

WHAT IS PROGRAM EVALUATION?

We applaud the addition of the Methods section to *AJPH* and are delighted that its inaugural article calls attention to the important role of program evaluation in public health.¹ Roughly 40% of the American Evaluation Association's 7100 members work in public health. As leaders of the association, we welcome the opportunity to engage our public health colleagues more widely, posing the following question—what is program evaluation?

The inaugural article suggests one answer, and it sparked lively discussion among our members. In the spirit of cross-disciplinary dialogue, we distill our understanding of their reaction: its definition of program evaluation is too narrow, and its framework relating program evaluation to select forms of inquiry is out of step with contemporary scholarly treatments of evaluation and interdisciplinary efforts to standardize practice.²⁻⁷

We recognize that the meanings of evaluation broadly, and program evaluation specifically, are evolving and contested. However, both are considered broad domains of inquiry by evaluation scholars, standard-setting bodies, associations, and practitioners.

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Within this view, impact evaluation, implementation science, and comparative effectiveness research are subsets of program evaluation, itself a subset of evaluative inquiry. Program evaluation may serve many purposes, including those of program improvement; accountability and decision making; judgments of merit, worth, and significance; and ultimately promoting social welfare.

The article distinguishes program evaluation from other inquiry approaches by the type of knowledge it generates. The Joint Committee, a national interdisciplinary standard-bearer for evaluation, points out that striving for generalizable knowledge does not differentiate research from program evaluation.² Some program evaluations seek generalizable knowledge, others do not; it is not a fundamental imperative. Moreover, research and evaluation draw on the same pool of methods. Program evaluations may, for example, employ experimental designs just as research may be conducted without them. Neither the type of knowledge generated nor methods used are differentiating factors.

There are many perspectives on program evaluation, to be certain, but the community of evaluation scholars and practitioners describe it as broad in scope, responsive to the purpose of inquiry, and focused on promoting the public good. We believe the power to define program evaluation ultimately rests with this community. An essential purpose of *AJPH* is to help public health research and practice evolve by learning from within and outside the field. To that end, we hope to stimulate discussion on what program evaluation is, what it should be, and why it matters in public health and beyond. *AJPH*

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CONTRIBUTORS

J. Gargani developed the original response. Both authors participated equally in its revision.

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SPIEGELMAN RESPONDS

I thank Gargani for his remarks on my recent commentary, launching a series "Evaluating Public Health Interventions" in *AJPH*, which addresses critical methodological issues that arise in the course of evaluating public health interventions. In this series, I have^{1,2} and will consider study design and analysis, describe the latest and most innovative emerging methodologies, and provide an overview of best practices. In the first column,¹ the one that to which Gargani's letter

responds, I defined four overlapping focal areas of inquiry: implementation science, impact evaluation, comparative effectiveness research, and program evaluation. Based on my review of the literature defining “program evaluation,” it appeared that the goal of program evaluation is typically intended to be specific for the program being evaluated, rather than aspiring to broader generalizability.

Gargani disagrees and made a convincing case that program evaluation may also aim for generalizability beyond the index program. I thank him for providing further evidence that unifying methods for implementation science, impact evaluation, program evaluation, and comparative effectiveness research will be a useful exercise, and that the exceptions to the unity of methods for these closely related disciplines will likely be rare. In future columns, I will be mindful to point out these exceptions when they occur. [AJPH](#)

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