should be investigated, the major problems here are the reliance on program theory (which is not always necessary to evaluate a program) and most of the questions posed are non-evaluative (e.g., "are the desired short-term outcomes (mediators) being achieved?" p. 75), among other problems specific to all theory-driven approaches (Coryn, 2005). Furthermore, this raises serious questions as to the purpose(s) of evaluation, as also mentioned in Henry's proposed approach. Is it the evaluator's job to conduct research which attempts to answer 'how and why' a program works (or does not work) or to determine 'if a program is working', 'is it any good', and if so, 'what it is worth'?

Finally, Jean King (2005) concludes the chapters devoted to the four theoretical orientations. Herein, King takes a tripartite approach which includes (i) considering whether or not she is qualified to evaluate the education program, (ii) contractual considerations, and (iii) developing evaluation capacity. The capacity building activities include creating an evaluation advisory committee and building an evaluation infrastructure. Rather than providing a detailed evaluation plan, King opts to describe steps for developing an evaluation culture within the Bunche-Da Vinci Academy. These steps include numerous activities from “access to evaluation and research knowledge training” (p. 92) to “instituting action research policies” (p. 96). While King’s capacity building approach is admirable, I would have preferred her to address the direct question of how she would evaluate the program.

All in all this issue of *New Directions for Evaluation* reminds us of the vast range of approaches to conducting evaluation and how some of the discipline’s visionaries would approach a specific case study. Unfortunately, it also reminds us of a number of ongoing quandaries; what is the purpose of evaluation?, do we need to know the mechanisms by which programs work?, are we merely consultants who help others do our work?, and so forth.

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