CHAPTER 2

The Tale of the Researcher and the Evaluator

I am a researcher; therefore, I am an evaluator.

The conversation that informs the evaluator–researcher debate is rooted in the "research versus evaluation" debate, so let's start there. Sometimes it is a deliberate and enjoyable conversation, and sometimes it is a subtler, strained one. Either way, the extent to which differences between research and evaluation exist influences several key decisions, such as what to study to be an evaluator, or whom to hire to design, implement, or critique an evaluation.

Before we embark on a somewhat dizzying journey, keep in mind that the basic aim of social science research is to produce or generate knowledge. Patton (2008) says that evaluation aims to influence actions; it is action-oriented. He notes that some evaluation texts mingle these definitions, such as Rossi and colleagues' (2004) popular text *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach,* which is in its seventh edition and is used in many social science graduate programs. In their book, Rossi and colleagues define **program evaluation** as "the use of social research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs in ways that are adapted to their political and organizational environments and are designed to inform social action to improve social conditions" (p. 16).

Some people put the two terms together and talk about **evaluation research.** Kelly (2004) describes evaluation research as an approach in which the purpose is to "solve practical problems" (p. 522), suggesting that the focus is not on judgment or improvement of interventions. Babbie (2017) notes that the purpose of evaluation research is to "determine whether social interventions or programs have had their desired effects" (p. 387). Here, the word "value" is noticeably absent. At the same time, other evaluators use the same phrase, *evaluation research,* to mean research that is done *on* evaluation. And let's not forget basic

and applied research. McBride (2013) tells us that basic research aims to address "fundamental processes of behavior," while applied research aims to "solve real-world problems" (p. 10). Hmm. Obviously, distinguishing between an evaluator and a researcher can be a bit mystifying—so I will make it as clear as I can. Keeping Patton's understanding of evaluation (its aim is to influence actions) and the core meaning of social science research (its aim is knowledge generation) in your mind, let's take a closer look at the differences between researchers and evaluators.

Why It Is Important to Understand the Differences between Researchers and Evaluators

Understanding the difference between evaluators and researchers can inform your career path in terms of which one you may like to be and therefore what to study. It can also clarify for you which types of positions to apply for, or whom to hire. While I was writing this book, an international development agency advertised for an evaluator to review evaluations of development programs in education and health from an external perspective, and to provide critical feedback. The job description asked for a person with strong communication skills, strong qualitative and quantitative research skills, and knowledge of the organization—all of which gave me pause. What about knowledge of evaluation methods, theories, or approaches? Or practical experience in designing or implementing evaluations? Or knowledge of how power, politics, culture, and language influence an evaluation approach? I was a bit aghast; surely they did not want a researcher to review an evaluation and provide feedback? Or maybe, just maybe, they did not know the difference between a researcher and an evaluator?

Researchers and Evaluators: Compatriots or Competitors?

Having a conversation about the differences between evaluators and researchers can be enlightening and uncomfortable at the same time. Sometimes the conversation is sensitive, such as when a researcher considers himself to be an evaluator. Or, awkwardly, you are a researcher and are wondering, "What does an evaluator have that I do not?" At other times, it is frustrating, such as when an evaluation commissioner hires a researcher to design an evaluation. So should you ever find yourself engaged in these kinds of ponderings, conversations, or situations, either with yourself or with someone else, consider these three essential conversation points: **valuing, purpose,** and **approaches.**

• *Valuing.* Valuing findings is at the core of an evaluator's work. Evaluators determine criteria (which can be done in multiple ways; see Chapter 12) to value evaluation findings. Researchers are not asked to value their research findings.

Wait, stop on that first point. I find some research to be very valuable.

I agree that some research is very valuable. Researchers use data to support a claim about something; however, they do not follow up that claim by valuing it. Here's an example. All females on my mother's side of my family suffer from migraines. Research has shown that certain so-called "trigger foods" may bring on migraines, and research also shows that certain types of drugs alleviate the pain. The females in my family are delighted about the research findings. While the researchers did not value their findings, my female family members found the research to be very valuable. For the evaluator, valuing a process or result is at the heart of her work.

• *Purpose.* Researchers ask questions on behalf of the larger scientific community. Basic scientific research seeks to uncover new knowledge, investigate and test theories, identify findings, and generalize them. Evaluators aim to provide information to a specific group on a particular intervention. The information is intended to be used to improve or judge that intervention—to learn more about that particular intervention, in a particular context, for a particular group of people, in a particular time frame.

• *Approaches.* Evaluation uses research methods, and then also brings its own approaches, theories, and models that are specific to the evaluation journey (see Chapter 15). Because evaluation approaches, theories, and models guide the evaluation process and its valuing framework, an evaluator needs to know them; a researcher does not.

BOX 2.1. Research and Evaluation: Some Distinct Differences

While the aim of applied research (and researchers) is often to generalize the results to the larger population (McBride, 2013), the aim of an evaluation (and therefore evaluators) is more commonly to look at a specific intervention, program, process, or policy and to judge its merit, worth, and significance, with the intent that the findings will be used by a specific group to make management decisions. A researcher fills the role of methodologist; an evaluator can often fill the role of methodologist, evaluation theorist, facilitator, negotiator, educator, and more. See Chapter 11 for further elaboration on an evaluator's potential roles.

Let's take a moment to look at what a conversation between a researcher and an evaluator might look like.

I am a researcher.	I am an evaluator.
I seek to generate knowledge, and I answer questions. I contribute to broader scientific knowledge.	I seek to generate knowledge, and I contribute knowledge to use in making decisions or improving an intervention or policy, for a specific group of stakeholders.
I use research methods of inquiry.	I use research methods of inquiry. I also use evaluation frameworks, theories, and approaches.
I identify results.	I identify results, or sometimes I use a researcher's results. And then I often work with diverse stakeholders to determine criteria on which to value those results.
My work is researcher-centric. I get to decide what I research and how to focus the research, though sometimes others, like those who fund me, also influence the decision.	My work is stakeholder-focused. Sometimes I help to shape stakeholders' questions. I shape them so that answers are likely to be useful to the stakeholders.
I publish my results in journals and books, and I also share my research at conferences so that the knowledge generated can be used.	I provide my reports and findings to the key stakeholders, so the findings can be used by them. Sometimes I publish, although publishing is not key to my evaluation work. Sometimes I give presentations at conferences on the work that I do.

Both Chapter 1 and this chapter may appear to suggest that conversations to clarify words and how they are used (e.g., **evidence** or **data, evaluator** or **researcher**) are easy conversations. They can be. At other times, however, to say that they become more antagonistic is to put it nicely. Knowing how to facilitate these tense conversations is a skill essential to being an effective evaluator, as difficult conversations can arise in all parts of an evaluative process. Let's stop for a moment and talk about facilitating useful conversations.

How to Facilitate Useful Conversations

In most evaluative processes, there will be times when people are on opposing sides, such as when I say "researcher" and you say "evaluator." Practicing how to manage these discussions in often less sticky situations (e.g., evaluation vs. research) can prepare you for occasions when you will need to engage with facilitating more challenging ones. Here are some other likely examples: (1) In an evaluation, there are data to answer a question that are as convincing for one side as another (e.g., "Yes, do it" vs. "No, do not do it"); (2) two groups (or more) analyze the same data and reach different conclusions; (3) there is agreement on the

conclusions, but a difference of opinions on the recommendations; and (4) there are people who just plainly have different opinions or understand a situation or word differently, and to whom the group needs to listen.

The approach described next describes how to facilitate a process that encourages people to listen to opposing viewpoints. There are three reasons to consider using this approach. First, when people know that others will listen to them, they are more likely to engage and work with these others, even when they have different opinions or assumptions. A second, and somewhat related, reason is that it can be very frustrating to perceive (rightly or wrongly) that no one is listening. This can cause a person or group to "shut down," and thus can cause an evaluator to miss important perspectives in the discussion. Third, truly listening to what others have to say who think differently opens new ways of understanding.

ACTIVITY 2.1. Listen–Speak–Listen

Purpose: A useful approach to engage groups who have very strong and clearly very different viewpoints is to facilitate a discussion where people *must* listen to other ways of thinking and other ideas. The purpose is to ensure that each idea, thought, or fact is spoken (or signed, as in sign language) and that people listen to each other; the purpose is not (necessarily) to reach agreement.

Time: The time will vary considerably, depending on the number of people in the room, and the number of ideas, thoughts, and/or facts that people want shared. I recommend, however, that groups be allotted 10–15 minutes to write down their key ideas or thoughts. While topics and the size of the group will further determine the time frame, keep in mind that it is hard work to listen. Limit the discussion, if possible, to 15–20 minutes. A longer-drawn-out listening session can be counterproductive, as people tend to stop listening when they are tired. Total time is approximately 25–35 minutes, though it can vary.

Preparing: Prior discussions inform the debate topic. Prepare small pieces of paper (with space to write one or two sentences) for each group; there should be at least one piece of paper per person, though more pieces of paper are recommended (should there be more ideas). Gather pens or pencils.

The exercise:

1. Summarize the question or debate on a piece of flip chart paper, and place this sheet at the front of the room. Summarize the two (or more) sides as equally as possible. Read these to the group.
2. Have people choose the side of the debate that they support more (or most) strongly, and form groups. If any persons are truly neutral or undecided, or just uncomfortable with the exercise, they stand off to the side as observers. During the activity, they are not allowed to speak or sign.
3. Read the rules to the group (see "The rules" on page 34).
4. Provide each group with pieces of paper and some pens or pencils, and ask them to write *one* key idea/point per piece of paper. Each person in the group should have *at least* one slip of paper to present, if possible, though each person may have several pieces (i.e., several ideas).
5. When the groups are ready, have them form a circle, with an opposing group member on either side of each person, so that every other speaker is on the same team. To decide who goes first, flip

a coin and choose a person from that group. He reads his statement, and then the person to his left reads hers, and so on, until all the points are made. Sitting in a circle encourages a discussion-like format. The process continues until all people are heard.

The rules: There are six simple rules.

1. People must show respect at all times (i.e., no yelling; no disrespectful words or body language).
2. Only one person speaks at a time.
3. Each person may only read what is on the paper—no more, no less.
4. Once an idea, thought, or fact is shared, it cannot be repeated, even if different words are used.
5. There is to be *no response* when the idea is presented, from either the other team or the observers.
6. Everyone must agree to the rules before the discussion starts.

This exercise encourages listening that enables engagement with other points of view. Such engagement has the potential to inform deeper thinking, promote stronger conclusions/more focused recommendations, or lead to agreement—although, of course, it may not. The Listen–Speak–Listen discussion is an example of a situation where an evaluator fills the role of negotiator and facilitator. (Again, for more on an evaluator's roles, see Chapter 11.)

Here is a specific example of when to use the Listen–Speak–Listen activity. Empirical data sometimes provides two opposing answers to the same evaluation question. While the evaluator can present both empirical findings to the evaluation user (and sometimes it is acceptable to do so), it can sometimes leave the evaluation user confused at best, or annoyed at worst. After all, an evaluator was brought in to provide information to inform management decisions, not a response much akin to "Well, sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not." While both sides can still be presented in the report, reasons (drawn from the Listen–Speak–Listen discussion) can now be given for why one answer is likely to be more appropriate than the other (through the depth of additional detail and explanation), or at the very least the evaluator can provide more information that management can use to make a decision.

Evaluation versus Research

- ***Have a minute?*** If you want a good giggle, peek at a blog by Patricia J. Rogers and E. Jane Davidson called Genuine Evaluation (*www.genuineevaluation.com*). For example, Rogers and Davidson provide a funny, realistic take on the difference between evaluators and researchers with their May 25, 2012, list of "Top ten things you'll never hear from the researcher you hired to do an evaluation."
- ***Have a few hours?*** Read an article by Levin-Rozalis (2003), "Evaluation and Research: Differences and Similarities," which can be found online in the *Canadian Journal of*

Program Evaluation. Or read a chapter by Mathison (2008), "What Is the Difference between Evaluation and Research—and Why Do We Care?" in N. L. Smith & P. R. Brandon (Eds.), *Fundamental Issues in Evaluation,* pp. 183–196.

- ***Have some more time?*** Read Chapter 2 in Michael Quinn Patton's (2008) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation,* fourth edition.

Researcher or evaluator? Research or evaluation? As we have reviewed in the chapter to this point, there is a difference. Understanding this difference should influence many things—from what knowledge and skills to pursue, to who is hired, to how something is shaped and used. The differences are confounded when researchers self-identify as evaluators, or when evaluation is mislabeled as research (and vice versa). And more mixed signals are sent when, for an example, an economist does an evaluation, yet labels herself as an economist rather than an evaluator. Knowing and understanding the differences (and the points where research overlaps into evaluation) is critical for evaluators, and those who commission them, to ensure that persons with the right knowledge and skills are present to conduct an evaluation.

The evaluator-versus-researcher conversation has opened up a space to confess that in the real world, some conversations may not go smoothly. It has also suggested a practical solution: the Listen–Speak–Listen activity, which provides a technique for facilitating lively conversations and active listening. This approach can be used at any point in the evaluation process when, for example, different opinions arise, where data do not provide clear answers, or when different interpretations of the data offer useful but opposing insights.

Now that we have covered some basic differences between evaluation and research (and evaluators and researchers), and have learned a practical facilitation technique, it is time to commence our evaluative journey. Before we let the adventure continue, however, I invite you to have a conversation with me.

Our Conversation: Between You and Me

Here is a situation that you may encounter with regard to the concepts and terms we have just covered. Practicing with this common scenario can be a great help as you deal with this kind of situation in the real world.

If someone asked you the following, how would you answer: "Are you a researcher or an evaluator?" Think about how you might respond so that a nonresearcher or non-evaluator would understand you—that is, without jargon, technical terms, or abbreviations. For example, most people would probably start drifting off if you were to say, "Well, I am an evaluator, and I do empirical research that then draws on evaluation theory to value findings—and a researcher, well, a researcher uses social science theory to . . ." If we met at a cocktail party, and I asked you that question, what would you say to me?

Describing the Evaluative Journey

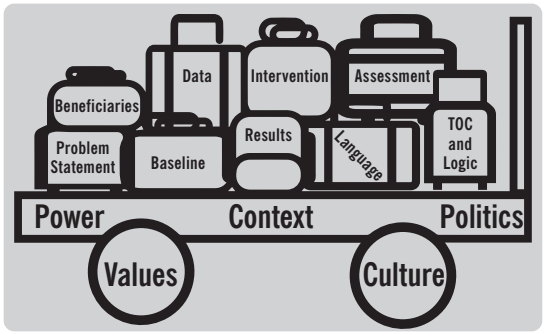
The next eight chapters illustrate the iterative logic of monitoring and evaluation, and suggest a process that is appropriate for nearly any monitoring or evaluation exercise. There are challenges to writing a book about an *iterative* process (i.e., one involving repetition to achieve a series of outcomes). First, it is nearly impossible to write iteratively without sounding redundant or having too much repetition for a reader. Although an iterative process works well in a workshop or discussion, and in real-life evaluative processes, it does not work so well in a book. The second challenge is that sometimes what logically seems like the beginning, or the place to start, is not. Sometimes it is better to dive into the middle of the process, in order to untangle the beginning and sort out the end, which brings us back to the beginning and then back to the end, and then back to the middle. And so on. Related to this is that your evaluation journey may start in a different place than where the book starts the journey. The third challenge is that there are often concepts, ideas, and definitions buried in each step that need to be discussed. So you see my dilemma: how to present the next several chapters—which by nature are iterative, with different potential starting places that can spiral off in multiple directions (depending on the evaluator and the context)—so that the steps make sense to you, my readers.

The Suitcases for Our Journey

The solution is to organize our journey into a trip where I bring along suitcases that keep the process organized by themes. The suitcases represent the themes that will be covered in each chapter; thus you will know what I am covering, in a broad sense. We will carry our suitcases with us, unpack what is needed, and then tuck them away until, once again, we need something that is inside. For instance, the suitcase labeled "Assessment" is packed to the brim with ideas, discussions, and definitions of such terms as *indicator, facts,* and *methods*. However, I will only take out of the suitcase what is needed at that point in the evaluative process; thus the same suitcase will show up multiple times, and each time something else may be pulled out, or quite possibly the same concept or term will be reframed as needed for that part of the journey. The journey can be used to:

- Reconstruct what happened (backward-looking).
- Construct what we hope will happen (forward-looking).
- Support implementation or innovation as it happens (real time).
- Inform the completion of a practical M&E framework.

The journey is thus used to provide answers to, and inform decisions about, what and how to assess and value an intervention—in other words, how to monitor *and* evaluate. All the topics covered during our evaluative journey are depicted on the next page.



The Journey's Illustrative Example

Throughout the remainder of this book, an example of a girls' education intervention is used repeatedly, to provide a consistent demonstration of how to apply concepts, terms, and processes. The girls' education intervention will unfold along with the journey, and will continue to be refined in each step, as an intervention would in an actual evaluative process.

POTENTIAL USERS OF THE EVALUATIVE JOURNEY

The rest of this book describes a journey through an evaluative process that is mindful of how power, politics, language, culture, and values shape that journey. The process has many iterative, interconnected, and interreliant steps. These include describing and understanding the intervention, defining and interrogating the reason for the intervention, determining what to assess, and gathering data (the monitoring). The information is then used to reflect and learn and to inform an evaluation design and process that increases broader knowledge, aids in judgment, supports learning, and/or otherwise informs decisions. The evaluation journey is designed to have multiple uses for six specific groups:

- *Students of evaluation and emerging evaluators.* Students of evaluation and emerging evaluators can use the thinking and process in the remainder of this book to improve their practical understanding of evaluative processes. Immersing themselves in the book will enable them to understand how and where evaluative thinking starts (and that there are various starting places), how the intervention's logic and theory are intertwined, and how that relates to and informs evaluation. The book grounds students' and emerging evaluators' understanding in how to engage with and construct effective monitoring frameworks, and ultimately how to design and implement useful evaluations.

- *Implementers of interventions.* Implementers are encouraged to make informed decisions that support achievement of an intervention's goals. The thinking and its processes

can be used so that implementers and their colleagues have a clear, holistic description of an evaluable intervention, and can use that understanding to engage in the M&E process in a practical manner. Furthermore, the process supports implementers as they engage with evaluators, donors, and others to whom they are accountable or with whom they otherwise interact.

- *Managers of interventions.* Managers of interventions can gain clarity on the intervention and the evaluative process. This clarity can support needed insight into how and why stakeholders with different perspectives may have different expectations regarding what is assessed, how it is assessed, and how findings are valued. This understanding can then be used to encourage constructive and mutually beneficial dialogues with implementers, donors, evaluators, and others to whom the managers are accountable or with whom they otherwise engage.

- *Evaluation teams.* Evaluation teams can use the process to clarify an intervention, which then informs refinement of evaluation questions, the evaluation design, and its valuing framework, and helps determine how and to whom to communicate the findings. Importantly, the process encourages teamwork with a shared understanding on all aspects of an evaluation process.

- *Lone evaluators.* A lone evaluator can use the process to think. When there is no one to engage with, and the evaluator needs to think about how to engage in an evaluation, going through the process will help keep her thinking organized and her decision making explicit—both of which are needed in an iterative evaluation process.

- *Confused evaluators.* The confused evaluator is provided with a way to untangle, engage with, and sort out confusion. Nearly all of us have all been there—perplexed, flummoxed, or mystified by the evaluation process. It happens. For example, someone says, "I need you to look at second-level outcomes and also assess the broader impact, and consider the immediate outcomes, and also look at efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. And gender. For the capacity-building program." Our immediate response may be, "Say what?"

WRAPPING UP

We have begun the evaluation journey in Chapter 1 and this chapter by clarifying the critical use of language in evaluation, and distinguishing between an evaluator and a researcher (and research and evaluation). Chapters 3–10 present an iterative process that can have different uses for different people. A girls' education intervention, the suitcase symbols, and the clarifying icons will guide the iterative evaluation journey for all its different users. Grab your hat and shoes; we're off on our evaluation adventure!