With a Splash of Soda, Please: Towards Active Engagement with Difference

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In the previous critique, Saville Kushner has offered a very thoughtful and provocative commentary on our statement about the merits of mixed-method approaches to contemporary program and policy evaluation, published in Volume 7, Issue 1 of *Evaluation*. I am very honored that Saville took our work seriously enough to read it as carefully as he did. I am also pleased that his commentary so richly invites further conversation. This response is offered in the spirit of continuing conversation.

My response has three main parts. First, I agree with most of what Kushner said in his commentary, and I would like to underscore several of the critical strands of the evaluation ideology that I believe we indeed mostly share. Second, despite our common evaluation perspectives and allegiances, Kushner seems to disagree with me and my co-authors about the merits of mixing methods or of adopting a mixed-method approach to evaluation. Kushner offers compelling reasons not to mix, as well as cautions about both the politics and conceptual rationales for mixing. Resisting the temptation to respond to each of Kushner's elegantly argued points, I will focus on two key themes of disagreement, as I understand them. And finally, I will briefly re-state my own position, re-framing it with the particular discourse of this conversation.

A Shared View of Evaluation: It's About Methodologies not Methods, and Politics Too

Most profoundly, I agree with Kushner that discussions about mixed-method approaches to evaluation are importantly about methodologies, not about methods, and particularly about the values and ideological stances that are embedded in social science methodologies.¹ By 'methodology' I mean an articulated set of assumptions about:

- the nature of the social world;
- the nature of the knowledge we can legitimately have about this world;
- what is possible and what is most important to know;

- value commitments regarding the purpose and location of our work in society; and
- the methods preferences that enable enactment of these assumptions.

I believe Kushner has a similar understanding of methodology. He speaks of the importance of predictability, consistency and integrity in evaluation practice; of embracing 'the logic of enquiry rather than its technology'; of endowing meaning to a particular method only via 'methodology where we talk about purpose and value'; and of ensuring that our methodological decisions reflect our values. Methodology includes epistemology and ideology. Methodology provides a conceptual and socio-political anchor for our work. Methodology locates our work, politically, culturally and morally, in the program and policy arenas in which we work. Kushner argues in particular, I believe, that methodology provides the overall justification for our work and the integrative cohesion and consistency that our work must have to be credible and accepted in these program and policy contexts.²

Like all domains of applied social science, today there are multiple legitimate methodologies framing the artful practice of social and educational program and policy evaluation. In evaluation, these include:

- methodologies that privilege generalizable causal explanation as the most important and noblest of scientific endeavors;
- methodologies centered around utilitarian ethics and pragmatism, valuing most 'what works' and what is most useful;
- methodologies that honor and emphasize the understanding of the meaningfulness of lived experience, contextual contingencies and dynamism in human action, individual human agency;
- methodologies that seek to deconstruct racism and patriarchy in Western societies;
- methodologies with emancipatory action as their central rationale;
- many blended methodologies; and more.

Most of these methodologies have preferences for particular methods, but methods gain meaning only from the methodologies that shape and guide their use. Here, I fully agree with Kushner. An interview does not inherently respect the agency of individual human life; it only does so if guided by and implemented within a methodological framework that advances this stance. So, any discussions of mixing methods in evaluation must be discussions of mixing methodologies, and thus of the complex epistemological and value-based issues that such an idea invokes.

I also agree with Kushner that evaluation practice decisions are socio-political and moral decisions – precisely because our methodologies include value commitments and political stances – and that evaluators rarely have complete control over all of these practice decisions, notably including decisions about mixing methods. Kushner makes an excellent point when he observes the current political attractiveness of multi-method evaluation amongst policy makers and other evaluation sponsors. These evaluation stakeholders appear to value the potential of multiple methods to facilitate interdisciplinary work or work that is

more comprehensive or possibly work that will advance certain political agendas. Kushner stated:

To mix or not to mix is not always purely the decision of the evaluator and is rarely politically neutral. Evaluators face many demands to adopt sponsor-prescribed multi-methods that can divert us from concentrating on the job at hand.

When our evaluation practice decisions are constrained by sponsor politics and dictates, the possibilities of conducting a mixed-method study as we envision it are similarly constrained. (Context constraints would affect most other kinds of evaluation approaches similarly.) As usefully noted by Kushner, fashioning a mixed-method evaluation study in a politicized context can also risk co-option into a given policy agenda. The reasons [for promoting multi- and mixed-method work] may indeed not be 'entirely benign', and we would do well to 'stand back just a little and ask relevant questions.' Kushner's cautionary alert is well taken.³

I agree with Kushner that we, evaluators, need to be knowable and known in the field. Our actions need to be consistent, even predictable, or at least not wildly surprising. Kushner stated:

we need to be recognizable and predictable to our constituents. Constituents are expected to be consistent in their responses to us and our will to generalize rests upon some assumption of predictability of response. Levels of mutual predictability are the foundations for the unusual and fragile evaluation relationships built in the field. The more constituents know the evaluators, the more secure they can be in their access to the evaluation and the better the evaluation relationships – and the richer, thereby, the data.

In what are our consistency and predictability in the field most importantly anchored? Kushner appears to want to anchor consistency in the commitment to a particular methodology that is transparent, knowable and predictable to stakeholders. Our mixed-method stance is, in contrast, anchored in a commitment to a process of engagement. Moreover, all individual methodologies risk reification and denial of the legitimacy of other ways of knowing. By mixing methods, there is less risk of denying difference. Mixing methods also makes more transparent to stakeholders the processes of knowledge construction and thereby alters their relationship to knowledge.

Kushner is right; mixed-method evaluation cannot be done without consideration of the consequences.⁴

Mixing Methods to Engage with Difference

In our mixed-method approach, we are specifically advocating that evaluators anchor their work in a value commitment to engaging with difference. Difference, diversity, pluralism is *the* major socio-political issue of contemporary American society (and arguably well beyond our borders, in this post-September 11th world). Evaluators can conduct their work from the relative safety of spaces at the edges or margins of ongoing deliberations and confrontations about difference, endeavoring to inform such deliberations and confrontations with good data and thoughtful judgments (see Mark et al., 2000). Or evaluators can 'invite

diverse ways of thinking and valuing' *into* their work and thereby position evaluation as a practice of active engagement with difference. This is our mixed-method agenda; 'in good mixed-method evaluation, difference is constitutive and generative' (Greene et al., 2001: 32). Kushner does not appear to agree with or support this view of positioning evaluation as engagement with difference.

Engaging with Epistemological Differences

Kushner repeatedly takes issue with the epistemological dimensions of our statement about mixed-method evaluation. He is troubled by images of juxtaposing very different, even conflicting ways of knowing about our social world, notably ways that make meaning of human endeavors through 'coarse-grained measurement' and aggregation or through conversation with each individual in her/his own unique contexts. He further notes (as is also discussed above) that epistemology and values are intertwined in methodology – so that ways of knowing are also ways of valuing – and, through one of his examples, suggests that some different methodologies are 'irresolvable'. Kushner is concerned that 'introducing multiple methods may displace considerations of how the evaluation fulfils its obligations to neutralize power inequalities by disguising those inequalities as epistemological differences.' Kushner is appropriately concerned and troubled, I believe.⁵ The epistemological challenges of mixed-method evaluation remain daunting.

But, my ideas about mixed-method evaluation do not attempt to respond to these challenges by postmodern fiat. I am not suggesting that 'we live in a new moral order which has already neutralized epistemological differences to which we cling haplessly'. I am not suggesting that deep differences in views on the nature of social knowing, rooted in generations of philosophical thought, should or even could be ignored in mixed-method inquiry. Nor am I promoting a mixed-method approach in order to enable 'evaluation to serve as a host for epistemological contests' or 'epistemological competitions'.

Rather, epistemologically, the view of mixed-method evaluation I am advancing endeavors to engage with epistemological differences, to:

1. respect multiple ways of knowing, from the post-positivist proposition to the Marxist-feminist social critique; and
2. understand and respect some of the deep contradictions posed by different epistemological traditions; but yet
3. not get stuck in these contradictions *nor* feel forced to choose just one way of knowing for my work; and instead
4. invite multiple ways of knowing into the same study so that it may be enriched (Greene and Caracelli, 1997).

Yes, multiple, diverse ways of knowing are likely to invoke some tensions. But, I agree with Kushner that 'some of our tensions define us'. Moreover, in my view of mixing methods, it is precisely in these tensions that the generative potential of mixed-method inquiry might best be realized (Greene, 2001; Greene and Caracelli, 1997). Thus, my mixed-method epistemological stance is one of engaging with such tensions, rather than being forced to pick just one side. And

the engagement is not intended to be a contest or competition, but more of a conversation. The point is not to see who wins, but what can be learned, one from the other.

Kincheloe (2001) recently made a similar argument for qualitative social research, using the concept of *bricolage* (from Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and the importance of conducting inquiry that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries.⁶

The process at work in the bricolage involves learning from difference. Researchers employing multiple research methods are often not chained to the same assumptions as individuals operating within a particular discipline. As they study the methods of diverse disciplines, they are forced to compare not only methods also differing epistemologies and social theoretical assumptions. . . . Bricolage does not simply *tolerate* difference but *cultivates* it as a spark to researcher creativity. (Kincheloe, 2001: 686–87, emphasis in original)

Moreover, my mixed-method epistemological argument is importantly substantiated by the recognition that epistemology and ideology *are* intertwined, that ways of knowing are also ways of valuing. (Again, on this issue, Kushner and I fully agree.) Evaluation has many legitimate stakeholders, who occupy different positions of power in evaluation contexts and characteristically maintain different value positions regarding the evaluand. And, because methods choices reflect underlying value commitments, different methods characteristically favor the power–value positions of different stakeholders. (Kushner made the same point.) A multiple- or mixed-method approach thereby enables an evaluation to be attentive to or inclusive of the concerns and value stances of more stakeholders than a single-method approach. In short, rather than feeling obligated to take just one side in the continuing battle of methodologies or to concomitantly privilege just one stakeholder group amidst the many legitimate claims on evaluation, these mixed-method ideas endeavor to be inclusive (House and Howe, 1999), both epistemologically and politically, *and* to actively engage with the differences that thereby come to the evaluation table.

Engaging with Difference as Part of the Fabric of Society

Relatedly, Kushner appears to be concerned that a mixed-method approach to evaluation means giving up ‘perennial contests over values in social inquiry’ or trying to sweep them under a methodological carpet, that ‘mixing methods might imply a promotion of competing visions of social justice’, and especially that a mixed-method approach can betray the confidence and trust of ‘programme participants [who] seek legitimation through commitment and a consistency of values’. Kushner wonders how evaluators can attain this personal commitment and consistency if they mix their methodologies. Kushner looks to his personalized methodology (Kushner, 2000) as the anchor for this consistency of presence and connections in the field. This personalized stance on evaluation offers ‘a way of mobilizing a concern with [individual] people in the practice of a program evaluation’. It represents a call for inverting the figure–ground relationship so that individual lives and experiences are not read only within the frame of the program, but the lives and work of people also provide the frame for reading the

meanings and significance of the program (p. 11).⁷ I think Kushner worries that mixing methods can compromise this commitment to honor and to find theoretical coherence and evaluative integrity in the meanings and experiences of individual lives.

I am not sure if I agree or disagree. It appears that my mixed-method commitment to engaging with difference is more of a political stance, while Kushner's stance is more personal, rooted in his valuing of intellectual autonomy.⁸ But, isn't the personal political? And aren't all politics local? I believe this difference clearly warrants further dialogue.

Meanwhile, let me reiterate the primary socio-political rationale for my view of mixing methods. What matters most in the methodology of mixing methods I am advancing is a commitment to active engagement with the differences – especially the social constructions of those differences – that distort and rupture the fabric of life in contemporary US society. A mixed-methodological stance is not a surrender to dominant ideologies or to political convenience (correctness or otherwise); nor is it a betrayal of my democratic commitments or my qualitative-interpretivist convictions. Rather, mixing methods means a commitment to engage with the differences and tensions that beset us and our strivings toward social betterment, *and* to engage in a spirit of tolerance, humility and dialogue.

Reprise

Saville Kushner and I share many evaluation convictions. These include a commitment to ensuring that the voices and perspectives of the most marginalized stakeholders are heard in our evaluation practice. To do this requires that evaluators act upon their 'privileged positions' (an idea Kushner believed was overlooked in our mixed-method statement).

My choice of action is at root political. My promotion of mixed-method approaches to evaluation is unabashedly politically motivated. Given that our work as evaluators is inherently political, I wish to conduct my work towards noble visions of a society characterized by tolerance, understanding and acceptance.

Dialogue, biculturalism (and multiculturalism), and ambassadorial diplomacy toward common understandings are apt images for the view of mixed-method social inquiry being advanced. . . . These images convey norms of reciprocity, respect, and openness while they simultaneously underscore the existence and acceptance of difference. Even more, these images convey a commitment to actually using our differences to generate more meaningful claims to know and more visionary understandings of our social worlds than would be possible with just a single methodology. (Greene, 2001: 253)

Notes

1. This claim perhaps also extends to most other discussions about evaluation. Evaluation is fundamentally the enactment of methodology, and our discussions and disputes are most fundamentally about the different assumptions and character of our different methodologies.

2. Kushner's own methodology appears to be that of the case study – a methodology 'guided by the singular need to arrive at a unifying theory of the case', by a respect for the unique (not meaningfully aggregated) qualities of individual human life, and by some 'obligations to neutralize power inequalities'. I share many of these methodological stances, but this is not the point of the present discussion.
3. Kushner's example of a national educational evaluation largely structured and defined by the government sponsor speaks eloquently to the need for greater evaluator authority in design and practice decisions, in order to make evaluation more responsive to multiple stakeholders and to local as well as national issues. But, this concern does not uniquely arise in mixed-method evaluation contexts.
4. I am indebted to Lehn Benjamin for the insights of these two paragraphs.
5. A case from my own evaluation history (Greene, 2000) dramatically illustrates and supports Kushner's point. In this study, methods were mixed precisely to include multiple dimensions of the program being evaluated (implementation and outcomes) and, even more importantly, to include multiple value stances and stakeholder perspectives regarding this program, which was quite controversial. Yet, debates about different claims to know and about the different methods used did indeed overpower illumination and discussion of underlying differences in value stances and power. This risk is indeed a significant one.
6. My citation of this article does not imply either my agreement or my disagreement with Kushner's concerns about interdisciplinary evaluation teams. I have a varied set of reactions to Kushner's discussion about disciplinarity, most of which are not directly germane to the topic of mixed-method evaluation.
7. This calls to my mind Tom Schwandt's discussions of philosophical hermeneutics as a significant frame for evaluation (see Schwandt, 1997, forthcoming). In this frame evaluation is viewed as a practical (moral-political) engagement that unfolds dialogically and pedagogically (not monologically and technically). Understanding, meaning, experience in this frame are centered in the contextualized, temporalized encounters of individuals.
8. Might the roots of this difference lie in our respective individual socio-cultural histories? Threats from the State to intellectual autonomy have constituted severe challenges to Saville and his British colleagues in recent decades. In the US, my formative intellectual years have been centered on the politics of difference, from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s through to the cultural studies of today.

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