

Foreword: Trends and Issues as Context

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Utilization-Focused Evaluation

What are the top 10 trends in program evaluation today? Or the top 10 issues? Or the top 10 challenges?

The framing question can take any of these several forms when I'm asked to give a keynote speech or conference presentation or guest seminar on the status and future of program evaluation. My full top ten list varies depending on a particular audience and its interests, but the top five is pretty fixed -- and mixed methods is always in the top five. In addition to publication of the first *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and the new *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (JMMR), wherever I go there's a crescendo buzz about mixed methods that may prove to be a tipping point. Or may not. There are important counterforces afoot in the land, but before I address those, let me acknowledge the significance of this special issue.

Research in the Schools has assembled a stellar group of authors to address a variety of cutting edge issues: philosophical, conceptual, methodological, sociopolitical, and practical. These experienced and knowledgeable authors address integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches during design, data collection, and analysis; synthesizing findings; challenges of validity, credibility, and legitimization; creating a strong mix and distinguishing types of mixes; mixed methods issues in federal accountability and theory-driven evaluation; and mixed methods as a form of social inquiry. It's an impressive collection and my crystal ball says this special issue will quickly become a classic, much cited and widely disseminated.

It comes at a good time. I hinted above that there are forces running counter to the wisdom and value of mixed methods. Those forces are represented by the ongoing insistence in some quarters that randomized controlled trials are the "Gold Standard" for research and evaluation and that any other designs, including mixed methods designs, fall short. This is the position represented by the guidelines and review procedures of the Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education), the influential *What Works Clearinghouse*, and the Campbell Collaborative, to name but a few powerful standard-setters in educational research and evaluation. These experimental design advocates describe their position as supporting *scientifically based methods*, language that is both politically

powerful and seductive. Who wants to be non-scientific? Yet their actual operational criteria give higher ratings to pure experimental designs than to mixed methods designs.

When the Institute of Education Sciences was formulating its narrow guidelines, the American Evaluation Association (AEA) adopted an official organizational policy response that said, in part:

Many methods are capable of demonstrating scientific rigor. For at least a decade, evaluators publicly debated whether newer inquiry methods were sufficiently rigorous. This issue was settled long ago. Actual practice and many published examples demonstrate that alternative and mixed methods are rigorous and scientific. To discourage a *repertoire of methods* would force evaluators backward. (AEA, n.d.)

This AEA position was ignored by the Institute of Education Sciences and proved controversial within the larger AEA membership, leading some distinguished members to drop out of AEA as a result. The debate continues both within the evaluation profession and in the larger society. At this point, it seems to me, the money and power in educational research favor the advocates of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) as the gold standard, a position that, in my judgment, is more ideologically than methodologically based. For, as this special issue makes clear, mixed methods bring particular strengths and insights to educational inquiry.

My own view, consistent with the AEA policy statement, is that the gold standard should be *methodological appropriateness* rather than methodological orthodoxy. Methodological appropriateness means that designs should be judged on the extent to which they answer the inquiry question at hand, not whether they adhere to some preordained standard. Making RCTs the gold standard puts the method before the question, a fundamental violation of inquiry in any field.

In the context of the debate about what constitutes the gold standard for educational research and evaluation, let me just note one of the strengths of mixed methods, namely the flexibility and adaptability

of such methods. To emphasize these traits, let me remind readers of the origin of the gold standard metaphor, for therein lies a cautionary tale. The gold standard is a monetary system in which the standard economic unit of account is a fixed weight of gold. When several nations are using such a fixed unit of account, the rates of exchange among national currencies effectively become fixed. The United States stopped issuing promises to redeem dollars for gold in 1933 – part of a policy change for dealing with the Great Depression. The 1944 Bretton Woods system created an obligation for each country to maintain the exchange rate of its currency in terms of gold. The system collapsed in 1971, following the United States' suspension of convertibility from dollars to gold. The gold standard failed the international economic system precisely because of its rigidity. RCTs as the gold standard in research and evaluation suffer this same rigidity. Mixed methods, within a framework that values methodological appropriateness and triangulation, offer, in contrast, flexibility and adaptability.

Thus, as you read the exquisite articles in this special issue, you will be learning about important methodological advances and pace-setting applications. You will also be participating in the larger debate that will determine the future criteria for judging research quality. By what standards should research and evaluation be judged? This special issue should go a long way in helping you decide and articulate your own views on this important matter.

Before closing, perhaps I should add one final piece. I opened by observing that, in my judgment, mixed methods is one of the top five trends in evaluation. Some readers may be wondering what the other four are. Let me relieve the suspense so that those of you reading in bed can sleep in peace. They are: (1) globalization of evaluation; (2) professionalization of evaluation; (3) logic models and theories of change as the frameworks for evaluation; and (4) systems thinking and complexity perspectives (which challenge linear logic models).

References

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.