



Synthesis of articles in *Evaluation and Program Planning*: 2010–2016



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ABSTRACT

Published articles from the *Evaluation and Program Planning* journal were examined over a six year period from 2010 to 2016. We investigated the focus of the journal, evaluation type (formative vs summative), number of articles published, place of authorship, number of authors, research domain of articles, research topics, and data collection method used. Results indicated that (a) public health, evaluation, and adolescent/child research domains were most prevalent; (b) most authors were from North-America; (c) most articles had three or more authors; and (d) document review was most prevalent data collection method. We suggest that more articles with a multicultural background be published, and more articles be solicited from other countries to fulfill the international mission of the journal.

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1. Introduction

Evaluators have conducted empirical research on evaluation articles (Alkin, 2003; Cousins & Earl, 1995; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark, 2008; Smith, 1980, 1983, 1993; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Worthen, 1990, 1998). More recently, practicing evaluators have reported that they value research on evaluation (Szanyi, Azzam, & Galen, 2012). However, only one study was conducted recently that indicated trends in evaluation and program planning. This recent article examined the historical path of evaluation content in the *Evaluation and Program Planning* journal (Ayob & Morell, 2016). Evaluators should continue to conduct empirical research on evaluation (RoE); more commonly known as meta-evaluation.

A review of evaluation articles builds a better understanding of evaluation model usage, evaluation topics researched, data collection methods, and program planning trends. The review effort will help evaluators know how and to what extent a certain methodology is needed, how essential information may be understood, and possible ways that the research findings can be used. The meta-evaluation over several years of a journal can provide a comprehensive overview; a progress report of sorts. Moreover, the meta-evaluation clarifies defining characteristics as well as the focus of the journal. To date, few meta-evaluations are reported for evaluation journals.

We further investigated the meta-evaluation of the *Evaluation and Program Planning* journal based on three primary reasons: (1)

journal is the flagship publication of the *American Evaluation Association* (AEA); an influential evaluation journal; (2) It is a leading international journal with a broad academic impact; and (3) it contains a diversity of evaluation articles to study. We feel our article expands on the findings in Ayob and Morell (2016) by providing additional categorization of prior studies (Saldana, 2013; Westat, 2010) and their topics.

In our study, we synthesized the published articles from the *Evaluation and Program Planning* journal from 2010 to 2016. From a synthesis of the published articles, we present a descriptive summary based on several criteria. The criteria were: focus of the journal, evaluation type, number of articles published, place of authorship, number of authors, research domain, research topics, and data collection method used. Overall, our results are given in graphical displays for ease of comparison.

2. Methods and procedures

We used specific established criteria for categorizing the articles and graphing the data (Vallin, Philippoff, Pierce, & Brandon, 2015). The authors separately reviewed 457 published articles in *Evaluation and Program Planning* during February 2010 to April 2016 (excluding the Editorial, Introduction and Book Review articles). The published articles were cross checked by the authors to avoid any incorrect categorizations due to category misclassification or fatigue. The flowchart in Fig. 1 shows our procedure for categorizing the published articles.

We used NVivo software for the qualitative analysis of the journal article titles (NVivo, 2015). Based on the word frequency list provided by NVivo, we categorized journal articles by authorship, evaluation type (either summative or formative),

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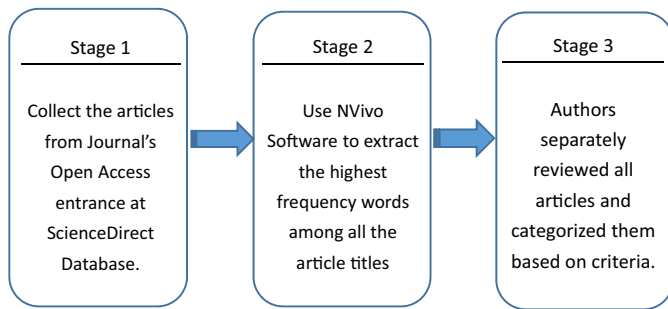


Fig. 1. Procedure for categorization of journal articles.

research domain, research topic and its data collection methodology. Any differences in categorization among the authors was addressed in a preliminary discussion during the preparation of the results. The final decision for categorization of these articles was based on the theoretical framework described in the book *The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation* (Westat, 2010), as well as, *Evaluation Theory, Models, & Applications* (Daniel & Anthony, 2007).

The study design was a mixed methods approach to data analysis. The methodology we used in this study followed the recommendations by Vallin et al., (2015) who categorized and reported on seventeen years of articles published in the *American Journal of Evaluation* from 1998 to 2014. Besides following their procedure in classifying and reporting on the research on evaluation articles (RoE), we extended our analysis to include an NVivo analysis, which synthesized all of the publications and provided the highest frequency of topics in the article titles.

3. Results

We used NVivo software to make a qualitative analysis of the article titles. The software yielded a count of the words with the highest frequency of occurrence. Based on that list, we extracted all of the highly ranked nouns, and excluded those irrelevant but still highly ranked function words, such as prepositions and adjectives. The word list in Table 1, including the most frequently used words in six years, indicated the primary focus of the journal. The word list shows that *evaluation* and *program planning* were the predominant topics for the journal, but topics have expanded to include *health/care* and many others.

The primary focus of the journal was concentrated in three basic areas: evaluation, health care, and program planning. The journal placed an increased emphasis on program evaluation, rather than program planning. From this word list, we also see an emphasis on health care. Accordingly, public health care was a common research topic in the journal. The word count also

Table 1
Frequency Count of Words (N=457 articles).

Rank	Word	Count	Percent (%)
1	Evaluation	221	29
2	Health/Care	121	16
3	Program/Planning	120	16
4	Research Study	58	8
5	Community	45	6
6	Development	36	5
6	Evidence	36	5
8	Approach	29	4
8	Implementation	29	4
10	Intervention	28	3.5
10	Theory	28	3.5
	Total	751	100

indicated that intervention and theory were important research topics. As stated in the preface for the types of the articles suitable for publication in the journal, the focus was on reporting of specific evaluation or planning efforts, and discussion of issues relevant to conducting evaluation and planning. The NVivo analysis suggests that these goals were achieved and represented within the published article titles. Program evaluation with related research topics had the highest frequency of words in the list. This reflects the journal's publication requirement for articles that address issues relevant to evaluation and planning: program planning, research, approach, implementation, intervention, and theory. Moreover, the word *evidence* appeared frequently, which indicated an emphasis on the role of collecting evidence in program planning and evaluation.

The NVivo software provided a visual display of the words in the analysis. Fig. 2 displays a Word-Cloud image, with more emphasis shown for words in larger print. Basically, higher frequency occurring words are shown in larger print. The word, *evaluation*, was therefore the most frequently occurring word, followed by *health* and *program*, which matches the top three listed in Table 1.

3.1. Descriptive data

Classification of the 457 articles from 2010 to 2016 included the country of origin, the professional or disciplinary domain within which the research was conducted, the topic addressed in the research, and the data collection method used in the study. We adopted a broad definition of program evaluation when categorizing the articles. We followed coding strategies outlined by Saldana (2013).

Fig. 3 indicated that more than half of the articles (N = 275, 60%) belonged to the category, *summative evaluation*, which refers to those evaluations designed to assess a project's success in reaching its stated goals. The frequency of summative evaluations indicated that the journal put more emphasis on that evaluation type, rather than formative evaluation of the ongoing program or project.

Since the journal changed its publication period from every three months to a bimonthly issue starting in 2013, we decided to summarize the data by year (Fig. 4). From 2010–2015, we see an increasing trend in the number of published evaluation articles;

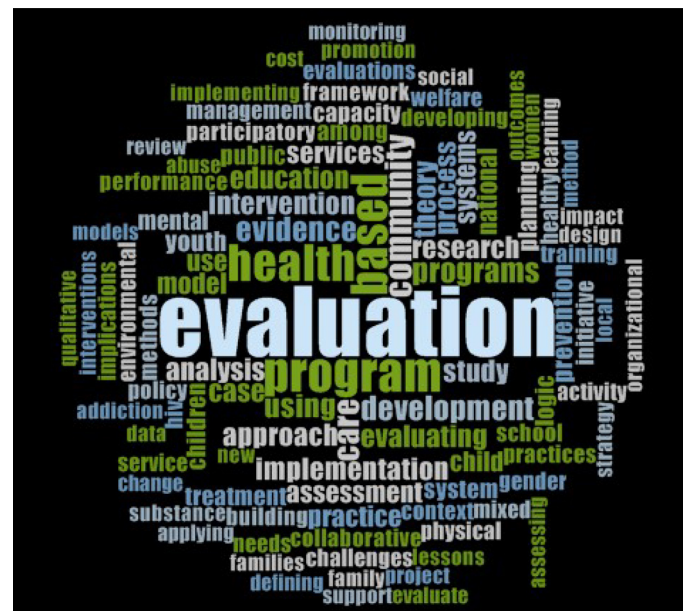


Fig. 2. Word-Cloud provided by NVivo software.

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