

A Decade of Research on Evaluation: Identifying and Classifying Empirical Research on Evaluation



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PURPOSE

This study examines what kind of empirical research on evaluation has been published in peer-reviewed journals, what topics have been covered, and what topics need more work.

The purpose of this study is to identify empirical research on evaluation (RoE) published in peer-reviewed journals between 2005 and 2014 and match these to evaluation subjects and inquiry modes as defined by Mark's (2008) taxonomy of research on evaluation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What **subjects** of inquiry are addressed by empirical research on evaluation?
2. What **methods** of inquiry are used in empirical research on evaluation?

BACKGROUND

As evaluators emphasize the role of data in decision making when it comes to programs, policies, and products, there is a surprising gap when it comes to the data evaluators base their decisions on. Empirical research on the methods, theories, and practice of evaluation has been called for by many theorists and thought leaders in the evaluation field.

Taxonomies are one way of organizing and categorizing bodies of research. As Mark (2008) points out, such framework(s) would help identify gaps in our evidence base, guide additional RoE, guide efforts to synthesize RoE, serve as a knowledge management system, and move forward on debates around evaluation issues.

What is Research on Evaluation?

For the purposes of this study, **research on evaluation** (RoE) is defined as:

"Any *purposeful, systematic, empirical* inquiry intended to test existing knowledge, contribute to existing knowledge, or generate new knowledge related to some aspect of evaluation processes or products, or evaluation theories, methods, or practices" (Coryn et al., 2016, p. 3).

IMPORTANCE

Why is Research on Evaluation Important?

- Empirical research on evaluation methods, theories, and practice can lead to best practices within evaluation.
- Empirical research on evaluation can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of evaluation practice, capacity building, teaching evaluation, and more.
- Evaluation methods, theories, and practice should be subjected to the same scrutiny that we apply to programs, projects, personnel, and policy.

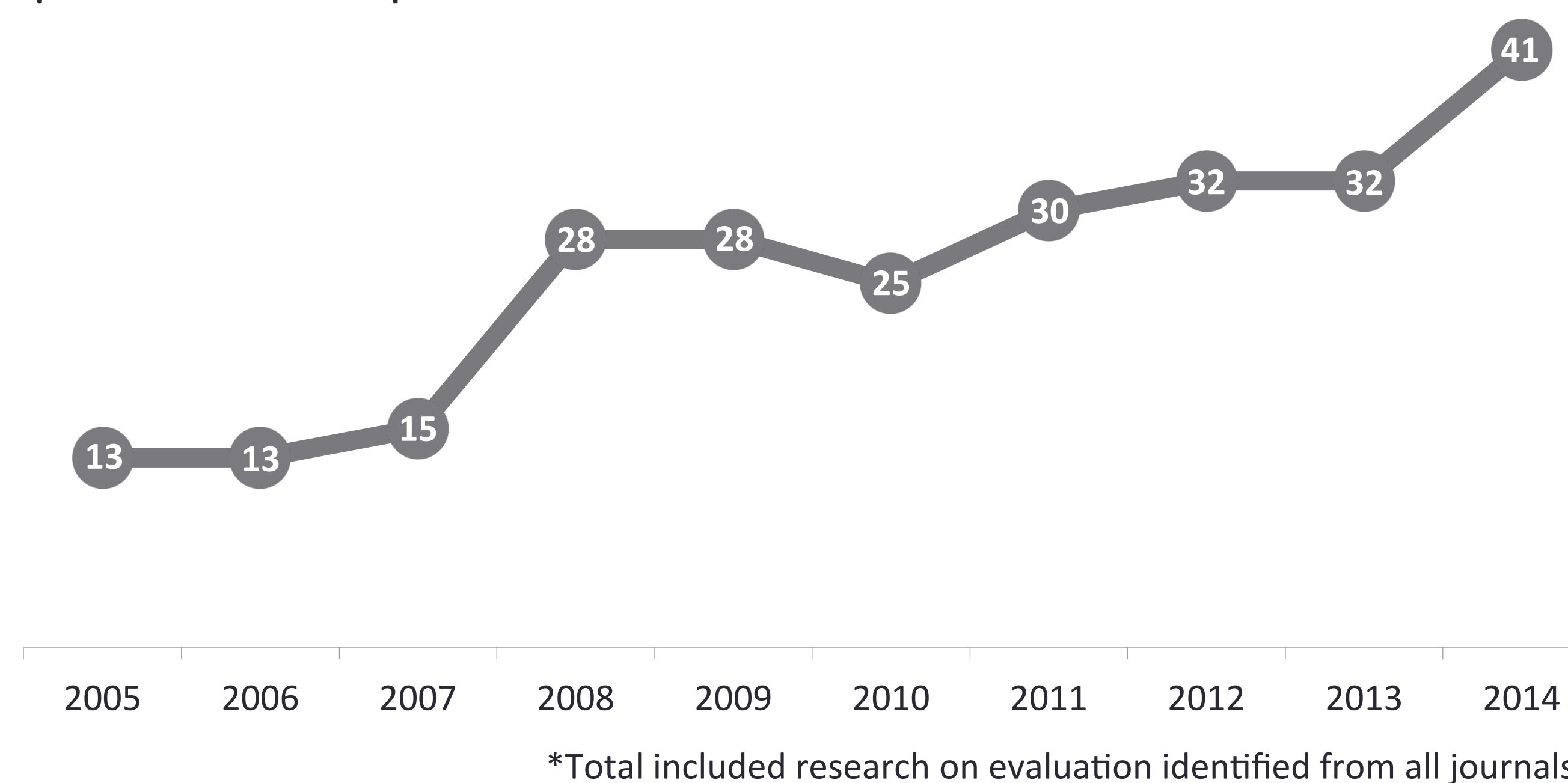
METHODS

- Ten years of articles (**N = 3,390**) in fourteen peer-reviewed evaluation journals¹ were screened by three pairs of coders for inclusion criteria based on the definition of research on evaluation. The included sample of articles (**n = 257**) were subjected to a second screening to ensure fidelity to inclusion criteria.
- Included articles were then systematically coded to the subjects of inquiry and modes of inquiry. Taxonomies developed by Mark (2008) were used for the subjects of inquiry (i.e. what questions are RoE articles asking) and modes of inquiry (i.e., how they are investigating those questions).

Only five journals had **more than 20** RoE articles published between 2005 and 2014.

	Articles screened (N)	Identified RoE (n)	Percent
American Journal of Evaluation	355	63	17.7%
Evaluation and Program Planning	540	44	8.1%
Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation	192	25	13.0%
New Directions for Evaluation	319	25	7.8%
Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation	171	21	13.0%

Empirical research on evaluation has **increased** in peer-reviewed publications since 2005.

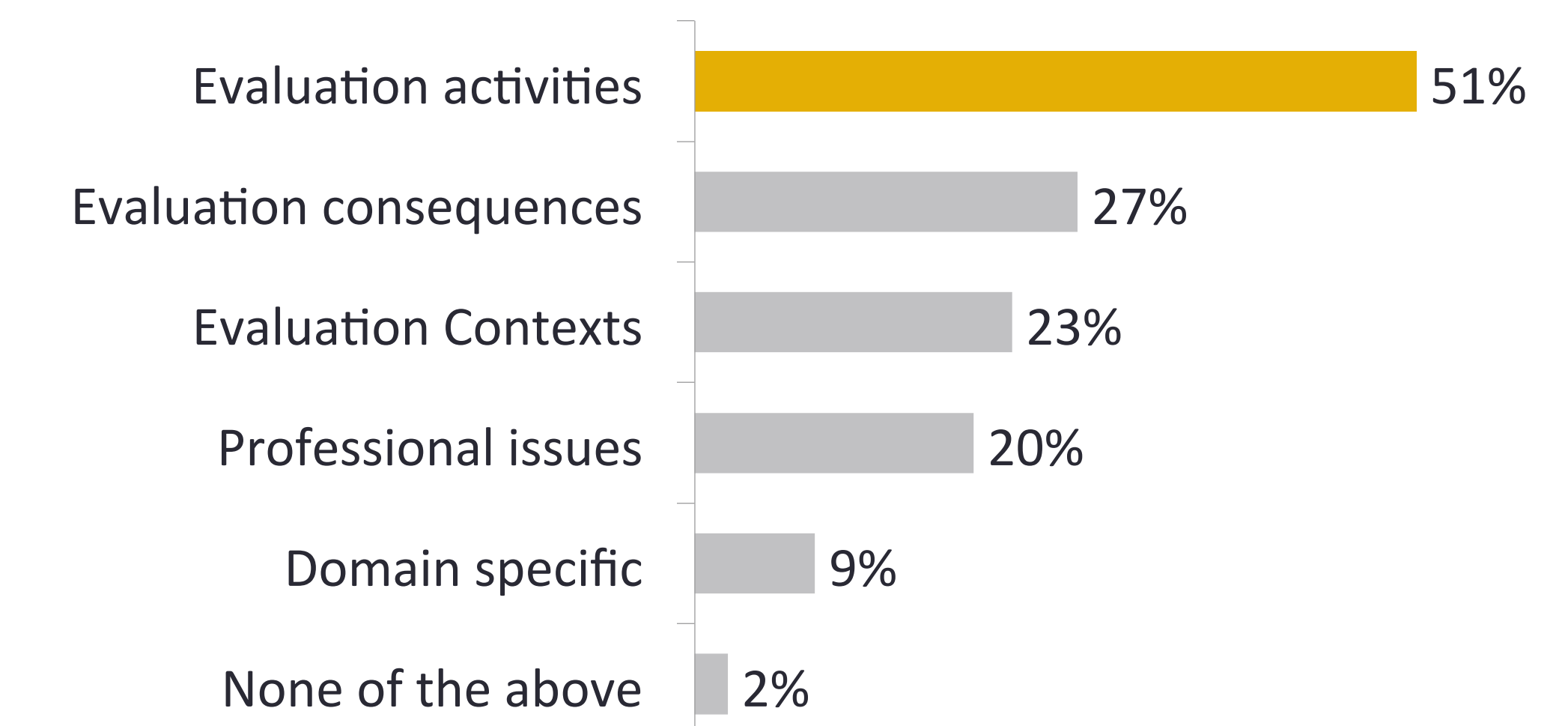


Included Journals

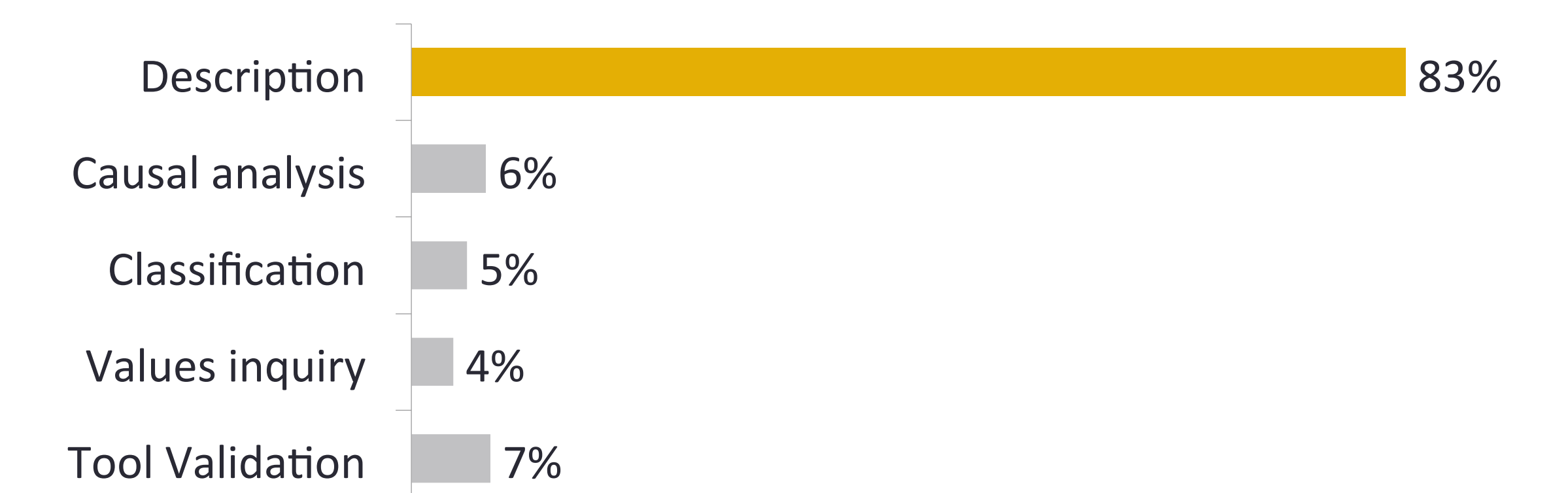
¹These journals were selected because of their focus on evaluation, whether directly or in a specific field or context; they include African Evaluation Journal, American Journal of Evaluation, Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Evaluation: The International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice, Evaluation and the Health Professions, Evaluation and Program Planning, Evaluation Journal of Australasia, Evaluation Review, Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation, New Directions for Evaluation, Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation, Research Evaluation, and Studies in Educational Evaluation.

FINDINGS

Most of the empirical research on evaluation identified focused its investigations on **evaluation activities**.



By far, the majority of empirical research on evaluation used **descriptive** modes of inquiry.



CONCLUSIONS

- The taxonomies put forth by Mark (2008) do a fair job of capturing the types of empirical research on evaluation that has been published in peer-reviewed evaluation journals.
- The high percentage of research on evaluation classified as description points to the need for more rigorous studies on evaluation methods, theories, and practice (i.e., findings of RoE are asking "what is", not questions of "why", "how", or "what impact").

Future Research

- The researchers hope to be able to compile identified empirical research on evaluation into meaningful categories that will facilitate use by practitioners through a searchable database.

LIMITATIONS

- Over 80% of articles were identified as descriptive according to Mark's (2008) taxonomy of inquiry modes. This is partly due to the inclusiveness of the definition (e.g., case studies, some systematic reviews, and regression analysis were included in this category).
- The narrow scope of time limits the conclusions that can be drawn for patterns in RoE over the history of evaluation as a profession.

References

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