
The Role of Theory in University Evaluation Coursework

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Background: The conceptualization of “theory” in evaluation is complicated and little is known about how “theory” is conveyed or taught in evaluation coursework. The paper examines how theory is conveyed to novice evaluators in university coursework, providing a new perspective on the role of theory in evaluation.

Purpose: The study examined how theory is conceptualized in the preparation of new evaluators through a systematic analysis of evaluation textbooks and a survey of instructors.

Setting: The study was conducted in the United States.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: The authors used multiple methods including a survey of 57 university-level evaluation instructors in the United States and a systematic analysis of content in 39 textbooks.

Data Collection and Analysis: The authors conducted a

content analysis of the textbooks and systematic coding and analysis of instructors' responses to survey items.

Findings: Analysis indicated a lack of coherence and consistency in use of theory, similar to that seen in evaluation practice. The authors found that instructors described “theory” in ways that indicated it is a multidimensional construct in evaluation teaching. The textbook analysis revealed significant variation in authors' coverage of theory. Instructors chose textbooks to fit contextual, pedagogical, and student needs. The findings support three takeaways for evaluation educators, practitioners, and scholars. First, the field must continue to clarify the role of theory in evaluator preparation. Second, an in-depth analysis of textbook authors' approaches to discussing theory in books and implications for evaluation practice in disciplines is warranted. Third, textbook authors and publishers could consider the themes that emerged from instructors' responses to inform book proposals and revisions of textbook editions to better suit the range of instructor needs.

Keywords: *evaluation teaching; theory in evaluation; content analysis; survey; evaluation textbooks*

Considerable literature in evaluation is devoted to inquiry on the preparation of evaluators. A consistent theme is the prioritization of practice with intentional focus on learning how to *do* evaluations. This makes sense for a field that does not (yet) require specific credentialing or qualification for individuals to become practitioners, even though more and more organizations have evaluation policies in place (Christie & Lemire, 2019), and the demand for evaluators is ever increasing. Perhaps relatedly, evaluation training and educational opportunities are centered on cultivating readiness for the field. More than two decades ago, Shadish, in his presidential address at the American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference (1998) titled “Evaluation Theory Is Who We Are,” asserted evaluation theory as a necessary aspect of evaluators’ professional identity and development. Other scholars have similarly presented the role of theory as critical to the induction of evaluators into the field (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). What is the role of *theory*, then, in the landscape of practice-centered evaluation preparation? In this study, we examined the explication of theory in evaluation preparation, specifically in university coursework and based on instructor perspectives.

A close examination of the theoretical foundation of evaluation reveals a complicated schema that can be attributed to the situatedness of evaluation in multiple disciplines that are influenced by diverse philosophical underpinnings; i.e., evaluation policy and expectations differ greatly according to disciplinary fields and practices. Second, the community of evaluators immersed in the real world of evaluation (and influenced by disciplinary situatedness) have recognized and formulated distinct conceptual frameworks and approaches to support practice (Christie, 2003). As Christie and Lemire (2019) point out, evaluation theories tend to be prescriptive and inform practice. Third, the heavy influence of government policy has elevated postpositivist and atheoretical approaches to evaluation practice as conducive to objective, value-free decision-making without adequate consideration for prevailing notions of evaluation theory (Christie & Alkin, 2008).

We sought to understand how this complicated schema is expressed, if at all, in university coursework. The motivation for the study emerged when authors Varier and Marshall had a conversation about theory in our own teaching of graduate-level evaluation courses. At the time, we were novice instructors with common evaluation experiences. A theory–practice gap emerged as we compared our teaching with our own training and

how we treated theory in our practical evaluation experiences. We found there was no coherent way to describe how theory informed our thinking or enactment of an evaluation project. For example, theory was rarely a consideration where evaluation took the form of narrow inquiry into a program’s working and effectiveness. In other cases, theory appeared based on its role in a program’s conceptualization. In one instance, an atheoretical evaluation led to the generation of theory on the phenomenon of mentoring-based teacher development. In almost all cases, theory was implicit and activated only as needed. Our experience has precluded us from teaching about the role of theory in evaluation in a prescriptive way or with great certainty about its role in practice. Instead, we emphasize the different ways of thinking about theory as a way to instill critical reflection and mindfulness when approaching evaluations. To this end, in our introductory evaluation classes we use Christie and Alkin’s (2008) article on the evaluation theory tree and Leuw and Donaldson’s (2015) article describing a systematic review of the use of theory in evaluation studies.

Conceptualizing Theory in Evaluation

Smith (2010) noted that there is not a shared understanding of theory in evaluation, and this includes the terms that are used to describe it: “In evaluation, the term ‘theory’ is often used interchangeably with the term ‘model.’ Unfortunately, the term ‘model’ has long been used ambiguously in evaluation” (p. 384). Similarly, Schwandt (2015) acknowledged “no single understanding of the term is widely accepted” while defining theory as, “... a body of knowledge that organizes, categorizes, describes, predicts, explains, and otherwise aids in understanding and controlling a topic” (p. 31). Aligned with the methods branch (Christie & Alkin, 2008) is an understanding of theory that guides much of social science research and lays the foundation for all inquiry in evaluation. As Perrin (2016) noted:

A theory is a set of related concepts that present a systematic view of events, issues, and situations in order to explain them or make predictions. In science, theory is based on tested and observable facts. Once a scientific theory is developed, the facts may be interpreted or investigated by other scientists, but the facts remain the same. Theories are based on fact, laws, and principles, while leaving room for unanswered questions. (p. 51)

However, social programs do not always emerge from the scientific knowledge base. The emergence of theory-driven evaluation applied the precepts of scientific theory (i.e., its role and value in inquiry) to specific programs. In essence, program theory describes and explains how components of a program are related to intended outcomes. As Weiss (1997) noted, “The idea of theory-driven evaluation is plausible and cogent, and it promises to bring greater explanatory power to evaluation” (p. 501). Undergirding these notions of theory, of course, are paradigms “... grounded in big assumptions about the world, essentially seeking to discern what is real and how we create knowledge” (Thomas & Campbell, 2021, p.107) and “...evaluation should surface theories and lay them out in as fine a detail as possible, identifying all the assumptions and sub-assumptions built into the program” (p. 108).

Domain theory (disciplinary or scientific theory), on the other hand, specifies the constructs and relationships of relevance in a program’s theory of change. The applied nature of research in the social sciences presupposes that empirical evidence informs not only the refinement of theory but the development of programs and interventions to change individual behaviors and organizational or societal practice. Evaluations of such programs and interventions therefore consider the underlying theories that guided programming.

Evaluation theory refers to models or approaches developed to conduct evaluations (Smith, 2010) beyond providing an understanding of how a program works. Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014) contextualized the contribution of evaluation theorists thus:

... [P]rogram evaluation scholars tend to be pragmatists. Rather than trying to understand the relationships among variables in program evaluations as they play out in the real world, these scholars have concentrated on providing evaluators with new evaluation approaches and tools designed to improve evaluation practice. (p. 46)

Evaluation theory offers a lens to:

describe and prescribe what evaluators do or should do when conducting evaluations.... They specify such things as evaluation purposes, users, and uses, who participates in the evaluation process and to what extent, general activities or strategies, method choices, and roles and responsibilities of the evaluator among others. (Coryn et al., 2011, p. 199)

From this perspective, evaluation theory provides a prescriptive reference for how an evaluation ought to be conducted, even though Christie and Lemire (2019) point out that evaluation theory does not necessarily provide procedural guidance on conducting evaluation. They also argued that evaluation theory has not made its way into evaluation policy in organizations.

Theory in Evaluation Practice

Leeuw and Donaldson (2015), in their review of evaluation studies, found evidence of different notions of theory. Theory was operationalized in three ways similar to the description provided in the previous section: a) program theory, or how a program’s workings and intended outcomes are connected; most commonly program theory is operationalized as theory of change or logic models; b) evaluation theory, or the frameworks that underpin the evaluation design, process, decision-making, and use; evaluation theory may include approaches or models that guide the evaluation process; and c) domain theory, grand disciplinary ideas also referred to as scientific or academic theories that contribute to a fundamental understanding of phenomena. They elevated the role of theory-driven evaluation by offering several creative suggestions for evaluators to strengthen the use of theory in their work by leveraging all three aspects of theory to explain a program’s workings. For example, they described theory-knitting or theory layering as ways for evaluators to combine or layer theories to strengthen an evaluation. Others have similarly called for greater incorporation of theory in evaluation (e.g., D’Agostino, 2001; Shaw, 2019).

Even though many contributions have been made toward understanding the role of theory in evaluation (e.g., Rossi & Freeman, 1989; Weiss, 1998), little is known from the point of view of evaluators themselves and their perceived role of theory in evaluation practice. In a study of more than 400 practicing evaluators’ conceptions of important evaluation skills, theory was addressed only peripherally (Galport & Azzam, 2017). In fact, the survey referenced program theory in one item within the domain of systematic inquiry, i.e., skills in the domain of research methods. Moreover, few survey respondents marked it as an important competency, indicating that the role of theory in evaluation practice remains understudied.

Theory in Evaluation Teaching

Theory also appears in the margins of the literature on teaching evaluation. A search of available research seems to indicate that theory is inconsistently incorporated into teaching evaluation. The emphasis on theory is determined by the location of the evaluation course, predominantly within a discipline (Gullickson et al., 2019). LaVelle and Donaldson (2010) and later LaVelle (2014, 2020) studied university programs in the United States and reported that a small number of programs had the term *evaluation theory* in a course title. They also found that evaluation courses were often associated with research methods and data analysis. Coursework in public policy tended to address various methodological approaches as representations of theoretical orientation (e.g., causal inferences or cost-benefit analysis). As Gullickson et al. (2019) inferred about Lavelle's study, programs emphasizing evaluation theory were likely to be located in dedicated evaluation degree or certificate programs. In another study of undergraduate evaluation course syllabi in the human services domain, Thomas (2018) did not report any occurrence of theory/ies of evaluation in the 11 programs that were analyzed. Even evaluation *approaches*, a term commonly used in place of "theory," was absent in the syllabus content. In Davies and MacKay's (2014) study, the majority of respondents reported evaluation approaches as being very important and spent considerable time covering this topic in introductory courses. However, it was unclear whether the term "approaches" referred to evaluation theory or evaluation skills and competencies.

Why teach theory in evaluation? First and foremost, regardless of the positionality of the instructor or positioning of a course within a discipline, emerging evaluators should understand the subjectivity of decisions made in what is evaluated, how, and in whose favor. Theory is an essential vehicle to cultivate the practice of evaluation in pursuit of an equitable, just world (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Thomas & Madison, 2010). For example, while studies report the presence of cultural competence as a topic in coursework, without a foundation in theory, courses will only address cultural competence superficially as a discrete skill. In contrast, embedding the four branches of the evaluation tree (Mertens & Wilson, 2019) and/or culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2014) in the historical context of evaluation theory development offers an affirming stance toward equity and

culturally sustaining work in evaluation. Second, theory provides an avenue for fostering evaluative critical thinking and reflection on one's emerging identity. Given that many students only take one course in evaluation, with considerable variability across settings (Davies & MacKay, 2014), it is important to present learning opportunities that allow students to appreciate and see themselves in the rich, diverse evaluation traditions and practices. Finally, content on theory strengthens students' skill development in evaluation. Being able to draw from the various conceptions of theory can offer a powerful way to frame an evaluation, develop better programs, and increase evaluation's influence on decision-making (D'Agostino, 2001; Leeuw & Donaldson, 2015; Shaw, 2019).

To this end, we investigated both how instructors in the United States approach teaching theory and how theory is conveyed in their course textbooks. Our study was guided by the following research questions to learn how theory is conveyed to novice evaluators in university coursework: 1) How do instructors approach the notion of theory in evaluation courses? 2) How do the textbooks used in the university evaluation courses in the United States address the topic of theory in evaluation work? 3) What are instructors' rationales for choosing textbooks?

Method

Positionality

Varier and Marshall are both faculty in colleges of education at universities with the Carnegie classification of R1 doctoral universities. Both teach program evaluation coursework to master's and doctoral students, as well as other courses in research methods and statistics. This project emerged from organic conversations about teaching evaluation coursework and a recognition that "theory" seemed to mean something different across constituencies. Kuehn is an evaluation practitioner in an institute of higher education overseeing institutional effectiveness and was a graduate student at the time of the study. She brought an important perspective as a practitioner and student of evaluation.

Design

We drew from multiple methods to understand how college and university evaluation instructors were teaching about theory in their courses. First, we conducted a survey of university instructors of

evaluation in the United States to gather a sample of textbooks used in evaluation courses and perspectives on how instructors teach theory. Following that, we engaged in a systematic content analysis that would reveal how theory is treated in evaluation textbooks.

Survey Instrument. We administered a short online survey to university-level instructors of evaluation in the United States. The survey included items about their evaluation courses, including academic level and textbooks used. A second set of items examined instructors' perspectives in terms of how they approached the topic of theory in evaluation and their rationale for selecting their textbooks. The survey also collected instructor background information, including gender, race, area of highest degree earned, evaluation experience, and the number of courses in evaluation they took as a student.

Survey Participants. We invited college and university faculty who taught evaluation coursework to complete our survey. Participants were identified via three sources. First, we shared an anonymous link to anyone interested in completing the survey while we were presenting a poster at the 2019 American Evaluation Association (AEA) annual conference in Minneapolis, MN (Varier, Marshall, & Kuehn, 2019). We subsequently sought permission from the AEA and received a random list of 1000 AEA members, to

whom we administered the survey. These initial efforts yielded fewer than 25 responses, so we additionally searched Coursicle¹ for every evaluation course offered at colleges and universities and generated a list of 200 universities based on the search. Faculty who were listed as teaching evaluation coursework were identified and subsequently verified by visiting each university's website. Course instructors were emailed with an invitation to complete our survey. Respondents had the option of completing a raffle survey to win one of five \$20 electronic gift cards for their participation. Fifty-seven evaluation instructors completed the survey. The majority were female (66.1%), white (78.9%), taught master's-level coursework (82.5%), and held a doctorate degree (92.9%). A plurality had 11 or more years of experience teaching evaluation (28.6%) and the majority had 11 or more years of experience conducting evaluation (62.7%). Three-fourths (75.5%) of our participants had taken at least one evaluation course as a student, and 42.9% reported taking more than one evaluation course. Half of our participants were faculty from health care / public health (25%) and education (25%) disciplines. Other program areas that were represented were developmental/educational psychology (15.4%), public administration and policy (9.6%), and social work (7.7%). See Table 1 for participant demographics.

¹ Coursicle (www.coursicle.com) is a website that has up-to-date course schedules for colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Table 1. Demographics of Sample

	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender (N = 56)</i>		
Female	37	66.1
Male	17	30.4
Other	1	1.8
Prefer not to answer	1	1.8
<i>Race</i>		
American Indian/Alaskan	1	1.8
Asian	6	10.5
Black	4	7.0
White	45	78.9
Prefer not to answer	1	1.8
<i>Ethnicity (N = 54)</i>		
Hispanic	2	3.7
Not Hispanic	51	94.4
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
<i>Level Taught^a</i>		
Undergraduate	5	8.8
Master's	47	82.5
Doctoral	25	43.9
Certificate/PD	8	14.0
<i>Highest Degree Earned (N = 56)</i>		
Master's	4	7.1
Doctorate	52	92.9
<i>Years Exp. Teaching Evaluation (N = 56)</i>		
0–2 years	10	17.9
3–5 years	15	26.3
6–10 years	14	25.0
11+ years	16	28.6
Prefer not to answer	1	1.8
<i>Years Exp. Doing Evaluation Work (N = 51)</i>		
0–2 years	2	3.9
3–5 years	5	9.8
6–10 years	7	13.7
11+ years	32	62.7
Prefer not to answer	2	3.9
<i>Area of Expertise (N = 52)^b</i>		
Health care / public health	13	25.0

Education	13	25.0
Developmental/educational psychology	8	15.4
Public administration/policy	5	9.6
Social work	4	7.7
Program evaluation	2	3.8
Sociology	2	3.8
Anthropology	1	1.9
Criminal Justice	1	1.9
Economics	1	1.9
Human resources	1	1.9
Mathematics	1	1.9
Political science	1	1.9

Note: $N = 57$ unless otherwise noted.

^a Participants could select more than one option; therefore, percentages add up to more than 100%.

^b One participant indicated that their area of expertise was education and social work, so they were counted for both.

Textbook Selection. One of the survey items asked participants to identify textbooks they have used in the evaluation courses they have taught. A total of 39 texts were identified in this process. We then acquired each of the textbooks from our own personal libraries, from university libraries, and through interlibrary loan requests. The most commonly identified textbook was Rossi, Lipsey, and Henry's (2018) *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* ($n = 9$). Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and

Worthen's (2011) *Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines* ($n = 7$) and Mertens and Wilson's (2019) *Program Evaluation Theory and Practice: A Comprehensive Guide* ($n = 6$) were the second- and third-most-cited textbooks. See Table 2 for the textbooks that participants most commonly identified. Appendix A documents all the textbooks analyzed for the study, along with affiliated disciplines as relevant.

Table 2. Textbooks Participants Selected for Evaluation Courses

Author(s)	Title (year)	Ed.	N
Rossi, Lipsey, & Henry	<i>Evaluation: A Systematic Approach</i> (2018)	8th	9
Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen	<i>Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines</i> (2011)	4th	7
Mertens & Wilson	<i>Program Evaluation Theory and Practice: A Comprehensive Guide</i> (2019)	2nd	6
Alkin ^a	<i>Evaluation Roots: A Wider Perspective of Theorists' Views and Influences</i> (2012)	2nd	3
Harris	<i>Evaluating Public and Community Health Programs</i> (2016)	2nd	3
McKenzie, Neiger, & Thackeray	<i>Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Health Promotion Programs</i> (2017)	7th	3

Royse, Thyer, & Padgett	<i>Program Evaluation: An Introduction to an Evidence-Based Approach</i> (2016)	6 th	3
Russ-Eft & Preskill	<i>Evaluation in Organizations: A Systematic Approach to Enhancing Learning, Performance, and Change</i> (2001)	n/a ^b	3
Stufflebeam & Coryn	<i>Evaluation Theory, Models, & Applications</i> (2014)	2nd	3

Note. *N* is the number of participants who identified a title as being selected for their evaluation courses. Participants in many instances identified more than one text.

^a Indicates author listed was the editor of the title.

^b n/a = only one edition exists as of this writing (September 2022).

Data Analyses

Survey data were first analyzed descriptively using SPSS version 28. Demographic data were summarized using descriptive statistics to describe the representation of instructors in our sample. The open-ended responses to the item on how instructors taught theory in their classes were analyzed using a hybrid coding approach (Saldaña, 2015). Some codes were created a priori to reflect the different types of theory one might encounter in evaluation (e.g., program theory). In vivo codes were added based on participant responses, followed by axial codes, which helped categorize responses into themes. Similarly, we used open and axial coding to analyze instructors' rationale for choosing the textbooks they reported, and then arrived at themes that reflected the entirety of responses. All qualitative analyses were conducted using ATLAS.ti version 24.

A web-based data entry form was created to systematically code the textbooks identified by participants. The form included the following: (1) if the textbook's title included the word "theory"; (2) if the preface described theory or an aspect of theory; (3) if so, a description of the preface content on theory, as well as the type(s) of theory discussed; (4) the prevalence of the term "theory" in the subject index; (5) the number of chapter titles containing the term "theory"; (6) definitions of "theory" offered in the textbooks; and (7) the type(s) of theory covered in the chapters. This entry form was completed for all 39 textbooks our participants identified in the survey.

Findings

The results are presented in the order of research questions to first describe instructors' perspectives on teaching theory, followed by their rationale for selecting textbooks for their coursework. We then report on the content analysis of 39 textbooks used in the classrooms as reported by the instructors.

Instructors' Perspectives on Teaching Theory

Two major themes summarize the instructors' responses about their approach to teaching theory in evaluation. We start with the theme that potentially explains the undermined role of theory and then proceed to the theme that has implications for conceptualizing how theory is taught in classrooms.

Participants' teaching of theory varied by discipline. When we asked participants how they taught topics related to evaluation theory in their coursework, their responses varied depending on their discipline. When participants whose field of study was in public policy and/or administration or a STEM² field were asked how (or if) they taught about theory in evaluation courses, they tended to respond "not really" or "minimal." One participant shared that they covered some content on research methods and measurement issues (i.e., reliability and validity), but little more. Faculty in medicine or health-related fields (i.e., public health) were also somewhat dismissive about the need to teach theory in their evaluation courses. One public health professor shared, "We do not focus deeply on theory. We focus more on [the] practice of how evaluation is actually done." However, several

² STEM = science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

faculty described bringing either domain theory (i.e., health behavior theories) and/or program theory (i.e., logic models) to their teaching of evaluation. As another public health professor shared, “We have a unit on programmatic theory, how to articulate the program’s theory of change or conceptual model, and then use that to structure an evaluation.” Faculty in health/medicine fields were also likely to share that they did not cover theory in their courses, but that theory was discussed in other courses in their students’ programs of study. Another public health professor shared, “[Theory] is taught in a previous course before [students] enroll in the evaluation course.” Several professors in health-related or medical fields saw theory as separate from evaluation endeavors. In all, participants from outside of the social sciences shared that they either did not include content on theory in their courses or they named only one type of theory that they prioritized; none of these participants shared *how* they approached teaching about theory.

Participants who taught in social science fields tended to offer more robust descriptions when asked how they taught about theory in their courses. Social science faculty far more often identified multiple types of theory in their responses; no participants from outside social science disciplines did that. Some participant responses described how they used specific texts to teach about theory. Marvin Alkin’s *Evaluation Roots* (2013) and Carol Weiss (1997, 1998) were both invoked, as were the four branches of Mertens and Wilson’s (2020) theory tree. An education professor shared that they use “the [Mertens and Wilson] book in the order it is presented (i.e., first 4 weeks of class on paradigms, branches, and theory), augmented by other articles/chapters on the importance of theory (in general and in evaluation), using lots of in-class dialogue to process the material with students.” A psychology professor discussed their process for teaching theory: “We discuss theory as a philosophical orientation to the world and draw on case studies... to illustrate how theories are similar/dissimilar in practice.” An educational psychology professor shared:

[I discussed it] differently depending on which definition of theory is discussed in a given class:

1. Difference between research and evaluation, with research gathering data to support theory.
2. Theory, as in program theory, such as Theory of Change and Theory of Action, what they are, how they are different, the role in an evaluation in understanding a program its purpose and

functions. 3. Evaluation theory, as in studying evaluation itself, and why theory is important.

A minority of social science participants shared that they were “theory agnostic” and/or did not believe that covering theory in class was of particular importance. One social work professor shared:

Not much. I don’t find theory to be a topic well-articulated in evaluation, aside from programmatic theory and theory of change, which are not the same as a theory for doing evaluation. As an evaluator, I also have rarely encountered theory in practice [or in] real-world applications, so I don’t tend to stress it all that much in class.

Overall, evaluation instructors in the social sciences described theory as an important part of their evaluation courses, shared more approaches for teaching about it, and drew on more types of theory than did instructors from other disciplines.

Theory, in evaluation teaching, is a multidimensional construct. We did not provide a definition or description of theory in the survey. In the (intentional) absence of a specific definition, instructors’ responses differed in their description of what theory means in evaluation. Instructors most commonly identified program theory, particularly those that reported covering only an overview of theory. For instance, an instructor who noted they emphasized practice in their course wrote, “mapping the conceptual model or theory of change to what is being evaluated” was the extent to which theory was covered in their course. Others placed emphasis on program theory in their courses. One instructor provided this detail:

I lecture from [Posavac’s] chapter content re what is program theory, why it is important, how it is related to logic models, and how it is useful for deciding where and how to plan and focus the evaluation of a program.

Similarly, another instructor noted, “That is why I use [Marvin Alkin’s edited volume, *Evaluation Roots*] and Carol Weiss on program theory.”

Next, instructors who referred to evaluation theories, models, and approaches indicated a heavy emphasis on the same in their courses. For example, an instructor noted this:

We have four weeks in the introductory course devoted to “introduction to evaluation theory,” and that corresponds to the four branches in

Mertens and Wilson's theory tree. In the advanced course, students are required to use a theory or theories to carry out an evaluation study (and show how it maps to the evaluation theory).

Even an instructor who mostly focused on the theoretical basis of quantitative and qualitative methods ensured they "emphasize(d) the role of purpose and stakeholders in evaluation." Another instructor, who noted theirs was the only graduate-level evaluation course in their program, reported, "As a foundation course, I focus on the purpose of evaluation and how different theoretical approaches developed." Again, respondents returned to an emphasis on practice, as one instructor invoked their practitioner identity:

I was a practitioner before becoming a professor so my teaching of theory is inherently grounded in my practice experience which uses a mixture of Culturally/Equity-Informed evaluation, Empowerment Evaluation and participatory. But essentially, I introduce them to fundamental evaluation theory ...

A handful of responses referred to domain or substantive theories, with some references to philosophy. This was notable among instructors in the health disciplines. Some participants noted covering the development of theoretical approaches in evaluation. These are distinct notions of theory that influence different aspects of evaluation practice.

Although occurring less frequently overall, instructors also described that theory served as a foundation for evaluation work and was often covered in the beginning of the course. Several

respondents made reference to the timing or duration of how they covered theory, along with teaching strategies such as discussions, activities, and assignments that required consideration of theory. These participants viewed theory as the "backbone" that helps "frame... programs" to determine how to engage with stakeholders and "which questions to ask." Therefore, there are multiple conceptualizations about theory in evaluation teaching.

Textbook Content Analysis

The textbooks were first coded for whether the book title included the word "theory" and the extent to which theory was discussed in the book's preface. Only five of the 39 textbooks that our participants identified included the word "theory" in the book title, whereas 86.5% of them did not. Approximately one-third of the books' prefaces discussed theory, or some aspect of theory ($n = 14$, 35.9%), and about one-third of the prefaces we reviewed did not mention theory at all. Textbooks whose subject matter focus was in health care, public health, and nursing were the least likely to discuss theory in the preface, with the exception of a single mention of a specific theory in one textbook and a sentence referencing a specific chapter. An additional nine textbooks' prefaces included a brief mention of theory. In some of these instances, this was alerting readers to a specific chapter in the book that discussed theory. See Table 3 for frequencies and percentages for the prevalence of theory in textbook titles and prefaces.

Table 3. The Prevalence of Theory in Evaluation Textbooks

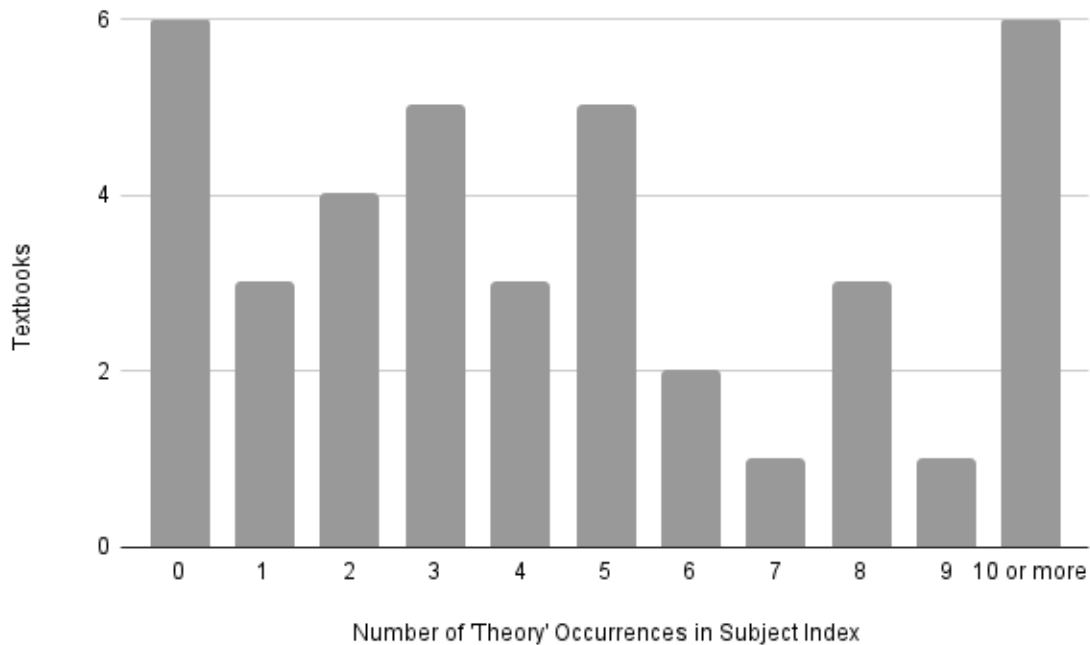
	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Title</i>		
Contains the word “theory”	4	10.8
Does not contain the word “theory”	34	86.5
Refers to specific theory / aspect of theory	1	2.7
<i>Preface</i>		
Describes theory / aspect of theory	14	35.9
Brief mention of theory	9	23.1
Does not describe theory / aspect of theory	13	34.2
Describes theory unrelated to evaluation	1	2.7
Text contains no preface	2	5.1

Note. *N* = 39 textbooks.

We also explored how prevalent the word “theory” was in the subject indexes of the 39 books the participants identified. The textbooks we reviewed had bimodal distribution. Six textbooks (15.4%) had subject indexes that did not include the term “theory” at all, while six textbooks (15.4%)

included 10 or more mentions of the term. Most of the textbooks we reviewed ($n = 20$) referenced theory between one and five times. See Figure 2 for the prevalence of the term “theory” in textbook subject indexes.

Figure 2. Number of “Theory” Occurrences in Subject Index



Textbooks were also evaluated in terms of the number of chapters that included “theory,” as an indicator of coverage. We also evaluated the content of the chapters to see how authors described and defined different types of theory within the chapters. The majority (56.4%) of the books did not contain a chapter whose title included the term “theory.” Twelve books included a single chapter with the term “theory” in the title, two books had two chapters on theory, two additional books had four chapters, and one book we reviewed included eight chapters with “theory” in their titles. Of the textbooks that had at least one chapter titled with the word “theory,” more than half ($n = 10$) discussed program theory. Grinnell et al. (2019) described program theory as a “theory of change model,” noting that these models are “a general graphical representation of how you believe change will occur within your program” (p. 131). Similarly, Weiss (1998) described program theory as “knowing what the program is, how it works, and how it is expected to reach the desired results...” (p. xi). It is worth noting that McDavid et al. (2018) devoted a chapter on applying logic models; however, they did not explicitly use the word “theory” in the title or otherwise. About a quarter of the textbooks we reviewed had chapters that discussed evaluation theory ($n = 8$). Schwandt (2015) described evaluation as “an organized set of

ideas about what evaluation is—its goals, aims, methods, and so on,” noting that the “theory of evaluation is better understood as a body of knowledge composed of evaluation models and approaches” (p. 34). Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014) describe evaluation as an “idealized view of the main concepts and structure of evaluation work, which form the basis of guidelines which are used to arrive at defensible descriptions and judgments” (p. ix). Finally, seven books which we reviewed dedicated chapters to describing domain theory. Some authors, like Thomas and Campbell (2021), provided definitions and examples of specific theories (e.g., critical theory, feminist standpoint theory). Other authors more generically described the role theory plays in evaluation. For example, Christie and Alkin (2013) argue that evaluations void of theory are of “limited usefulness for stakeholders because the evaluation provides no information about the context of the effectuality and few clues on the strengths and weaknesses of a program and how to improve it” (p. 114). Three of the textbooks contained a chapter that addressed all three types of theory (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; McKenzie et al., 2017; Thomas & Campbell, 2021). Textbooks rooted in health-related disciplines were the least likely to discuss evaluation theory; if and when theory was discussed in these texts it was often related to domain theory (e.g., health

behavior theory). Although measurement theory was not one of the three types of theory we initially focused our attention on, it is worth noting that five chapters across two textbooks were devoted to

different aspects of measurement theory (e.g., Crocker & Algina, 1986). See Table 4 for descriptive statistics related to the prevalence of “theory” chapters in the textbooks we reviewed.

Table 4. Types of Theory Covered in Textbooks

Type of theory	No. of chapters	%	No. of books	%
Domain theory	8	22.9	7	17.9
Evaluation theory	12	34.3	8	20.5
Measurement theory	5	14.3	2	5.1
Program theory	10	28.6	10	25.6
No theory chapter			22	56.4

Note. Chapter % based on a total of 35 theory chapters. Book % based on a total of 39 textbooks. Because some books covered multiple types of theory, figures do not add to 100%.

Rationale for Choosing Textbooks

We conclude the results with a content analysis of instructors’ rationale for choosing the textbooks. We examined this because we find the priorities that instructors set in choosing learning materials can have implications for identifying resources that tackle the subject of theory. Additionally, a text may make reference to theory, but that subject matter may not be leveraged in the classroom. The analysis revealed three types of rationale for instructors’ selection of the textbooks they reported for their courses: (a) to fit with the instructional context; (b) to meet pedagogical needs; and (c) to meet student needs.

Fit with the instructional context. Instructors described contextual factors that determined the lens through which evaluation is taught. Thereby the selection of a textbook was determined by the extent to which the book offered a similar lens. This was apparent in responses that referred to choosing materials that were aligned with a specific discipline (public health or education, for example). Some instructors indicated adopting textbooks that were recommended by colleagues, or continuing to use the same textbooks they “inherited” from others who taught the course. A few others noted that their institution prescribed a specific textbook. Another aspect of the context also overlapped with the desire to use a textbook that met students’ needs. For

example, an instructor noted, “[the text] is focused on social work and easy to digest.”

To meet pedagogical needs. Instructors described adopting textbooks that met specific instructional needs of a course. Some wanted comprehensive coverage of evaluation topics, while others wanted coverage of basic or fundamental topics. Some responses alluded to multiple approaches and the presence of a variety of authors or perspectives. Many instructors also wanted a textbook that provided instructional aids and “real world” examples and case studies that supported instruction. Finally, some responses indicated a preference for textbooks that provided a central resource for the course’s content. Some instructors noted how a textbook addressed theory as a rationale for selection. For example, “I look for books that go beyond evaluation techniques to address evaluation context, stakeholders, values and valuing, equity and inclusion, role of the evaluator, relationship between methodology, epistemology, and ontology, etc.” Another referenced the connection between domain theory and evaluation: “Best book in the field that links health behavior theory with measurement concepts and evaluation.”

To meet student needs. Instructors sought books that met the needs of the students they served. References to textbooks that were practitioner-

oriented and accessible to a range of learners / diverse learners were dominant and alluded to this theme. To illustrate, one instructor wrote:

This is a more macro textbook that meets the full range of needs of students in our program. It's incredibly user friendly, and I find that students really do read and/or refer to it to learn more about the concepts and approaches that we cover in class.

Instructors described choosing textbooks that are affordable and/or open source, indicating an ethical dimension to selecting textbooks. In a similar vein, some instructors reported not using a textbook in favor of materials that they put together for the course and perhaps made available to students through institutional libraries or other resources.

Discussion

The study findings show a similar landscape of theory to that which Leeuw and Donaldson (2015) reported in their review of evaluation studies. The findings signify a need for coherence in framing the diverse theoretical orientations that inform evaluation practice in evaluation training. Instructors' approach to theory in their evaluation classes represents a multidimensional construct incorporating program theory, disciplinary and methodological underpinnings, and evaluation theory. Important disciplinary differences emerged in whether and how theory was broached in the coursework. Notably, public health- and STEM-focused disciplines continue to foreground evaluation methods, with minimal coverage of theory beyond disciplinary relevance. This contrasts with the many ways that instructors in the social science disciplines responded about theory. Our work to answer the second research question, centered on the systematic analysis of textbooks, and findings demonstrated a preponderance of program theory, with some presence of evaluation and domain theories. It is important to note that some textbooks were dedicated to evaluation approaches or models (see Appendix A), and several others were designed for multiple disciplines. In exploring instructors' rationales for choosing textbooks, we again found them to be aligned with disciplinary needs, along with other pedagogical and student needs. Instructors sought learning materials that met a range of student needs and coverage of instructional objectives. The coverage of theory, in particular, did not emerge as a major theme.

Evaluation teaching can approach theory by keeping the diversity of conceptions in mind. How theory may be broached with coherence is evident in the textbook by Mertens and Wilson (2019), which provides a comprehensive description of theory in two chapters as a foundation for evaluation content. Mertens and Wilson situate theory by framing the historical development of evaluation within contemporary philosophical paradigms which undergird the multitude of theoretical conceptions in the field. The text is an example of an evaluation text that is comprehensive and multidisciplinary. The general lack of coherence among instructors' responses and in the textbooks in the inclusion of theory, its meaning, and relevance to evaluation practice mirrors what scholars have noted about the field's approach to theory (Smith, 2010). We make sense of these findings by offering three takeaways for evaluation educators, practitioners, and scholars.

First, the findings indicate that the field needs to continue to grapple with the role of theory in evaluation. Specifically, the field must determine whether and how theory is / should be conveyed to novice evaluators. Balancing practice with theory is important for developing and sustaining a field's growth. An emphasis on theory in evaluation teaching is important for two reasons. First, it elevates the professionalization of the field. Program theory and evaluation theory make remarkable contributions to social science inquiry. Notably, program and evaluation theories have enabled practitioners to address the inadequacies of reductionist inquiry into social phenomena (Frye & Hemmer, 2012). Second, it supports critical thinking and expands the toolkit of developing practitioners. By gaining a vocabulary to think about theory in their work, students become better consumers of evaluation research. Understanding the diverse notions of theory enables evaluators to think about their own positionality and the relevance of their evaluation work to the state of the field. We are not advocating for a rigid approach to whether/how theory should be incorporated in evaluation teaching or practice. Rather, we think that introducing theory in all its forms gives evaluators the ability to engage in intentional decision-making. It can foster creative approaches to designing evaluations, where evaluators are intentional in their consideration of theory. Of course, how theory is addressed in teaching differs by discipline, and it is important for evaluators to know and understand that to foster collaborations and interdisciplinary work.

Second, an in-depth analysis of authors' approaches to discussing theory in textbooks is warranted. Our analysis yielded useful information

about the coverage of theory in textbooks. Coverage of theory in these foundational texts was uneven and, in many cases, highly limited. Notably, the diverse presence of program, evaluation, and domain theory among textbooks that addressed theory is consistent with instructors' responses and what is known in the literature. Such an analysis might combine more perspective-gathering in the form of interviews with authors; this could result in a more nuanced understanding of the presence (or absence) of theory in evaluation. More broadly, evaluation scholars could make their view of theory in relation to practice more explicit even as they continue to emphasize the utility of textbooks for practitioners. As in instruction, there is scope for textbooks to present at least an overview of varied conceptualizations about theory in the field. This is especially important given how instructors in our sample sought to identify textbooks that are a central resource for students about evaluation content.

Finally, the wide variety of textbooks available for evaluation instructors allows instructors to select textbooks that meet their specific instructional needs and fit their teaching context. Surveyed instructors chose textbooks for a variety of reasons, among which a book's coverage of theory was one. Similarly, future inquiry could focus on evaluation instructors' pedagogical approaches and close examination of disciplinary practices, beliefs and conceptions about evaluation, and agency in choosing textbooks. Textbook authors and publishers could consider the three themes that emerged from instructors' responses to inform book proposals and revisions of textbook editions.

Conclusion

Our findings provide a snapshot of instructor perspectives and texts used in evaluation teaching. Of course, the study is limited by the sample size and sampling methods. Yet, we believe that it provides a representative and descriptive account of the state of theory in evaluation teaching. The findings offer useful information for further study on evaluation teaching and supporting evaluation practitioners to effectively make theoretical considerations. The findings provide a first step toward understanding how theory is conceptualized in evaluation teaching in the United States and shed light on a new perspective on the role of theory in evaluation by examining how the evaluation field is educating its new evaluators.

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Appendix A

Textbooks that Participants Selected for Evaluation Courses

Author(s)	Title (Year)	Ed.	Subject area	N
Rossi, Lipsey, & Henry	<i>Evaluation: A Systematic Approach</i> (2018)	8th	Multiple	9
Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen	<i>Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines</i> (2011)	4th	Multiple	7
Mertens & Wilson	<i>Program Evaluation Theory and Practice: A Comprehensive Guide</i> (2019)	2nd	Multiple	6
Alkin ^a	<i>Evaluation Roots: A Wider Perspective of Theorists' Views and Influences</i> (2012)	2nd	Multiple	3
Harris	<i>Evaluating Public and Community Health Programs</i> (2016)	2nd	Health	3
McKenzie, Neiger, & Thackeray	<i>Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Health Promotion Programs</i> (2017)	7th	Health	3
Royse, Thyer, & Padgett	<i>Program Evaluation: An Introduction to an Evidence-Based Approach</i> (2016)	6th	Multiple	3
Russ-Eft & Preskill	<i>Evaluation in Organizations: A Systematic Approach to Enhancing Learning, Performance, and Change</i> (2001)	n/a	Organizational management	3
Stufflebeam & Coryn	<i>Evaluation Theory, Models, & Applications</i> (2014)	2nd	Education and social science	3
Grinnell & Gabor	<i>Program Evaluation for Social Workers: Foundations for Evidence-Based Programs</i> (2019)	n/a	Social work	2
McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorne	<i>Program Evaluation and Performance Measurement: An Introduction to Practice</i> (2018)	n/a	Public policy / organizational management	2
Newcomer, Harry, & Wholey	<i>Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation</i> (2015)	4th	Public policy	2
Rubin & Babbie	<i>Essential Research Methods for Social Work</i> (2015)	4th	Social work	2
Russ-Eft & Preskill	<i>Evaluation in Organizations: A Systematic Approach to Enhancing Learning, Performance, and Change</i> (2001)	n/a	Organizational management	2
Weiss	<i>Evaluation</i> (1998)	2nd	Multiple	2
Alkin & Vo	<i>Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z</i> (2018)	2nd	Multiple	1

Author(s)	Title (Year)	Ed.	Subject area	N
Altschuld	<i>Bridging the Gap Between Asset/Capacity Building and Needs Assessment: Concepts and Practical Applications</i> (2014)	n/a	Multiple	1
Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu	<i>Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better</i> (2015)	n/a	Education	1
Crocker & Algina	<i>Introduction to Classical and Modern Test Theory</i> (1986)	n/a	Psychometrics	1
Davidson	<i>Evaluation Methodology Basics: The Nuts and Bolts of Sound Evaluation</i> (2005)	n/a	Multiple	1
Fink	<i>Evaluation Fundamentals: Insights into the Outcomes, Effectiveness, and Quality of Health Programs</i> (2005)	2nd	Health	1
Gertler, Martinez, Premand, Rawlings, & Vermeersch	<i>Impact Evaluation in Practice</i> (2011)	n/a	International development and policy	1
Hodges & Videto	<i>Assessment and Planning in Health Programs</i> (2011)	n/a	Health	1
Keating	<i>Curriculum Development and Evaluation in Nursing Education</i> (2017)	4th	Nursing	1
Knowlton & Phillips	<i>The Logic Model Guidebook: Better Strategies for Great Results</i> (2012)	2nd	Organizational management	1
Leedy & Ormrod	<i>Practical Research: Planning and Design</i> (2015)	11th	Multiple / research methodology	1
Linfield & Posavac ^b	<i>Program Evaluation: Methods and Case Studies</i> (2019)	9th	Multiple	1
Oermann & Gaberson	<i>Evaluation and Testing in Nursing Education</i> (2019)	6th	Nursing	1
Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana ^a	<i>Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice</i> (2016)	n/a	Multiple	1
Perrin	<i>Essentials of Planning and Evaluation for Public Health</i> (2016)	n/a	Health	1
Posavac & Carey ^b	<i>Program Evaluation: Models and Case Studies</i> (1989)	3rd	Multiple	1

Author(s)	Title (Year)	Ed.	Subject area	N
Rubin	<i>Program Evaluation: Pragmatic Methods for Social Work and Human Service Agencies</i> (2020)	n/a	Social work and human service	1
Schwandt	<i>Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of the Mind for Practice</i> (2015)	n/a	Multiple	1
Stake	<i>Standards-Based & Responsive Evaluation</i> (2003)	n/a	Multiple	1
Stufflebeam, Madaus, & Kellaghan ^a	<i>Evaluation Models: Viewpoints on Educational and Human Services Evaluation</i> (2000)	2nd	Education and human services	1
Sylvia & Sylvia	<i>Program Planning and Evaluation for the Public Manager</i> (2012)	4th	Organizational management	1
Thomas & Campbell	<i>Evaluation in Today's World: Respecting Diversity, Improving Quality, and Promoting Usability</i> (2021)	n/a	Organizational management	1
Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers	<i>The Program Evaluation Standards: A Guide for Evaluators and Evaluation Users</i> (2011)	3rd	Education	1

Note. N is the number of participants who identified a title as being selected for their evaluation courses. Participants in many instances identified more than one text.

^a Indicates author(s) listed was the editor of the title; ^b editions of the same title; n/a = only one edition exists as of this writing (June 2022); Ed. = edition.