

## CHAPTER 1

# Evaluation Roots Theory to Practice

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The first publication of *Evaluation Roots* in 2002 represented an initial effort to bring together literature from a variety of domains, sectors, and schools of thought that, in concert, represented a theoretical approach to our understanding of evaluation as a field of practice. Rather than assert any one methodology or set of principles as a primary definition of evaluation, *Evaluation Roots* reached back in history to detail the many approaches articulated by published and prolific thought leaders influencing modern evaluation practice. The compendium primarily sought to contextualize the state of the field in view of the early ideas of evaluation and “to see the way they were enhanced over time.”

In its time, *Evaluation Roots* became a scholarly centerpiece for a field that was itself experiencing a period of rapid growth. Evaluation in the 1960s and 1970s was born in the United States from The Great Society era, where federal expansion and investment in social welfare programming gave rise to

experimental examinations of how public dollars should be allocated and whether they were effective in producing social good. From the 1970s to the 1990s, while large, federally funded projects declined, evaluation was increasingly applied to a growing variety of smaller-scale programs and interventions in both the public and private sectors. Over these 30 years, evaluation became an established field through professionalization (e.g., in the identification of evaluator competencies and the growth of evaluation professional associations) and institutionalization (e.g., in embeddedness of evaluation roles within both implementing and funding organizations). The year 2000 might be characterized as the outset of an “evidence-based society,” where the value for program and policy evaluation grew increasingly dependent on the rigorous and systematic gathering, analysis, and interpretation of evidence to inform decision making. The use of evaluation in identifying “best practices”—not just effec-

tive, decent, or better practices, but “best” (Patton, 2001, p. 330)—not only demanded the systematic review of well-defined bases of evidence but also focused on increasingly widespread and diversified data sources (e.g., Big Data). It also was incumbent on the evaluation field in this period to assert the rigor of those approaches applied by evaluators in accumulating and generalizing bodies of knowledge.

Within this time line, *Evaluation Roots* was an approach to gathering together early documentation of how evaluation was or should be designed, implemented, and reviewed. The authors focused on the subject of evaluation theories, thereby introducing the novel idea that evaluation is substantiated by a theoretical base. What could perhaps be more colloquially described as evaluation approaches or models, the presented evaluation theories culminated in a distilling of individuals who were “prominent” in evaluation and “contributed substantially” to basic research methodology, evaluation issue analysis, and evaluation interpretation and teaching; and who have also advocated for a particular theoretical position on evaluation. The object of the compendium was not to map together all evaluators and approaches intersecting with these themes. Rather, selection of featured theories was based on their address of (1) issues related to the methodology being used, (2) the manner in which data are to be judged or valued, and/or (3) the user focus of the evaluation effort.

As *Evaluation Roots* itself asserts, values are an integral component of judgment. The compilation of a theoretical base explicitly relied on published work written in the English language. Individuals most eligible for consideration were those best positioned to prolifically produce peer-reviewed publications and engage in academic scholarship. As a result, featured contributors were predominantly Western, White, and male. This representation is, as a result, mirrored within the original evaluation theory tree. While the intention behind identifying indi-

vidual theorists as the “roots” of evaluation practice was to trace historical influences on current approaches, this also implicitly attributed to a select group of thinkers the genesis of the field. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars, as well as global and indigenous practices, were largely missing from the picture and—many have argued—from subsequent discussions around what ideas should influence the role and implementation of evaluation.

The 2020s in the United States may well be characterized as a period of public reckoning with its history of racial injustice. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other high-profile police killings sparked a social movement that has elevated, with a sense of urgency, the need to seek truth and to redress and reform historical and deeply systemic racial injustices. This requires both acknowledgment of previously underrecognized scholars and a reimagining of multiple social structures and systems of belief that collectively enable abuse and socioeconomic harm against BIPOC. The field of evaluation is no exception, and an examination of how evaluation practices do or do not address racial equity is warranted.

It is therefore incumbent on the evaluation community to interrogate the values we bring to bear on how we define credible evidence, rigor, and the appropriateness of applying different evaluation theories and models in current contexts. This edition of *Evaluation Roots* attempts to broaden both its portfolio of contributors and the diversity of approaches discussed. Its approach is still an examination of available literature written in the English language, and the volume has known limitations in that it is not entirely comprehensive. There is still much to be done in the field of evaluation (and academia writ large) to expand the representation and accessibility of published works from a greater diversity of perspectives and experience.

In the spirit of critical reflection, this volume of *Evaluation Roots* invites readers to

consider the connections between evaluation theory and practice rather than assert which individuals constitute the “roots.” The objectives of each evaluation approach, the types of settings and scale to which they can be applied, the ways in which key stakeholders are engaged, and the limitations of each approach are presented for reader examination and assessment. The intensive review of these aspects is intended to encourage dialogue around the values, contexts, and implications of each approach, as well as to present an opportunity to consider how our own and others’ values play out in evalua-

tion implementation. The editors believe that collective deliberation and ongoing discussion are critical to our advancement of evaluation practice in a way that encourages us to be increasingly imaginative, encouraging of diversity, and ultimately, in service of equity.

## REFERENCE

- Patton, M. Q. (2001). Evaluation, knowledge management, best practices, and high quality lessons learned. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 22(3), 329–336.

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