

What's at Stake? Decolonization of Terminology in the United States

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Background: Evaluators and other researchers use the term *stakeholder* to describe those that involved in the research process to define who should be considered when conducting interviews, evaluations, and other data collection. Because the term *stakeholder* has a colonial context of holding a negative origin, we explore the background and reasons why we should consider how we use certain terminology in evaluation.

Purpose: This idea to consider article leads us to put further thought into how we use colonized words in evaluation research. Using current literature and Anti-Colonial theory we

give alternative suggestions to one of the most frequently used terms *stakeholder(s)*.

Setting: Not applicable.

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Findings: Not applicable.

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Not everyone can be a settler, a landowner. Similarly, the academy and educational research has codified knowledge as ownable... (Patel, 2016, p. 35)

Language is used to show how we perceive the world, and this notion is based on our culture and how we learn to communicate with each other (Altarriba & Basinight-Brown, 2022). Consequently, language is a tool that either promotes or harms individuals most interested in learning more about the world around them. In the academy, academic research has shown many similarities to settler colonialism in the sense that knowledge is available to all parties but, in reality, only applies to those in power. Through their efforts to improve and judge, evaluators have an inherent responsibility to dictate the responsible use of language. As such, the evaluation field needs, through open discussion and research on evaluation, to constantly reflect on and proactively shape the use of evaluative language to be constructive.

One example of colonialism terminology is *stakeholder*, which appears pervasively in evaluation theories, methods, and practice. Michael Scriven defines our example term as “An interested party in an evaluation, e.g., a politician who supported the original program” (1991, p. 150). Furthermore, evaluation research describes these parties as “individuals or groups who possess a vested interest in the outcomes of a project or program and wield the capacity to affect its success or failure significantly” (Amin et al., 2023). However, this term may perpetuate inequalities and colonial harm, potentially undermining the positive outcomes intended by its use (Patel, 2016; Reed et al., 2024). According to Plys et al. (2024), this term is particularly problematic when used with Indigenous peoples and communities, as it has been highly criticized for undermining the constitutional and treaty rights held by Indigenous peoples. Historically, this implied ownership and control, often prioritizing certain voices while silencing those most affected by policies and programs, undermining equity and inclusivity (Eskerod, 2020; Patel, 2016; Phillips et al., 2003).

The Colonial Influence and Its Impact on Evaluation Terminology

When colonizing the New World began, many English settlers came to this continent for a new start or to build and farm areas of land to create profit and wealth. The land, however, was already occupied by a nation or Nations of Indigenous

people. Settlers then forced the Indigenous people from their land, home, and way of life to make way for the “white man” to build a new nation. To build this nation, people of color were also removed from their lands in Africa and brought over against their will to work the fields and in the homes of the newly wealthy plantation owners. This began a downward spiral into what defined who had power and who was powerless in the United States (Library of Congress, n.d.). In the article “Implementing Afrocentricity: Connecting Students of African Descent to Their Cultural Heritage,” Traoré (2007) discusses the repercussions of colonialism in Africa, stating, “The colonial view that the world had to be conquered, dominated, controlled is antithetical to the African worldview” (Traoré, 2007, p. 64).

Of course, colonialism is not specific to one country. India, South Africa, the Caribbean islands, Canada, South America, and other places have also been subjected to European rule. Swartz defines colonization in her book *Psychoanalysis and Colonialism: A Contemporary Introduction* as

The domination of one nation by another, and the subjugation of its peoples politically and economically. It implies an established relationship to rule, with the imposition of colonizers’ legal framework, governance structures, and language on those colonized. (2023, pp. 4–5)

In evaluation research, systematic identification and engagement of evaluation participants are imperative for collecting diverse perspectives, ensuring accountability, and fostering collaborative efforts (Reed et al., 2024; Rodriguez-Campos, 2012). The contributions of these participants are typically recognized as instrumental in shaping evaluation questions, methodologies, and the subsequent interpretation of findings, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of evaluations undertaken (Daigneault & Jacob, 2009). Their pronounced focus emphasizes the necessity for inclusivity and transparency throughout the evaluation process, thereby promoting a more nuanced understanding of the impact and value of various initiatives. When evaluating a program, organization, or school, it is essential to ensure that all relevant parties are accounted for in the evaluation process; if even one party is overlooked, the evaluation findings can hold less credibility (Roeder, 2013). Scholar Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2000) argues that Indigenous knowledge is often commodified—packaged for sale, reshaped to fit colonial narratives, and treated as a product rather than a living system of understanding meant to educate

and empower (p. 209). So, how has this concept of selling repackaged goods been presented in evaluation research? The term *stakeholder* has shifted from its literal meaning to represent those directly interested in a company, institution, or educational space. This change has continued to impact Indigenous peoples, who are striving to revitalize their language rather than submit to colonial narratives that have been largely successful at repackaging Indigenous language (p. 221). Ignoring the use of insensitive colonial terminology could continue the inability of Indigenous communities to feel fully included in the conversation.

Furthermore, the concept of colonized knowledge deters the idea in a way that implies that knowledge is no longer considered global, but more of a concept only available to those who live in the West. In the case of the use of the term *stakeholder*, the term itself has come to fit the narrative of what colonialism was designed to do; in the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), “Colonialism was not just about collection. It was about re-arrangement, re-presentation, and re-distribution” (p. 62). Language should be included in that sentiment. As mentioned throughout, language is a tool that is so powerful that when claimed by a given party for the sole purpose of changing the meaning of words (such as *stakeholder*), that particular party has the power to determine what they want the word to mean before it is widely distributed around the world. To progress evaluation research beyond the scope of the 21st century, there has to be some accountability for how knowledge has been colonized and how the field can acknowledge this to be more culturally responsive and inclusive.

Critiquing a term like *stakeholder* reveals its colonial origins and detrimental implications for marginalized communities. Its association with land staking reflects historical power dynamics of dominance and appropriation (Banerjee, 2003; Reed et al., 2024). In contemporary organizational contexts, the term can inadvertently perpetuate these dynamics, sidelining marginalized voices and reinforcing existing hierarchies (Banerjee, 2003; Reed et al., 2024). These origins and implications were initially designated individuals who drove stakes into the ground to assert ownership over land, frequently to the detriment of Indigenous populations (Reed et al., 2024; Research Impact Canada, 2024; Tuck & Yang, 2021). This practice exemplified the broader colonization efforts characterized by land appropriation and control (Plys et al., 2024). The contemporary application of selected terminology may inadvertently perpetuate colonial power dynamics and structural inequalities, suggesting a sense of ownership and

authority over resources and communities (Reed et al., 2024). Such appropriation of the term can be particularly detrimental when applied to marginalized groups, as it serves to reinforce historical injustices and systemic inequities that continue to affect these populations.

Because land appropriation’s origins carry historical implications of exclusion and dominance (Reed et al., 2024), in current contexts, this may imply a hierarchy where certain groups, typically those in power, are viewed as more legitimate. With the continuation of Indigenous nations’ process in taking back control of their ancestral land, there is a need for decolonized language in this movement so that the message is clear and does not allow for the continued implied control of Western language (DeLancey, 2023). This could sideline marginalized communities whose perspectives and needs are often overlooked. Because of this, these evaluation participants can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities and power dynamics in evaluation research.

Furthermore, an obscure and fundamental power imbalance can create a false sense of equality among all evaluation participants. In practice, voices from underrepresented groups are frequently overshadowed by those with more significant influence and resources (Alm & Guttormsen, 2021; Chowdhury, 2023). This skews the evaluation process and reinforces systemic inequalities by ignoring the needs of all parties involved (O’Day & Smith, 2016; Reed et al., 2024). To promote an equitable and inclusive evaluation framework, redefining our terminology and practices and valuing all voices is critical.

Going Forward: Ideas for Changing the Language That We Use

Waalaneekweew (2018), explained that when we approach Indigenous people in the process of evaluation we must make sure that we are not invoking our own processes but rather listening to those who we are evaluating in order to guide the process. In Mark et al.’s (2025) interview of Joan LaFrance, she is quoted as saying when using evaluation in Indigenous communities you must “start with valuing Indigenous knowledge. The framework includes (1) valuing our being people of a place, (2) recognizing our gifts, (3) honoring family and community, and (4) respecting sovereignty” (p. 178). The combination of honoring those who we are evaluating and respecting their culture should be used in every instance so that trust and understanding occur, ultimately leading to a

mutually beneficial outcome of the evaluation process.

Adopting language and practices that recognize and address these imbalances is essential to achieve genuinely inclusive evaluations, ensuring all voices are equally valued. When working with any group of people, we should be mindful of who they are, where they come from, and how they view the world. Part of the worldview experience is rooted in one's culture, language, customs, and educational background. Sensitivity to these differences can enhance relationships and trust between evaluators and those being evaluated. Embracing cultural differences during evaluations can lead to better information and more authentic task completion (Narayanan, 2023).

For evaluation research to be truly inclusive, researchers must treat the evaluation process as a knowledge-building practice from all aspects (concerning decolonization and culturally responsive evaluation research). The case has been made to adopt a more accepting and culturally responsive approach to language use in education evaluation; we ask the field to consider alternative terminology. When approaching a group of people from diverse backgrounds, the evaluators must gain the trust of those participating in the organization.

Dustin Louie contends that not all language employed by individuals of white and European descent is inherently oppressive. Instead, he advocates for adopting an open-minded, globally connected language that fosters relationships among people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, including Indigenous peoples and people of color (2024). Yoon and Kerr (2024) suggest that for Canada, an essential aspect of the healing process should involve reflecting on a history encompassing all peoples' narratives rather than solely focusing on those of European descent.

Nevertheless, due to the oppressive nature of the history of the United States, we need to be more aware of the terminology that we use in the modern day that has carried over from a time when force was used to oppress people of color. We are not saying that these terms are being used to oppress a population of people purposely; instead, these terms of oppression have been passed on through generations without the public understanding their foundational meanings. This change reflects an awareness of the historical and cultural sensitivities associated with specific terms and their impact on students' perceptions and experiences.

Evidence of evolving language practices is everywhere. As an example, the terminology used to direct young students in seating arrangements has evolved significantly in contemporary educational settings. As a result, educators have

adopted other terms or directions to encourage children to sit on the floor with their legs crossed, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward more respectful and inclusive language within classrooms (National Museum of the American Indian | Smithsonian, 2024). If terminology can evolve in the kindergarten classroom, it can with evaluators, but more visible efforts are needed.

Some individual efforts to promote change within the evaluation community already exist. In their blogpost, MacDonald and McLees (2021) argue that different terminology should be used in evaluation, and they give a few examples of alternative terms and the definitions of these terms. They also clarify that when considering alternative terminology, they "tried to use plain language to improve clarity and reduce the potential for bias or harm to others" (Para. 2). One suggestion from their AEA365 blog is to use a term like *collaborators* or *contributors*, which is defined as "Those who co-create or participate in evaluation activities or provide in-kind resources to support evaluation" (Table 1). Likewise, the term *rights holders* has been suggested as an alternative that affirms Indigenous sovereignty (Plys et al., 2024). More efforts to unify and centralize similar efforts will only accelerate change.

Just as Scriven (1991) has developed an evaluation thesaurus for terms in the field of evaluation, the case could be made to create a framework and reference for a similar resource to be updated or designed to give background information on inappropriate terms frequently used when conducting evaluations and writing evaluation reports. This reference would provide evaluators with the knowledge they need about the origin of terms to better bridge the gaps in understanding between themselves and the people they are working with.

If specific terms must be used, then a formal acknowledgment of how and by whom the organization and evaluator define the term must be considered. Completing this acknowledgment will also allow evaluators to understand the organization's makeup and how the organization's leadership is intended to work. From teachers to parents, administrators to students, investors, and board members, these are the people who shape organizations. Every person in an organization is essential to the organization's ability to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals as intended. Not all groups of people in an organization are decision makers, so it is essential to ensure they receive a voice, even if they cannot directly decide, to protect the participation of the non-decision makers (Alkin & Vo, 2018, p. 82).

Language significantly affects participants' perceptions and roles in evaluation research. Culturally sensitive and inclusive language fosters an equitable environment, resulting in more accurate data collection by acknowledging diverse backgrounds and reducing biases or misunderstandings. When we acknowledge terminology in the evaluation and suggest why and how, we raise awareness and offer alternative options. By doing so, the impact on scholarship related to evaluation research has the potential to position itself in a way that is responsive to all parties involved. As such, the use of certain terminology should be acknowledged more formally in the evaluation textbooks we read, on our various professional associations' websites, and by the journals that publish our scholarship.

Language is a potent instrument for decision-making, knowledge construction, perception shaping, and interpersonal communication. It acts as a gateway that empowers individuals in their human experience and possesses the potential to perpetuate disparities if wielded improperly (O'Connor et al., 2023). Within evaluation research, the terminology employed to delineate programs, involved parties, decisions, and resultant impacts has frequently overlooked incorporating culturally responsive evaluation. This disregard may sustain systemic inequalities and marginalize specific demographics, underscoring the imperative for adopting more inclusive and equitable language practices (Plys et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Being an outsider is challenging enough, but if you understand your audience and know more about who they are and what their culture and language mean to them, you can build trust among people from multiple cultures. When this happens, evaluations can occur more openly and honestly to help guide the organizations trying to help their communities. Our suggestions will help to build awareness in the colonial terminologies that have been used for generations and how to begin incorporating alternative terminology in educational evaluation and beyond.

To achieve inclusive evaluation research, we must embrace it as a holistic knowledge-building practice. A decolonized and culturally responsive approach relies on adopting inclusive language and earning the trust of diverse groups by understanding their unique perspectives. Recognizing the challenges of being an outsider is essential for fostering trust and transparency, leading to more effective evaluations. Embracing

diverse cultural lenses is a professional obligation and a commitment to our collective future, starting with using inclusive language. We owe it to ourselves and our future to embrace each other's differences and cultural lenses. Inclusive and caring language and terminology are an excellent way to start.

Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings once asserted that while an educational achievement gap exists, the focus and call out for social science researchers should address what she framed as the "educational debt" (2006). A debt represents something that must be repaid. In the field of evaluation research, there is an outstanding debt regarding terminology that has subconsciously harmed minoritized groups.

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