



Serving the public and non-profit sectors through independent program evaluation, applied research, and technical assistance.

EVALUATION BRIEF

Common Evaluation Myths and Misconceptions

September 2009

Introduction

Program evaluation is a complex undertaking that requires the consideration of a wide range of prospective research designs and data collection tools. As you review your alternatives, it is important to be cognizant of and avoid misunderstandings regarding certain key evaluation concepts. This brief describes five of the most common evaluation “myths” and misconceptions, critiques their underlying assumptions, and highlights the reasons for rejecting them.

Misconception: Evaluations can be either quantitative or qualitative.

Reality: Evaluators may sometimes say that they are implementing a “quantitative” or a “qualitative” evaluation. In doing so, they are confounding the related but separate concepts of a *research design* and a *research method*. A research design refers to the overarching methodological framework that guides an evaluation effort, in other words, the conceptual lens through which the evaluation is viewed and implemented. The research design “provides the glue that holds the research project together. A design is used to structure the research, to show how all of the major parts of the research project ... work together to ... address the central research questions.”¹ In contrast, a *research method* denotes a specific data collection tool or technique that is used to answer a key research question within the parameters established by the research design. As such, a given research design may involve the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. For example, an evaluator may select an experimental (random assignment) *research design* and then choose telephone surveys, case record reviews, and focus groups as her or his *research methods*.²

¹ Trochim, W. M., 2006. Research methods knowledge database. Retrieved June 26, 2009 from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/design.php>.

² For more information on evaluation designs and research methods, see James Bell Associates (2009, September). *Selecting an evaluation approach*. Arlington, VA: Author.



Myth: Experimental designs are unfair and unethical because they deny people needed services.

Reality: Many caseworkers, program managers, and even some evaluators object to the perceived lack of fairness inherent in experimental research designs. These objections usually arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of experimental research designs, and more generally, of the ultimate goal of any evaluation endeavor. Major flaws in this myth regarding experimental designs are described below:

- *Presumes new program or service is effective:* Claims that experimental designs are unethical rest on the assumption that the service or program under investigation does in fact improve the lives of targeted participants. In fact, it is quite possible that the services in question provide no benefit to participants or could even make them worse off. Determining the actual impact of an untested program or service constitutes the fundamental purpose of all evaluations.
- *Assumes that resources exist to serve all eligible clients:* In most situations the financial, personnel, and material resources do not exist to offer a new program to all people who could potentially benefit from it. Given the reality of limited resources, a fair and consistent method must be selected for deciding who will and will not be offered the new program. Because experimental designs involve random assignment, the selection of program participants is based solely on chance rather than on the arbitrary criteria (for example, place of residence) used in some research designs. In this respect, experimental designs are arguably more fair than other designs.
- *People in the control group are not denied services:* Rather, subjects assigned to the control group receive the same range of services that were available before the new program was implemented. Until proven otherwise, it is possible that these traditional services are equally or more effective than the new untested service.

Myth: Qualitative research methods are easier, less rigorous, and less “scientific.”

Reality: On the other end of the spectrum from quantitative methods, evaluations that rely heavily on qualitative research methods are sometimes impugned as a “lazy” way to conduct research that lacks scientific rigor and leads to inconclusive results about program outcomes. In reality, both qualitative and quantitative methods are important components of a comprehensive and useful evaluation. Several facts about qualitative research methods belie these common misperceptions:

- *Qualitative methods answer different questions:* The difference between qualitative and quantitative research methods lies not in their comparative rigor or accuracy but rather in the types of questions they are designed to answer. Qualitative research methods are used to gather insights into the experiences and perspectives of program participants to help explain *how* and *why* a program works, not just *whether* it works. Answering these questions requires a highly methodical and meticulous approach to planning and implementing the data collection process, for example, by constructing effective interview protocols and developing schema for coding and interpreting textual information.

- *Qualitative data can be more difficult to analyze:* In part due to sheer volume, data collected using qualitative methods can be more difficult to analyze than data collected using quantitative methods. Highly structured and efficient procedures for sifting and categorizing information are critical to making sense of the data and for discovering the essential insights hidden within them.
- *Qualitative research is often more labor intensive:* As a corollary to the difficulties involved in organizing and analyzing qualitative data, qualitative methods often constitute the most labor intensive approach to conducting research. Rather than being a quick and easy way to do research, qualitative methods involve a substantial commitment of time, experience, and expertise that must be considered when planning and implementing an evaluation.

Myth: The data you need for the evaluation will be readily available through a human service database or similar information management system.

Reality: A perennial assumption made by many evaluators is that they will have access to critical information on program participants (e.g., demographics, mental health and substance abuse history, safety and permanency outcomes) through information management systems maintained by local or state authorities. In reality, they often discover that they are barred from or severely delayed in accessing the necessary information; that certain data elements that were presumed to be in the database do not in fact exist; or that the quality of the available data are so low as to be of limited value. Evaluators can avoid these unexpected surprises by taking the following steps:

- *Secure buy-in:* During the initial evaluation planning stages, it is critical to obtain support for the evaluation effort from managers at the organization in which the data are housed and to assuage any concerns they may have regarding data privacy laws or policies. In addition, the cooperation of database administrators and analysts must be secured to ensure that the data will in fact be produced in a timely manner.
- *Run a pilot test:* Once access to the data is secured, request a sample run from the information system to ensure that the requisite data (1) do in fact exist; (2) are valid (i.e., contain the information you actually need in a format you can use); and (3) are substantially complete. By pilot testing prospective data sources before progressing too far with evaluation implementation, you can identify poor results early on and if necessary select an alternative data collection method. As part of running the pilot test, verify whether the information management system maintains *historical data* on your target population, i.e., that old data are not overwritten by new information but rather are maintained in the system to facilitate longitudinal data analysis.

Misconception: Participant satisfaction is a valid and sufficient measure of program success.

Reality: Feedback from program participants and staff regarding their satisfaction with program services and their perceptions of a project's effectiveness is an integral part of many comprehensive evaluations. However, some evaluators make the mistake of confusing satisfaction with program effectiveness, i.e., assuming that satisfaction with program services is an end in itself and that high levels of satisfaction mean that the program achieved successful outcomes. In reality, satisfaction is not a true outcome measure because it does



not address changes in program participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, or status.³ Moreover, an over-reliance on participant satisfaction data can create skewed perceptions of program impact. For example, an employment training program that receives high marks from participants, but that does not actually result in more job placements or higher wages for those participants, cannot validly claim that it has achieved positive outcomes.⁴

Despite its limited value for measuring program outcomes, satisfaction data can serve as a useful component of a comprehensive *process* evaluation. A process evaluation describes the specific services, activities, policies, and procedures that are implemented as part of a program; it also provides early feedback regarding whether program implementation proceeded as intended and helps identify implementation barriers and necessary changes to the original service delivery model.⁵ In these respects, satisfaction data can provide valuable insights about aspects of a program that are not working as intended and that are in need of improvement. In short, information on participant and staff satisfaction serves as an important program improvement tool but is not a sufficient indicator of a project's ultimate success.

Conclusion

A wide range of programmatic, methodological, and pragmatic factors affects the selection of an appropriate research design and data collection tools. Keeping in mind the myths and misconceptions described above will prevent you from discounting potentially valuable methodological options and will assist you in choosing an evaluation approach that results in findings that are both valid and useful. For more information about common evaluation myths and misconceptions, or about evaluation designs and research methods in general, please contact a JBA team member at:

James Bell Associates
1001 19th Street, North, Suite 1500
Arlington, Virginia 22209
703-528-3230 or 800-546-3230
www.jbassoc.com

³ "Status" refers to the long-term condition or circumstances of a person; for example, the permanency status of a child in a family reunification program is either reunited with her family of origin, still in foster care, or in another permanent living arrangement (e.g., adoption, guardianship).

⁴ For more information on measuring program outcomes, see James Bell Associates (2008, December). *Conducting an outcome evaluation*. Arlington, VA: Author.

⁵ For more information on process evaluations, see James Bell Associates (2008, August). *Conducting a process evaluation*. Arlington, VA: Author.