



### Editor's Introduction

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## Editor's Introduction

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*Seymour J. Rosenthal, MSSW*

The reporter from a large, urban newspaper called to inquire about the nature of evaluating "some social programs." He promised not to take too much of my "valuable time," since he was working against a deadline on a story in a series regarding social service groups and their strategies for coping with welfare reform and child welfare issues. "How can you tell whether or not these programs are successful? What indicators do you use?"

A lengthy discussion ensued which ranged from an academic treatise in evaluation methodology to the philosophic notion that program outcomes need to be viewed in both broad and narrow goal perspectives. I explained that too often, programmatic outcomes are constrained by rigid boundaries which do not permit the kind of broader assessment which may lead to genuine learning. We learn as much from the unanticipated outcomes as from those which are predicted. My point was that when looking at program outcomes, we should spend the necessary time to clearly understand what worked and what did not work. Practitioners should examine both the promised and unanticipated outcomes in the specific context of the experiences of the participants, and account for the potential of unreported outcomes and the limits of measurements as well.

The reporter's promise of a brief discussion was unmet, and for an hour and a half our conversation continued with both of us clearly not satisfied that the other had been reached sufficiently. The article appeared several days later, and while not representative of the philosophical and technical issues that we had discussed, was clearly sympathetic to the professional concern for supporting objective, careful assessments of social programs. And in the end, our conversation stimulated my decision to choose the theme of evaluation for this issue.

The conversation was yet another reminder of

the need for professional development in evaluative research. The profession must enhance its capabilities by conducting supportable, intelligent programmatic evaluations, and articulating these outcomes in a way that both captures the interests of community members and engages decision makers in their deliberations on the creation and revision of social policy.

Historically, practitioners believed that, given the enormity of need for services to reduce human suffering, any efforts for such cause were not only justified, but that a grateful society should welcome their efforts. At the time these beliefs were held, the amount of public dollars dedicated to social service efforts was a fraction of today's expenditures. After years in which public funded service became woven into the fabric of governmental budgeting, those opposing the use of taxpayers money to fund "wasteful social experiments" found voice. The taxpayers revolt was on. Good intentions were and are no longer acceptable. Clearly, the largesse that was extant in the 60s has long since gone. Though we produced the greatest budget surplus in the history of this nation, the embers of the taxpayers' revolt still burn brightly, and will likely continue to simmer well into this new millennium.

In our efforts to evolve professionally in the new millennium, we must challenge ourselves in many ways. First, we need to speak with clarity and conviction about the outcomes of our efforts, whether we can shout with glee of their positive results or speak in somber tones of what we have learned from the negative results of these programs. Just as the medical profession publishes in clear, articulate fashion their research that ends in failure as well as success, we too must claim that all efforts lead to a better targeting of future efforts. Second, we need to begin a generalized undertaking to increase amongst all practitioners a commitment to, and an understanding of, the practice and technology of

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program evaluation.

Continuing education programs could address this undertaking. Many current practitioners graduated from schools of social work without taking an evaluative research course as a requirement or an elective, while many others may have taken a statistics and methodology course without any conviction other than it was required. Finally, we need to permit and encourage a more open, and yet technically structured, assessment of our programmatic efforts. Much could be accomplished if we permitted and encouraged inter-professional alliances in what should become a national teach-in on evaluation research. Our prior professional preparation could not have envisioned the current context of our practice; it is time to accept and adapt to the fact that the policy interventions of recent years have significantly changed the profession.

This issue's "commissioned article" is a joint presentation on evaluation and continuing education featuring an academic perspective by Dr. Lois Milner and a practitioner's perspective by Dr. Raymond Meyers. Each represents his or her

respective constituency with clarity and distinctiveness. Of course, we encourage you to expand on their discussion by submitting your unique perspective within an area of social service specialization.

The three major research articles in this issue discuss professional development as it applies to distance education programs, agency management, and training and certification procedures. Each of the authors' exploration of his or her respective topics incorporates the changing face of the profession in light of advancing technology and policy changes. Future issues of this journal will publish further examinations of the need for continuing education programs as a result of our professional adaptation and the continual reverberations of societal change. We welcome all submissions on these topics, as well as other issues related to the field of professional development and continuing social work education.

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I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Katherine M. Bezak in preparing the text for publication.