The Difference Between Research and Evaluation

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Research

* Research is often undertaken to:
  * Prove a hypothesis
  * Prove a theory
  * Prove or validate works of earlier experts
  * Generate new knowledge
  * Make generalizations about completed studies or events
  * Explain causes
* Intended to increase the body of knowledge on a particular issue
* Strictly controlled, cannot be modified during course of the experiment
* Dissemination involves publishing results

Evaluation

* Often focuses on improving the performance or efficiency of individuals, groups, programs, or policies
* Serves to tell how well a person or program is doing and what needs to be done to improve efficacy and efficiency
* Results of a program or policy evaluation can guide solutions to the problems and to improve the existing program for the target population
* Primary focus is to benefit the specific program target population
* Driven by key questions led by stakeholders
* Seeks specifics that show what is happening in a program or event Dissemination involves report to stakeholders

Research vs. Evaluation

Research

* Purpose is testing and producing generalizable results
* Scientific inquiry based on intellectual curiosity
* Questions originate with scholars in a particular discipline
* Advances broad knowledge and theory
* Conducted within a controlled setting
* Quality and importance judged by peer review

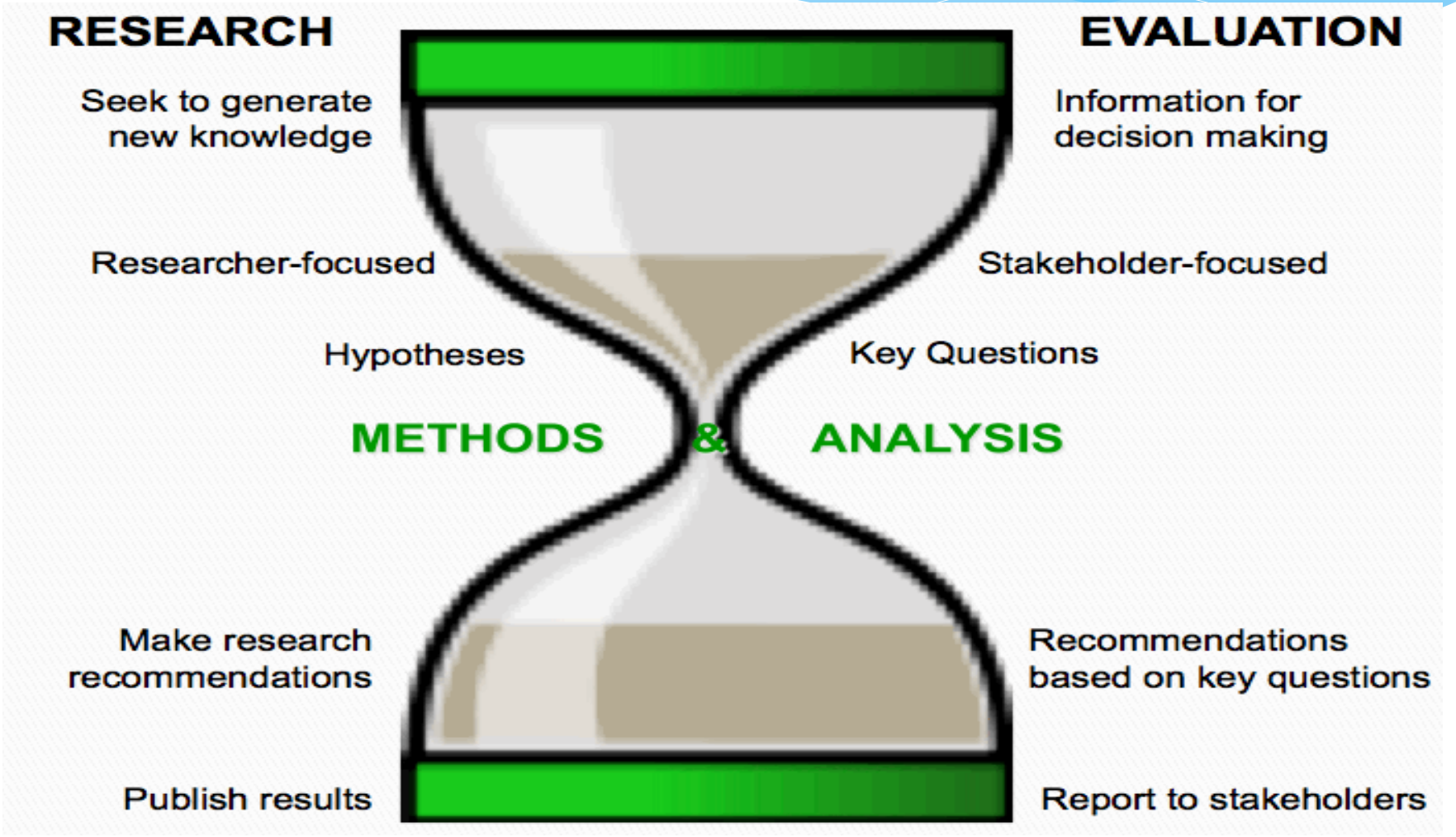
Evaluation

* Purpose is to determine the effectiveness of a particular model; judge merit or worth
* Questions originate with key stakeholders
* Policy and program interests of stakeholders paramount
* Provides information for decision-making on a specific program
* Conducted within a setting of changing actors, priorities, resources and timelines
* Quality and importance judged by those who will use the findings to take action and make decisions

Blome, (2009). Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation, National Institute of General Medical Sciences; Patton, M.Q. (2014). Evaluation Flash Cards: Embedding Evaluative Thinking in Organizational Culture. St. Paul, MN: Otto Bremer Foundation.

Similarities Between Research and Evaluation

* Both enhance knowledge
* Use many of the same qualitative and quantitative methodologies and analytic techniques
* An activity could be both research and evaluation or neither
* Both make conclusions based on systematic data collection and analysis
* Both require ethical oversight



American Evaluation Association - http://aea365.org/blog/?p=222

Evaluation-When it is Not Considered Human Subjects Research

* Program evaluation activities are not considered human subject research when:
  * Data is collected internally and analyzed for the normal course of business and intent is only to provide information for, and about, the setting in which they are conducted
  * They are conducted as part of the standard operating procedures of the setting
  * They do not involve experimental or non-standard interventions
  * Consists of searches of existing literature
  * Involves de-identified data analysis
* Program evaluation activities are not generally considered contributing to generalizable knowledge and usually do not need Human Subjects or Institutional Review Board approval

Evaluation-When it is Considered Human Subjects Research

* But…
* Program evaluation activities are considered human subject research when:
  * The information collected is going to be generalized to other programs
  * Publishing results in scholarly journals (the assumption that publishing the findings generalizes the data)
  * Evaluations are connected to groups' or individuals' outcomes
  * An evaluation impacts the replication of other programs, services, populations at large or public policy
  * An evaluation is implemented by third party agencies

Research vs. Evaluation "Bumper Stickers"

* Research generalizes, evaluation particularizes
* Research is designed to prove something, while evaluation is designed to improve something
* Research - what's so? Evaluation – so what?
* Research – how it works? Evaluation – how well it works?
* Research is about what is; evaluation is about what is valuable
* Research provides the basis for drawing conclusions; evaluation provides the basis for decision making

Mathison, S. (2007) What is the difference between evaluation and research? And why do we care? In N. L. Smith & P. Brandon (Eds.).Fundamental issues in evaluation. New York: Guilford Publishers.

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