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# Meta-Analysis and Everyday Life: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

THOMAS A. SCHWANDT

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Lipsey offers an important argument for using meta-analysis to provide information on the efficacy of various social interventions as well as insight into the design of evaluation research on those interventions. The following is less a response to Professor Lipsey's paper per se than a second opinion based on a brief meta-theoretical investigation of the technique of meta-analysis. By subjecting the method, its assumptions, what it takes as 'givens,' and the methodology in which it acquires meaning to some careful scrutiny, I hope to reveal the good news, the bad news, and the potentially really objectionable news that attends the deployment of this method.

Meta-analysis, cluster evaluation, integrative research reviews, Foucault's archaeology and genealogy, and the like, are methods that make it possible for us to talk about human experience in general. Thinking and talking about experience in general is patently necessary simply to get along in everyday life. If we could not conceive of and speak about roses, tires, bread, pain, success, fear, health, families, violence, and so on in general, we would have a very hard time communicating with one another and we would face the impossible task of remembering every event and instance in particular. Thus, the good news about a method such as meta-analysis is that it makes possible (and assumes) a kind of general knowledge that, as Professor Lipsey says, allows us to "converse comfortably" about a variety of social phenomena "without a great deal of confusion about what they mean." Thus, we can talk about your family and my family, even though the notion means very different things to each of us—what the family actually is or was in each case is most likely constituted in very different ways.

The potential bad news about the use of a method like meta-analysis is that one begins to forget that in fact there *is* a great deal of confusion about what social phenomena mean. This mistake usually follows from forgetting that (a) there is no idiom in which reality prefers to be described, and (b) meta-analysis is part of a particular idiom (or language of methodology) that dictates how social reality is to be perceived, comprehended, described, and

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represented (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). That idiom makes it possible to describe the essentially intentional phenomena that constitute social life (e.g., being a member of a family, marrying, joining, healing, teaching, participating, negotiating, evaluating, etc.) in general non-intentional ways. Consider the following example, which I have adapted from Fay (1996). Suppose we describe an event as follows: "Beginning on May 3, 1997, Mary Smith, a long-time user of heroin and other hard drugs, enrolled in the sixteen-week Mt. Sinai drug rehabilitation program. She participated for the full 16 weeks and was discharged." To explain this event, *as described in this way*, we would need to understand what 'enrolled,' 'participated,' and 'discharged' meant. That, in turn, would require that we either grasp the intentions of the actor(s) involved or the intentionality of the acts of 'enrollment,' 'participation,' and 'discharged' themselves. But if this same event is described in a non-intentional manner as "a drug addict completed a drug treatment program," then, *as described in this way*, this event is amenable to an explanation requiring general information about drug addicts and drug treatment programs. The first kind of explanation is idiographic and reflects an abiding interest in the particularity, specificity, and uniqueness of the event. The second kind of explanation is (more or less) nomological and treats all unique events such as this in terms of what they have in common—as an instance of a class of events—so that it is possible to talk generally about a recurring pattern.

There are two important points to be seen here: First, social reality does not demand a certain idiom by which to be described. We may all readily (and quite correctly) acknowledge that human action is clearly intentional in nature (versus, for example, the non-intentional behavior of natural phenomena), that its meaning is open and heterogeneous. But we can choose to describe, represent, and interpret social actions *as* intentional phenomena (as, for example, is done in interpretive anthropology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, etc.) or we can choose to describe social action in general, non-intentional ways (as is done in meta-analysis). The 'bad' news about meta-analysis arises when we mistake efforts to *describe and represent* social phenomena in general, non-intentional ways for the belief that this is precisely the way social phenomena *are*. The possibility of describing human action so as to eliminate its intentional, language-impregnated, discursive, historical character is often too easily confused with assuming that human action is *necessarily* arranged in something like a 'periodic table of the social elements.' This is an error of reification: treating our language of description and representation *as if* it denoted a material and concrete reality.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that we understand that meta-analysis is a means of generating general knowledge, as described above, and that its users are mindful of the danger of reification inherent in mistaking the application of the method for the way the world really is. We must now address the following questions: What do we do with this kind of knowledge in evaluation? In what kind of framework is it deployed? What do we think having this kind of knowledge means for the human activity we call doing evaluation? I believe an even greater peril, a truly objectionable state of affairs, lurks just ahead. This becomes apparent in examining the association of meta-analysis as method with evaluation as a technical project—an activity dedicated to managing the social world through objective knowledge obtained by method. (Please note that in what follows I am not claiming that Professor Lipsey makes this association in his paper.) Of course, by no means is the technical view of evaluation associated only with perspectives that endorse the merits of meta-analysis as a technique. Virtually all forms of evaluation practice in contemporary society (whether they are so-called quantitative, qualitative, participatory, or mixed-method approaches) both constitute and are constituted by this view.

There is a long line of thought stretching from the prewar period in Europe to the present day in which thinkers as diverse as Bergson, Husserl, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and closer to the present, Gadamer, Arendt, Adorno, Habermas, Taylor, and Bauman share a broad-based criticism of modern technicism and the hegemony of method in the study of human affairs. All argue that there is something seriously amiss in a society that assumes that technical mastery of human action through objective knowledge is a viable project. Even a cursory glance at any major statement of the purpose and role of evaluation in society will reveal that evaluation is a thorough manifestation of this modern project. Evaluation is a technology for assigning value to objects, events, processes, and people. It is a practice built around the assumptions that (a) evaluative information makes possible the improvement of society through the rationalization of various kinds of social practices, such as, the formation of social policy, the implementation of educational programs, social services, and medical and psychological treatments, the administration of these programs, and so forth, and (b) there is a best means of generating and delivering this information to clients, administrators, or managers to ensure the realization of their goal of an ordered society.

The aim of the modernist project of evaluation is to tame the unruly social world, to bring order to our way of thinking about what does and does not work for improving social life. As currently conceived, evaluation is one of those human endeavors like administration, management, health care, and education that reflect the mistaken belief in the manageability of everything human, and in which method is increasingly allowed to define and circumscribe our entire view of the world (Schwandt, 1998). This attitude or posture of bringing everyday life under control, of managing it and ordering it, is captured in the following observation:

As human beings we give ourselves to—or find ourselves in—projects through which we shape our environments and our relationships with each other. In the history of this projecting, particularly since the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, we have moved more and more into a position where, as ‘subjects’, we confront a world which is ours to objectify and control. And, increasingly, the substance of our human lives has become part of this objectified world over which we exercise mastery. Our lives are resolved into a series of projects—all our “wanting and doing,” our “making, producing and constructing”—occur within this overall project or ‘frame’ of mastery itself. It is this frame which defines the scope of our ambitions and the meaning of success; our attitudes, our modes of thought, the very questions which are our problems arise already within this framework or else are smoothly, and inexorably, assimilated to it (Dunne, 1993, p. 366).

As a modern technological project, evaluation practice begins with the reasonable assumption that the activity of evaluation is a type of moral-political social interaction conducted by ordinary folks in a variety of settings and circumstances where these people invariably both know and act. In these settings (classrooms, administrative offices, social service agencies, etc.), actors’ evaluation knowledge is intimately connected with ordinary ways of conducting themselves, with relating to others, and with getting things done. However, evaluation practice assumes that these highly contingent ways of evaluating and judging that occur in the course of everyday life can be and ought to be brought within the scope of a more scientifically managed view. That is, there ought to be both a body of knowledge and a set of explicit methods and rules that will supplant (or, at the very least, significantly reduce) the contingent, unreliable evaluation understanding and judgment of everyday practitioners and thereby ensure the success of their performance. Meta-analysis is but one of many techniques used in the service of this goal. The aim of the modernist evaluation project is thus to convert the rationality implicit in evaluation practices associated

with teaching, managing, providing health care, offering social welfare services, and so on into technical rationality and thereby to overcome as much as possible the contingencies and conditionality of human life (Dunne, 1993).

The guiding knowledge-constitutive interest of evaluation practice is what Habermas (1974 [1971]) and others have identified as the technical cognitive interest—an interest grounded in the notion of purposive-rational action and directed at controlling and manipulating the natural and social worlds. There is nothing inherently ‘evil’ in this interest in technique, means-end rationality, and productive, method-driven knowledge. The problem lies in the fact that this interest and its associated conception of knowledge have increasingly come to characterize all of human life in modern societies. Gadamer (1992 [1965]) makes this point in the following way:

It would be no exaggeration to claim that we owe the modern phase of the industrial revolution not so much to the advances in the natural sciences as to the rationalization of their technical and economic application. What appears to me to characterize our epoch is not the surprising control of nature we have achieved, but the development of scientific methods to guide the life of society. . . . The scientific tendencies of thought underlying our civilization have in our time pervaded all aspects of social praxis. Scientific market research, scientific warfare, scientific diplomacy, scientific rearing of the younger generation, scientific leadership of the people—the application of science to all these fields gives expertise a commanding position in the economy and society. And so the problem of an ordered world assumes primary importance (p. 165).

This does not mean that society is deformed simply because experts in evaluation, management, and so on are consulted for their knowledge. The danger lies in the mistaken belief that we can *apply* this conception of knowledge to the “concrete life situation of people and the practical exercise of their commonsense rationality” (Gadamer, 1992 [1965], p. 171). The more we believe that it is both possible and desirable to transform the kind of knowledge and rationality suited to moral-political human interaction (i.e., praxis) into a kind of technical knowledge and means-end rationality, the more we risk our responsibility to ourselves and as citizens of a society to reflect on and criticize our practices. This deformation of praxis—bringing its unique kind of knowledge and rationality within the frame of technical mastery—aided by, among other developments, the modern technologies of evaluation, electronic communication, and practices of administrative coordination is readily evident in all aspects of human interaction. Consider, for example, efforts to rationalize the practice of education by focusing on measurement of student achievement and other ‘output’ indicators, to manage the delivery of care for the health of others in terms of indicators of cost-effectiveness and efficiency, and to develop the science of public administration.

None of this means that knowledge of the kind that Professor Lipsey explains can be generated by meta-analytic techniques is without merit or value. The issue is not to confuse the production of general knowledge generated via such methods with the kind of knowledge necessary for actors in classrooms, meeting rooms, and board rooms to make wise evaluation judgments. Even a perfect evaluation technology of society will not guarantee wise practical choices when evaluation is called for because the knowledge required in the concrete situations of everyday life is a different kind of practical knowing.

As a modern professional practice, evaluation is a scientific undertaking, the technical province of a particular kind of expert. It is an activity that has to do with making or production—an activity designed to bring about and terminate in a product or result, namely, an evaluation judgment of the merit, worth, or significance of some person, policy, program,

and so on. The product/result (the evaluation outcome as reported by the evaluator) is separable from the one who produces it; the knowledge required for (or which governs) this activity also is separable from the user of that knowledge. In other words, it is a kind of activity in which one can decide to willfully participate or not participate: Monday through Friday, the evaluation expert 'puts on' her evaluation knowledge to make the 'product' of an evaluation. On the weekends, that knowledge is set aside when the evaluator is not engaged in 'making' evaluations.

This mode of productive activity is associated with a kind of practical knowledge called *techné*. This is knowledge possessed by an expert in a specialized craft—a person who understands the principles underlying the production of an object or state of affairs, such as, a house, a table, a safe journey, a state of being healthy, or an evaluation. This kind of knowledge fits smoothly into a means-end framework: The materials and tools (including methods) of this kind of practical knowledge are means used by the maker to bring about the end product/result. Practical knowledge itself is a means to the achievement of the final product as the end of the activity. Evaluation as a productive activity is thus under the firm control of an objective, impersonal method (whether qualitative, quantitative, or 'mixed').

The professional practice of evaluation as this kind of expert productive activity fails to make sense of and relate to evaluation as a dimension of praxis. Praxis is a form of human activity that has to do with the conduct of one's life and affairs as a member of society. The distinct mode of practical knowledge associated with praxis is *phronesis*. This is neither a technical nor a cognitive capacity that one has at one's disposal, but rather is bound up with the kind of person that one is and is becoming. This kind of knowledge characterizes a person who knows how to live well; it is acquired and deployed in one's actions with one's fellow human beings. This kind of knowledge is variously referred to as deliberative excellence, practical wisdom, or practical reason. Associated cognitive virtues are understanding, judgment, and interpretation.

The kinds of evaluative decisions that we make as a part of our everyday life (in our interactions with our children, colleagues, spouses, significant others, friends) and as part of the practices to which we belong and the associated responsibilities that we have as teachers, health care professionals, social workers, public managers, and so on are moral-political actions. They are a kind of human interaction and activity that leaves no separate identifiable outcome as its 'product'—hence, the end (aim) of the activity is realized in the very doing of the activity itself. In conversation with my daughter I evaluate her reasons for wanting me to lend her money to buy a car. The aim of the evaluative activity here is to make a wise judgment. The evaluative decision that I take as a result shapes both her and my own sense of my being a father. In conversation with a student, we review a recent paper submitted by the student for a seminar that I led. I offer my evaluation of the paper; the aim of the activity is to help the student develop and strengthen her perspective and to offer criticism in a constructive way. The evaluative decision that I take as a result shapes my sense of being a teacher of a particular kind. The 'outcome' is about formation of self (hers and mine) in the encounter with others. The same kind of phenomenon occurs when a manager and team of service providers together evaluate whether their agency is effective in helping their clients. The 'outcomes' of these evaluation activities are not decisions about which 'program components' are 'working,' what to do about changing 'client demographics,' or what to do about 'differential responses to the treatment.' Rather, the 'result' of the evaluation is a

particular way of being toward and interacting with these clients, conceiving of their needs, regarding them as persons of a particular kind, and grappling with the question 'are we doing the right thing and doing it well?'

The contingency, situational specificity, inherent openness, and ambiguity of evaluating cannot be eliminated, reduced, or made more manageable by having the 'right' kind of technical knowledge. Evaluation is not a decision-making process that can be rationalized by *applying* better technologies. It is a human activity, a social interaction requiring moral-political judgment. It requires general knowledge of all kinds—knowledge of concepts and relations between concepts involved in various practice situations (health care versus education, for example) as well as knowledge of techniques of communication, case based knowledge of strategies previously used and found successful in particular circumstances, unformulated knowledge of pitfalls and difficulties to be anticipated and avoided, knowledge of the aims of the practice and what both fosters and subverts and transforms those aims, and so on (Dunne, 1993). But the judgment required to make use of those stocks of knowledge in the situation at hand—deploying that understanding in relation to right person(s), to the right extent, at the right time, given the right aim, and in the right way—is simply not a kind of knowledge that is forthcoming from the application of method and a conception of evaluation as a technique.

Modernist conceptions of evaluation supplant rather than develop this kind of wisdom and intelligence in practitioners by divorcing the activity of evaluation from the kind of knowing and acting that constitute evaluative interactions with others in everyday life. Thus, the truly objectionable move potentially associated with meta-analysis (and with all efforts to find method-driven solutions to the 'problem' of praxis) is assuming that evaluation is a technology for managing human affairs and believing that somehow practice will be less ambiguous or more rational if we can only find the right ways to generate and apply evaluation knowledge. (Of course, effective resistance to this move will not be forthcoming from a neo-romantic, unrealistic longing for a premodern society. Nor will the modernist project of eclipsing praxis by technique be obstructed by so-called third paradigm or mixed-methods approaches that continue to unfold within the frame of mastery, or by postmodern approaches to evaluation that retreat into the aesthetic and the play of language, deny the concrete reality of everyday life, and elevate the contingency and concrete situatedness of choice-making into a radical, universal perspectivism.)

General knowledge is an important way of thinking about ourselves and our actions. Of course, then, we should do meta-analyses and other forms of evaluation synthesis (e.g., cluster evaluation, integrative literature reviews, etc.). But we should not invest in these tools on the mistaken technicist assumption that better technical or craft knowledge (better methods, rules, or procedures) will eliminate the interpretive challenges of evaluative praxis and thereby yield a science of human action. We must learn to become responsible to and for ourselves and our circumstances. The activity of evaluating does not lie outside ourselves in the effectiveness of objects (e.g., programs, treatments, interventions, projects, and their components) and actions divorced from our ways of being in the world. Decisions about the merit, worth, or significance of our actions are about our own self-formation and responsibility to others. We must help practitioners see themselves as students and researchers of their own evaluative practices rather than consumers of evaluation aided by outside experts.

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