

INTRODUCTION

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Over the past 70 years, evaluation has evolved into a distinct form of social inquiry that has professionalized to include an array of professional associations; graduate degree programs; and sets of standards, principles, and competencies. This book aims to acquaint evaluation students, practitioners, and scholars with the big ideas that have helped shape and distinguish the discipline of evaluation. It contains classic writings on core evaluation concepts by some of the field's most influential figures alongside new essays offering contemporary perspectives on the same concepts. In positioning classic writings alongside new commentary on core evaluation concepts, we invite readers to reflect on

- what makes evaluation unique,
- how far the field has come since these core ideas were introduced.
- differences in perspectives based on authors' contexts and positionalities, and
- what may be on the horizon as the field continues to mature and evolve.

As we introduce this book, it may be helpful to understand what it is *not*. It is not

- an introduction to evaluation;
- an absolute summary of the entire discipline of evaluation, including theory, methods, and practices;
- a guide to evaluation practice;
- a guide to evaluation theory; or
- a summary of our interpretations of other people's writing about evaluation.

There are a number of excellent books on evaluation that serve the purposes described in the previous bullet list. We wanted to create a different kind of book. We hope the combination of classic and contemporary perspectives will spark critical reflection about the past and future of evaluation.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

We created this book primarily for advanced evaluation students, experienced evaluation practitioners, and emerging and seasoned evaluation scholars—that is, people who have learned the basics of evaluation and are ready to think critically about the field. However, anyone interested in learning

more about evaluation as a discipline and the elements of what makes it unique may benefit from reading this book. We hope that readers take away a deeper understanding of the core concepts in evaluation and advance their own thinking about their place within the field.

THE CORE CONCEPTS

The core concepts featured in the book are ideas that we, the editors, believe help define the evaluation field. We thought deeply and discussed the following questions:

- What makes evaluation different from applied research or other forms of inquiry or practice?
- What ideas and practices have been generally adopted and internalized by the evaluation community?
- What beliefs or principles reside at the core of our collective professional identity?

In considering these and similar questions, six big ideas rose to the surface:

1. Evaluation is a distinct form of inquiry that is oriented to reaching judgments of merit, worth, or significance.
2. Engagement enhances the usefulness and relevance of evaluation.
3. Evaluation is inherently political.
4. Culturally responsive evaluation practice can lead to a more just society.
5. Evaluation's value is realized through its use and influence.
6. Evaluation is a reflexive practice: Evaluation can and should be evaluated.

Evaluation is practiced in a wide variety of contexts for different purposes. Practitioners have vastly different academic and professional backgrounds, epistemologies, and values. They use eclectic methods, many borrowed and refined from other social science disciplines. Yet, evaluation stands apart from other fields in several ways. Collectively, we have found that people who identify professionally as evaluators generally agree on these six concepts. These ideas permeate the standards, principles, and competencies that have been developed to guide professional evaluation practice in the United States.

What we find especially fascinating about these concepts is that they were not always so deeply ingrained in the fabric of evaluation thought and practice. These ideas were, if not transformative or revolutionary, certainly novel when they first emerged in the evaluation field. That originality of ideas and provocation of thought and conversation is something we hope this book's readers will experience. We encourage you to consider how the ideas presented in the classic writings were not initially widely embraced when originally published. We hope you will

consider where the new insights, interpretations, and innovations offered by the book's contemporary authors might take the evaluation field next.

THE CLASSIC PIECES

We believe that providing readers with unfiltered access to original influential writings, rather than just our summaries or interpretations of them, supports deeper understanding of the concepts that have helped define the field of evaluation. Selecting the classic writings was challenging, as there was rarely a single article or book chapter that encapsulated the early thinking on a core concept. We looked for previously published articles and book chapters that

- clearly conveyed the seminal ideas related to the core concept (we regarded this as more important than being the most cited or earliest writing on the topic),
- were published when the core concept was novel or at least had not yet fully gained traction in the evaluation field, and
- were written by authors recognized as thought leaders related to the featured concept.

We did not identify an arbitrary time frame that would make something count as “classic.” Rather, we focused on selecting writings that included big ideas that acted as seeds that would sprout, flourish, and come to define the field. We read—and reread—many pieces. Some choices were difficult. In many cases, we've included other classic writings in the recommended reading list at the close of each section.

DIVERSE VOICES IN EVALUATION

Many within our field have rightly critiqued the racial homogeneity of the scholars whose writings are included in foundational texts and who are recognized as key theorists and award winners (Boyce et al., 2023; Hood, 2001; Shanker, 2020). This book features early writings that strongly influenced the evaluation field's development; the majority of the authors of these pieces identify as White and male. We recognize that these authors and their works gained influence within systems that historically overlooked other ideas proposed by scholars of color and women.

We believe it is important for the evaluation community to engage directly with the works that have helped shape the field. We also recognize that in highlighting these classic pieces, we are further amplifying privileged voices and reinforcing a historically inequitable canon of evaluation literature. In this book, we address this duality in two ways.

First, we engaged a diverse set of authors in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, age, countries of residence and origin, as well as evaluation experience, training, and sector. Among the 26 contributing authors (including editors), 20 identify as women, 5 as men, 1 as nonbinary, and 1 as genderqueer. The group includes individuals who identify as queer

($n = 3$), bisexual ($n = 2$), gay or lesbian ($n = 2$), and straight or heterosexual ($n = 19$) (one person chose not to share their sexual identity). The authors' ages (at the time of this book's publication) ranged from 26 to 67, with a median of 40. Nine authors identify as Black, African American, African, or Caribbean; nine as White; four as Latino/a/e; two as Asian or East Asian or Indian; one as both Asian/East Asian/Indian and Middle Eastern; and one identified as Indigenous Arab. The authors reside in eight different countries, including the United States ($n = 19$), Australia, Botswana, Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Kenya, and South Africa. Eight authors' nation of origin is different from where they currently reside. The authors' years of experience working or studying in the evaluation field ranges from 3 to 31, with a median of 12. Half of the authors ($n = 13$) work in academia, with others working in government, for-profit enterprises, or nonprofits.

To learn more about the authors' identities and positionalities, read their positionality statements at the end of each book section.

Second, we have included a 1957 article by Leander Boykin, a Black evaluation scholar. His ideas about evaluation did not gain traction at the time, and he is not widely cited in today's evaluation literature. However, he introduced ideas about evaluation that ultimately became widely accepted. We highlight one of Boykin's articles here as an example of evaluation scholarship by a Black author that failed to receive the attention it deserved when it was published.

SHINING A LIGHT ON ONE EARLY BLACK EVALUATION SCHOLAR: LEANDER BOYKIN'S COMMENTARY ON THE NATURE OF EVALUATION

As part of the Nobody Knows My Name project, Hood and Hopson brought to light the work of Leander Boykin and several other early Black evaluators (Hood, 2001, 2017; Hood & Hopson, 2008). In surfacing this groundbreaking work, they sought to remedy the field's ignorance about scholarly work by African Americans. We found Boykin's 1957 article, "Let's Eliminate the Confusion: What Is Evaluation?" to be especially compelling for several reasons.

First, we would not be surprised to find an article with the exact same title in today's literature on evaluation. Debates about the nature of evaluation continue to thrive. Unlike in Boykin's time, however, there has been substantial convergence of thought, manifesting in evaluation codified standards, guidelines, and principles, not only within the United States but globally. This convergence is demonstrated by the common themes across evaluation guidance materials developed by groups such as the African Evaluation Association (2020), Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (2015), German Evaluation Society, and the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Evaluation (2016).

Second, Boykin's work predates the commonly accepted "birth" of modern evaluation associated with the passage of the U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Mertens & Wilson, 2018; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014; Thomas & Campbell, 2022). ESEA required that organizations receiving grants have their interventions evaluated, which led to an exponential increase in evaluation activity and ultimately spawned the evaluation discipline and profession. There is little evidence in the evaluation literature that

the predominantly White scholars whose contributions strongly influenced evaluation thinking and practice in this era considered the earlier work of Boykin and other Black evaluators.

Finally, several of Boykin's key points are generally embraced in evaluation today, despite the fact that he was specifically discussing the evaluation of students as part of the evaluation of academic programs. Had these ideas been acknowledged, adopted, and further developed by evaluation scholars who ultimately shaped the field's early development, evaluation thought and practice might have advanced more rapidly. Here are a few examples:

- Boykin argued that the “ultimate purpose of evaluation is to improve the educational program of a school” (p. 117). This calls to mind the mantra of Daniel Stufflebeam (who is widely acknowledged as a key figure in the development of modern evaluation) that “the most important purpose of evaluation is not to prove, but to improve” (Stufflebeam, 2003, p. 31).
- Boykin called for using a wide variety of data sources and methods in evaluation, rather than relying on tests. The benefits of using mixed methods are now widely acknowledged. In addition, the overreliance on standardized tests is something professional evaluators found themselves cautioning against several decades later (American Evaluation Association, 2002). He characterized evaluation as “a group endeavor” that should involve a wide array of people associated with the program being evaluated. He noted that evaluation “strengthens democracy because it depends on the use of democratic procedures for its successful fulfillment” (p. 110). This association of evaluation with democracy is a dominant theme in the work of influential evaluation scholars such as House (1980, 1990), Howe (House & Howe, 2000), and MacDonald (1974, 1976) and their successors who advocated for participatory and collaborative approaches to evaluation (e.g., Cousins, 2019; Fetterman et al., 2018).
- He distinguished evaluation from measurement, invoking the dictionary definition of evaluation: “to appraise carefully” (p. 115). This is consistent with the evaluation field's eventual embrace of the definition of evaluation as the determination of merit, worth, or significance (American Evaluation Association, n.d.; Fitzpatrick et al. 2023; Scriven, 1991; Thomas & Campbell, 2021; Yarbrough et al., 2011).

While Boykin may not have substantially influenced the evaluation's field development, we elevate his writing here in hopes that his scholarship not only is honored but also influences your thinking about evaluation.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into six parts that correspond to six core evaluation concepts. Following this introductory section (Part I), Parts II through VI each begin with an introduction that discusses the featured core concept and sets the stage for the chapters in that section. Next is the classic writing that exemplifies early thinking or practice—a reprinted article or book

chapter—related to the core concept. The classic writing is followed by two new essays that offer 21st-century interpretations of the classic writing, review relevant developments in the evaluation field, and present provocative ideas for evaluation’s future. Each section closes with a reflection guide that includes key points, questions to spark further thought and dialogue, and recommendations for further reading on the topic.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS

Lori Wingate

Growing up in a highly homogenous (White, working- and middle-class) rural community in Illinois in the 1970s and 1980s, I was unaware of the advantages associated with my place in the social world. It was not until I read a series of ethnographies about Black urban youth during my first year of graduate school that I started to understand that being White and middle class gave me certain advantages in life. Decades passed before I learned the name of this advantage: *unearned privilege*. Now I realize I have reaped countless benefits because I identify as White, heterosexual, nondisabled, and cisgendered.

Fascinated by the unwritten rules that shape society and social interactions, I obtained bachelor’s and master’s degrees in sociology. A few years after completing my master’s, I started working at the Western Michigan University (WMU) Evaluation Center. Here, my orientation to evaluation as a discipline and profession was profoundly shaped by Daniel Stuffelbeam, James Sanders, and Arlen Gullickson, who also happened to have served as the first three chairpersons of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. Later, while pursuing a Ph.D. in evaluation at WMU, I studied under Michael Scriven. His idea that there is an inherent logic to evaluation gradually took root with me as I came to appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of evaluation in addition to its practical applications.

In my current role as The Evaluation Center’s director and in recognition of my privileged position, I believe that I have a responsibility to listen, learn, and lift up the voices of evaluation scholars and practitioners whose experiences, perspectives, and identities differ from my own. The more I learn, the more clearly I understand I have a great deal more to learn.

Ayesha Boyce

I was uniquely aware of my identities of privilege and oppression as I grew up within a middle-class family in Phoenix, AZ, as a cisgendered, nondisabled, Christian, heterosexual, Afro-Latina, parochial school student. I often felt out of place around my peers at school and similarly out of place around my peers within my local neighborhood. It wasn’t until I earned my undergraduate and graduate degrees that I was able to reconcile my juxtapositioned intersectional identities. As an undergraduate student my earned membership in the public service organization Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., solidified my feelings of acceptance as I was immediately surrounded by ambitious, dedicated, degree-seeking Black women committed to service. My time as a co-captain in the Twin City Roller Derby League during graduate school introduced me to a community that supported athleticism, body positivity, and all sexual orientations and gender identities.

My identity as an evaluator has been shaped by the excellent mentoring I have had from Jennifer Greene, Lizanne DeStefano, Melvin Hall, Stafford Hood, Rodney Hopson, and Veronica Thomas. Sitting squarely on the social justice “branch” of evaluation, I firmly believe that evaluation can and should embody the values of a more just society and that values and advocacy within evaluation are inevitable.

As a tenured associate professor at Arizona State University within the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation, my personal and professional experiences have influenced my passion for evaluation practice, theory, and teaching. My scholarship focuses on attending to value stances and issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, access, cultural responsiveness, and social justice within evaluation—especially multisite, STEM, and contexts with historically and systematically marginalized populations. My scholarship, mentorship, and understanding of equity in evaluation continue to shift as my skill set, experiences, and identities evolve.

Lyssa Wilson Becho

Before entering the field of evaluation, I worked at a youth-serving nonprofit organization. I found myself spending hours each week providing documentation of the number of youths I served with little follow-up on what they learned or how they changed because of our time together. This experience led to my interest in evaluation and gave me a great appreciation for the operations of resource-restricted organizations. While earning my doctorate from the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Evaluation program at Western Michigan University, my understanding of evaluation shifted from something that was essentially counting heads for the sake of funder mandates to a learning process that allows change makers to more fully understand the value of their work.

My perspective as a cisgendered, nondisabled, straight, White woman is inextricable from my approach to conducting and thinking about evaluation. Growing up in a middle-class Connecticut family laid the foundation for my assumptions about the world. These assumptions were stretched, challenged, and altered as I got older. My expanded understanding of justice and equity—and my place within those systems—influence my engagement in evaluation as a practice and my theoretical and methodological preferences.

Most of my current work at Western Michigan University’s Evaluation Center focuses on evaluation training and capacity-strengthening efforts for practicing evaluators and non-evaluators. Given this lens, I am particularly aware of how concepts from the evaluation field are translated to those who do not have a formal background in the field and how important it is for non-evaluators to understand how evaluation impacts their work. I believe the field of evaluation has important lessons for evaluators and non-evaluators alike.

Kelly Robertson

I grew up in a middle-class family in rural Michigan. When I was little, I wanted to be a psychologist because I believed individual-level issues were what held people back in life. It wasn’t until college that I learned about systems of oppression and how they drive individual-level outcomes. I was drawn to evaluation because it provided me with the opportunity to support organizations working toward larger community-, structural- and systems-level change.

My identity as a woman made me want to understand how systems and institutions maintain inequities. I soon learned that while I may be oppressed in some ways, I also benefit from unearned privilege because I identify as White, cisgendered, straight, and nondisabled. My identity shapes my assumptions about the world and my evaluation practice. My interest in the complex ways our identities, cultures, and systems shape our everyday experiences has also influenced how I think evaluation should be conducted. I believe conducting evaluation in a contextually and culturally responsive manner is imperative to evaluation quality.

I have a master's degree in international development and a Ph.D. in evaluation. My work as an evaluator focuses on conducting evaluations and providing evaluation capacity-strengthening services to practicing evaluators and non-evaluators. My thinking about evaluation has been strongly shaped by individuals I interacted with as part of my graduate studies and through working at The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University, including Michael Scriven, Chris Coryn, Paul Clements, Rodney Hopson, and Donna Mertens.

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