
What's a Girl Gonna Do?: Understanding Evaluation Theory Through a Critical- Postcolonial Lens

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Background: Evaluation theory is considered integral to good evaluation practice, yet there is a lack of clarity on what constitutes evaluation theory versus evaluation approaches and perspectives. The widely-used evaluation theory tree, while foundational for teaching evaluation theory, predominantly features white, male scholars with minimal representation of women and no representation of scholars of color in its original form.

Purpose: This autoethnographic study examines the learning experiences of three Black female graduate students as they engaged with evaluation theory in introductory program evaluation courses, using critical-postcolonial theory as an analytical framework to interrogate the teaching and learning of evaluation theory.

Setting: A midsized R2 university (doctoral universities with high research activity) in the southeastern United States, specifically within the university's research and evaluation program housed in the School of Education.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Keywords: *evaluation training; student voice; evaluation course; introduction to evaluation; critical race theory; postcolonial theory; autoethnography; evaluation theory tree; CPT*

Research Design: Autoethnography using critical-postcolonial theory (CPT) as the analytical framework, incorporating individual reflections, focus group discussions, and reflective journals.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data collected through collaboratively designed individual reflection protocols, bi-weekly focus group discussions (August-October 2022), and personal multimedia reflective journals (audio recordings and written entries). Analysis employed thematic coding strategy with two designated coders using deductive coding guided by research questions.

Findings: Four major themes emerged: (1) need to clarify the meaning of evaluation theory, (2) evaluation theory tree as a tool for learning, (3) exclusion or erasure of Black and brown scholars, and (4) lack of alignment between course content and researchers' values. The study revealed how the whiteness and maleness of evaluation theory created barriers to connection and understanding for Black female students.

Evaluation theory is the root of program evaluation and is used to help guide and shape one's practice as a program evaluator (Shadish, 1998). However, as Black female students in higher education, when learning about evaluation theory, we learned that mainly white, male scholars' contributions are highlighted and the contributions of Black and brown and female scholars are absent.

Some evaluation scholars (Hall, 2018; Hood, 2001; Hood & Hopson, 2008; Thomas & Madison, 2010), when teaching evaluation theory, bring awareness to the whiteness of evaluation theory and the dire need to include scholars of color and theories oriented toward social justice. Literature on the learning experiences of students of color, social cognitive learning theory, and the pervasiveness of whiteness in higher education (through concepts such as hidden curricula, institutionalized whiteness, and the whiteness of intellect) helps situate the role of whiteness in classroom curriculum and its potential impacts on the learning experiences of students of color, hence the need to explore the effect on Black women.

Representation in Evaluation Theory

Evaluation theory provides a knowledge base unique to the field of evaluation, which offers evaluators guidance as they navigate their practice (Shadish, 1998). When referring to evaluation theory, Shadish (1998) generally refers to the body of theoretical writing primarily focused on evaluation practice. Alkin (2004) acknowledges the varied nomenclature used to describe evaluation theory, including the terms *approaches*, *models*, and *frameworks*, and provides two general definitions for evaluation theory:

- (a) A prescriptive model, the most common type, as a set of rules, prescriptions, and prohibitions and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be done; such models serve as exemplars; and (b) a descriptive model as a set of statements and generalizations which describes, predicts, or explains evaluation activities. Such a model is designed to offer an empirical theory. (p. 3)

The evaluation theory tree is a tool often used to present students of evaluation with the contributing theories to the field of program evaluation (Alkin & Christie, 2004). Since the creation of the tree, it has been cited in over 500 articles as a key foundational piece related to evaluation theory. The evaluation theory tree

provides a visual for learning evaluation theory, highlighting the names of theorists in the field. Specifically, the tree categorizes evaluation theorists whose contributions center methods, use, and values which can be seen as the main branches of the evaluation theory tree. Social inquiry and accountability and control are highlighted as the roots and foundations of program evaluation.

Many of the theorists identified on the tree do not have explicit theories associated with program evaluation. Instead, the theorists have contributed to the field through research in ways that have helped to shape the practice of evaluation. The obscurity of what constitutes evaluation theory has resulted in scholars being considered theorists, though they do not consider the work that they do to be theory (Cousins, 2013). When reflecting on his work on the application of a program logic modeling approach to visualizing evaluation theory as it relates to practical participatory evaluation (PPE), Cousins (2013) discussed his experiences as an "accidental theorist" (p. 67). He noted that although he may be credited as a theorist, he considers his work on PPE to be an evaluation approach. Without clear criteria of what constitutes evaluation theory, there is confusion as to what is considered a theory and what is not. Ultimately, this has resulted in some scholars being celebrated as theorists while the contributions of others are left unnoticed.

The tree includes mostly male, white scholars, with minimal contributions from women and no contributions from scholars of color. Hood and Hopson (2008) discussed the need for the roots of evaluation theory to be re-examined. In their article titled "Evaluation Roots Reconsidered: Asa Hilliard, a Fallen Hero in the 'Nobody Knows My Name' Project, and African Educational Excellence," Hood and Hopson (2008) emphasize the need for evaluation theory to consider the contributions of African American scholars. Hood and Hopson (2008) explain that the passing of the New Deal permitted some of the most inclusive policies to date. The New Deal was a social reform enacted by Franklin D. Roosevelt that instituted a series of programs and projects in an effort to guard against economic disaster (Thomas & Madison, 2010). Despite this reform, evaluations conducted during this period did not provide a social justice lens to their approach. This often resulted in failure to pay attention to the mistreatment of African Americans and other marginalized groups (e.g., women) who experienced bias and limited advancement under the New Deal. As a result, many voices of African American evaluators during this period often went unnoticed, as much of their

work was within African American communities (Hood, 2001). Hood states:

While it is clear that African Americans were publishing work in the area of educational evaluation during the period from 1938 through 1960, their work has not been cited as being a part of the mainstream evaluation literature in our reading lists for courses on program evaluation. (2001, p. 34).

Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the voices of African American evaluators who influenced program evaluation in the teaching and learning of evaluation theory.

This dismissal of Black female contributions was not isolated to just the evaluation field or the evaluation tree. The erasure of Black women is apparent in pop culture, sociopolitical movements, academia, and many more areas (Okello & Morton, 2022; Meyer, 2020; Webster, 2017). In the early 1900s, Black women were not even allowed to vote, let alone make contributions to scholarly work, and we notice the continuous perpetuation of “white silence” over a century later, in which “when white people choose to ignore the challenges faced by non-whites and the poor, they aid in the oppression of those people” (Webster, 2017, p. 199).

Institutionalized Whiteness and Hidden Curriculums in Higher Education

When discussing the impact of the dominant histories on the curriculum being taught in higher education, Joseph-Salisbury (2019) explains that dominant histories pose white European people as the holders of intellect, whereas Black and brown people are seen as inferior, a theory used to uphold supremacy and justify slavery. This lends credence to the thought that through the curriculum in higher education whiteness is normalized. Joseph-Salisbury (2019) states,

Any academic who has attempted to engage in conversations with colleagues who teach canonical theory, will know just how naturalized those canons are thought to be (Sabaratnam 2017). The reasoning goes that the centrality of those scholars has nothing to do with their whiteness and/or maleness, but is merely, and always objectively, because they are the foundational or the best thinkers. (p. 7)

Esposito (2011) studied the experiences of undergraduate women of color in higher education

and how they make sense of their ideas about gender learned through formal, informal, and hidden curricula. She highlights that “hidden curricula” refer to the implicit lessons, values, and expectations embedded within educational environments that are not part of the formal curriculum. These hidden messages are often shaped by issues of race, class, and gender, meaning that they may reinforce societal norms and biases that advantage certain groups while disadvantaging others (Grant, 1992; Martin, 1994; Thorne, 1993; Weis & Fine, 1993, as cited in Esposito, 2011, p. 145). For example, hidden curricula can manifest in the way certain cultural norms are valued over others, subtly reinforcing social hierarchies and perpetuating inequalities. The pervasiveness of white culture in higher educational settings is often elusive and unrecognized, as it is seen as natural and regular (Esposito, 2011). As whiteness is prevalent and normalized in education and learning, understanding the ways students work to protect the dominance of whiteness can help to disrupt discourse that aims to preserve whiteness (Hyttén & Warren, 2003).

Social Constructivism as a Means to Understand the Experiences of Students of Color

Rooted in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Lev Vygotsky, social constructivism is a learning theory that is rooted in the traditional learning theories of constructivism and cognitivism (Saunders et al., 2020). Saunders et al. explain, “Whereas those [cognitivism and constructivism] theories focus on how individuals process information and construct meaning, social constructivists also consider how people’s interactions with others impact their understanding of the world” (p. 45). Specifically, social constructivism recognizes that people in the same events and circumstances can have different learning experiences. Within this theory, there is an interest in understanding how constructs such as identity, family, community, and culture can shape the learner’s understanding. With this phenomenon, learning can become difficult, specifically for students of color, in cases where they cannot connect or identify with the experiences that are taught in their learning content (Boyce, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical perspective that critically examines societal

structures—such as housing, education, economics, and health care—through a lens that foregrounds the pervasive and systemic influence of race (Delgado et al., 2017). One of the foundational tenets of CRT is that race is “ordinary,” meaning that racism is embedded in the normal, everyday functioning of society and is therefore often invisible or unacknowledged by those who do not directly experience it. Other key tenets include the idea of interest convergence (where progress in racial and social justice is often achieved only when it aligns with the interests of dominant groups), the social construction of race, racialization, intersectionality, and the “voice of color” (which values counter-storytelling as a way to share perspectives typically marginalized in dominant narratives). The CRT framework has been applied to the studies of whiteness, hidden curriculum, and black students’ experiences in higher education, as it centralizes race and provides a way of making meaning of these experiences (Esposito, 2011; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). CRT was initially rooted in legal studies but has been subsequently adapted to various disciplines, including education (Crenshaw & Gotanda, 1995). In the field of education, scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) have expanded the application of CRT, emphasizing its relevance to understanding race dynamics and power structures within educational settings. Avent et al. (2024) employed CRT to understand the education, training and socialization concerns of Black evaluators. Building upon this foundation, our study draws upon CRT’s principles to analyze the experiences of Black female evaluation graduate students within the context of program evaluation classes. CRT informs our research questions by emphasizing the importance of examining how race shapes perceptions and experiences, and we also integrate CRT’s focus on intersectionality and the voice of color to explore the multifaceted nature of the student experiences.

Postcolonial theory is a critical approach originating from countries that were, or are presently, colonies (Christophers, 2007). It highlights the “othering” of minority groups by dominant cultures (Carter, 2004). In the context of evaluation theory—which has historically been shaped by dominant groups (primarily white, male scholars)—postcolonial theory sheds light on the marginalization of scholars of color, who are often underrepresented in this field. This approach aligns with a decolonizing lens in evaluation literature, which seeks to question and dismantle the Eurocentric and male-centered paradigms that have traditionally framed scholarly discourse. As Black women from formerly colonized regions,

including southern Africa and the United States, we employ postcolonial theory as a guiding framework to analyze how the underrepresentation of scholars of color in evaluation theory contributes to their “othering” within this academic space. This decolonizing perspective allows us to question whose voices are valued in the construction of knowledge and to advocate for more inclusive and representative frameworks in evaluation.

Both theoretical approaches bring important components to our analysis, so in this study we combined critical race theory and postcolonial theory to develop a new framework, critical-postcolonial theory, aimed to shed light on the complex interplay between race and colonialism in the experiences of Black female graduate students studying evaluation and evaluation theory. This intersection recognizes that the experiences of Black female students cannot be fully understood by looking at race or colonialism in isolation; instead, these students navigate a matrix of power dynamics influenced by both factors. In the context of evaluation theory, the critical-postcolonial approach emphasizes how colonial legacies have shaped the field’s foundations. Evaluation theory, like many academic disciplines, often reflects the perspectives and priorities of colonial powers and reinforces dominant norms, including those of whiteness and masculinity. This leads to the marginalization of scholars of color, particularly Black females, as they are “othered” in academic spaces. The critical-postcolonial approach encourages researchers to take a holistic view of Black female graduate students’ experiences with evaluation theory. It examines not only the classroom experiences but also the broader structural and historical factors that contribute to their unique position within the academic landscape.

Ultimately, the critical-postcolonial approach is not just about analysis but also about advocacy and change. It calls for reevaluating and reshaping evaluation theory and academic practices to be more inclusive and equitable. This includes promoting diverse voices, revising curricula, and challenging the normative structures that perpetuate inequality. Overall, this critical-postcolonial approach provides a powerful analytical framework by drawing on the strengths of both CRT and postcolonial theory. It enables a nuanced exploration of how race and colonialism intersect and impact the experiences of Black female graduate students in the specific context of evaluation theory, ultimately aiming for greater equity and inclusion within this academic field. This approach enables a more holistic examination of learning experiences, emphasizing the need for

greater diversity and inclusion in evaluation scholarship and challenging the traditional, often exclusionary, norms within the field. In doing so, we contribute to a richer understanding of how race and colonialism intersect in education and academia, ultimately advocating for more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

To accomplish this, we address the following research questions: (1) How do Black female evaluation students conceptualize evaluation theory? (2) How do Black female student perspectives and experiences impact learning and understanding evaluation theory and the evaluation theory tree? (3) How does the representation of theorists in evaluation impact the learning experiences of Black female graduate students?

Methodology

This study took place at a midsized R2 university—a classification for doctoral universities with high research activity—in the southeastern United States. The research was conducted within the university's research and evaluation program, housed in the School of Education. The program trains masters and doctoral students in educational research, measurement, and evaluation with a focus on either program evaluation or educational measurement and quantitative methods. Evaluation of Educational Programs is a required core course for doctoral students on both tracks, intended to expose students to program evaluation and an overview of evaluation theories and the key components of an evaluation. Doctoral students on the Program Evaluation track are further required to take four other evaluation classes: Applied Educational Evaluation, Culturally Responsive Approaches to Research and Evaluation, Advanced Evaluation Theory, and Policy in Evaluation. These courses are taught by various professors, each with their unique approaches, content preferences, and teaching methods. This diversity among instructors could have an impact on the student learning experience.

Autoethnography

In this study, we employ autoethnography as a primary research method. We, the authors, three Black female evaluation graduate students and our advisor, engage in introspection and self-analysis to provide a deep understanding of our own experiences with evaluation theory. Autoethnography is an approach that centers the researcher's personal experiences and reflections

within a specific sociocultural context (Chang, 2013). It yields rich, nuanced insights, acknowledging subjectivity and embracing the individual's role in research (Chang, 2013). Autoethnographers use their experiences to challenge dominant narratives, provide qualitative data, and contribute to social change efforts. This flexible approach is interdisciplinary and valuable for exploring a wide range of topics (Chang, 2013).

This approach aligns with CRT's emphasis on the importance of individual narratives and counter-storytelling to challenge dominant narratives and uncover the complexities of race within education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). We utilized critical-postcolonial Theory (CPT) as the analytical framework to conduct this autoethnography. This approach allowed us to explore, from our own standpoint, the teaching and learning of evaluation theory in introductory program evaluation graduate classes. By using our personal experiences and insights, we aimed to interrogate and shed light on the complexities and challenges related to the representation and understanding of evaluation theory, particularly with regard to issues of race and diversity within the field.

The Researchers

Tyler Clark is a cisgender female 3rd-year program evaluation doctoral student from North Carolina. She is an alumna of an HBCU (historically Black college/university) and a former early childhood educator. She has a background in psychology and criminal justice, and her research interests are in social justice; equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); and criminal justice. Brianna Hooks Singletary is a cisgender female 4th-year program evaluation doctoral student who is an HBCU alumna from Maryland. She holds an MBA and has worked as an educator in the K–12 school system. Her research interests lie at the intersection of social justice, education, and learning. Malitsitso Moteane is a bilingual, Black, cisgender female doctoral student who is in her 4th year on the measurement track but took three entry-level evaluation classes. She was born in southern Africa, where she worked as a mathematics teacher and a lecturer in a teacher training program. These three authors worked together to develop the reflection protocol, participated in focus group discussions, analyzed data, and formulated findings. Aileen Reid served as their advisor. She is an Afro-Caribbean, cisgender female assistant professor who investigates inequities in outcomes. She provided valuable feedback, offering guidance to improve the

research design, the data collection process, and the quality of the findings. Additionally, the advisor served as a debriefer, helping the three of us reflect on our experiences, emotions, and personal insights throughout the autoethnographic journey. This reflective process with the advisor helped us gain a deeper understanding of our own narratives and ensured that our autoethnography is rigorous and meaningful.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from each of the researchers through individual reflections guided by a collaboratively designed reflection protocol. In crafting our research protocol, we engaged in a meticulous process of development. Collaboratively, we designed a protocol that would effectively delve into our individual backgrounds, our evolving grasp of program evaluation theory, and our reflections on the teaching methods. We referenced course syllabi and lecture slides to facilitate discussions and the interpretability of our experiences of our entry level evaluation classes. This methodical approach ensured that our research questions were addressed with depth and precision, and that the protocol was tailored to capture our unique experiences and insights. In addition, we utilized focus group discussion transcripts and notes and personal reflective journals as a source of data. Here, we describe each data collection method.

Individual Reflections.

During the summer of 2022, as part of our research preparation, we collaboratively designed a comprehensive reflection protocol. This protocol was specifically crafted to delve into three key aspects: individual backgrounds, understanding of program evaluation theory, and reflections on teaching methods.

First, we used the protocol to gather insights into our unique personal backgrounds and experiences prior to entering the program. These insights were vital for understanding how our diverse histories and perspectives influenced our engagement with program evaluation theory. Another focal point of the protocol was to capture our individual understanding of program evaluation theory. This encompassed our initial perceptions, interpretations, and evolving comprehension of this complex field as we progressed through our graduate program. The third element of the protocol centered on our reflections regarding the teaching and pedagogical

methods used to impart evaluation theory. It encouraged us to critically examine how this theory was presented and conveyed to us during our coursework.

After securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure ethical research practices, each of us individually responded to the reflection protocol. This allowed us to provide candid and introspective insights into our experiences and perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of our journeys within the program. To ensure the reliability and consistency of our data analysis, we employed a rigorous coding process. Two members of our research team were designated as coders, and we used a thematic coding strategy (Gibbs, 2007). This approach involved systematically categorizing and analyzing the responses to the reflection protocol, enabling us to extract meaningful patterns and themes that would inform our autoethnographic exploration (Gibbs, 2007).

Reflective Journals.

As part of our research process, each of us maintained personal multimedia reflective journals. These journals allowed us to engage in individual reflexive practice, which is an important component of qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008). They served as repositories where we documented our thoughts, emotions, and insights throughout the study relating to evaluation theory, the evaluation theory tree, and reflections on how evaluation theory was taught. We used two main formats for these journals: audio recordings and written entries.

Audio Recordings. We found that recording our thoughts and reflections in audio format offered an authentic and immediate way to capture our evolving understanding of evaluation theory. These recordings provided a rich archive of spoken narratives, allowing us to express our ideas in a natural and unfiltered manner. Additionally, audio journals enabled us to convey nuances in tone, emotion, and emphasis that might be lost in written text.

Written Entries: Written journal entries, on the other hand, provided a structured platform for us to articulate our thoughts more systematically. In these entries, we could carefully craft our reflections, analyze our experiences, and record specific instances where our understanding of evaluation theory and its teaching evolved. Written journals also allowed for easy referencing and analysis during the later stages of the study.

Focus Group Discussions

From August to October 2022 we had bi-weekly meetings where we shared resources and class materials and reflected on our conceptions of evaluation theory. For example, in September 2022, we had a formal focus group discussion where we went through the reflection protocol.

Our focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Each researcher then independently analyzed the focus groups transcriptions using content and thematic analyses to surface the major themes (Gibbs, 2007). The researchers deductively coded the transcripts, guided by the research questions. After the individual coding was completed, we met to discuss the themes that emerged. We then reviewed, compared, and narrowed down the overall themes of the data, resulting in four total themes:

1. Need to clarify the meaning of evaluation theory,
2. Evaluation theory tree as a tool for learning,
3. Exclusion or erasure of Black and brown scholars, and
4. Lack of alignment between course content and researcher's values.

Limitations

This autoethnography looked at the experiences of three Black female graduate students from one university and one evaluation program. In addition, as previously mentioned, our program differs from many others across the nation, as we are the only evaluation program that requires a culturally responsive evaluation course in the mandatory curriculum. With that said, we may have different experiences from others in less social justice-focused programs. We recognize that our experiences may not be transferable to all other graduate evaluation programs, yet our experiences are still valid. In addition, we also recognize that engaging in autoethnography is a learning and development process; we run into the possibility that our findings could be an idiosyncratic way for rationalizing and justifying our own claims (Pearce, 2010). However, we have grounded our findings in literature that exemplifies similar results. Overall, we used this research as a reflection of our learning experiences to share our unique understanding of evaluation theory through the teaching and usage of the evaluation theory tree.

Findings

Here, we present detailed findings, discuss those findings, and conclude by discussing the implications of this work and acknowledging the next steps to decolonize the teaching and learning of evaluation theory in graduate evaluation programs.

Need to Clarify the Meaning of Evaluation Theory

In response to our first research question, where we asked how Black female evaluation students conceptualize evaluation theory, the most prevalent theme in the data was a desire for more clarity on what exactly evaluation theory is. While we shared a common understanding of evaluation theory as a set of principles that guide the decisions evaluators make in the course of their work, including but not limited to engagement of stakeholders, data collection methods, tools, analysis, and so on, we all admitted that the definition was, as one of us stated, "pretty vague still." It surfaced that we "don't have that clear understanding of what constitutes evaluation theory." In intermediate and advanced evaluation classes, class projects involved case studies of evaluation theorists, mostly from the "use" branch of the evaluation theory tree. In these projects, attempts were made to study more deeply the model and/or approach attributable to each theorist by bringing the evaluation theorist to life. This involved role play and the creation of evaluation plans for several evaluation cases, summarizing the key features and components of our assigned theorist's practice, and reflecting on their contribution to our understanding of evaluation theory (Alkin & Christie, 2002). Despite in-depth study of the theory/model/approach, we were only able to give an overview of certain theorists' beliefs and locate them on the three branches.

One area that raises questions for us is the interchangeable use of the terms *evaluation theory*, *evaluation approach*, and *evaluation framework*. Consequent to that, the reason for the attribution of some approaches and frameworks to the level of theory³/₄while others (such as culturally responsive approaches [to be discussed in a later section]) remain approaches and frameworks³/₄is unclear. Even in our work outside of this project, we had a heightened awareness of other novice and experienced evaluators' use of the term *evaluation theory* and how, if at all, they differentiated it from evaluation approaches or frameworks. While we

did not question them on the word choice or ask for elaboration on what they mean by each, in our personal reflections we noticed that what is at one time called a theory is at others an approach, with no distinction made between the two terms. Indeed, even in the original publication of the tree (Alkin & Christie, 2004), *evaluation theory* and *evaluation approach* are used interchangeably.

In addition, we found a lack of clarity with the theory or praxis interaction. In the conduct of evaluation, “methods,” “use,” and “values” all have to be attended to. Yet, the emphasis that separates “use” theories from “methods” theories from “values” theories is subjective and ever-changing, which makes it difficult for us to recall and categorize the theories. The following quote demonstrates how this tension highlighted in the literature manifested in our reflections:

I think it becomes a little difficult (to understand) when you're focusing on this thing, but you're also considering (the other two). Like, if we're focusing on use, but we're also considering methods, and we're also considering values ... in some way we are considering values when we're considering use, right? We want to make sure that the person who is going to use it, or the stakeholders who are going to use it, their values are included in the process because, of course, that would be a way that they would use it. If it's not something that they value, or not talking about their values, they might not use it.

This is further exacerbated in our reflections on the use of terms like “contributions” versus “theories.” We recognized that white contributions were often classified as theories while Black contributions were referred to as approaches to evaluations (as in culturally responsive evaluation) or just contributions.

Related to the lack of clarity on the demarcations of what constitutes an evaluation theory discussed above, a subtheme that surfaced from the data was a set of questions about what qualifies one to be considered and/or named a theorist. In light of the fact that theorists are placed on branches according to what they focus on, the question still surfaced and to a large extent remained unanswered amongst: What makes them theorists? In all our introductory evaluation classes the Alkin and Christie (2004) evaluation theory tree featured the names of evaluation theorists, but in its presentation was not accompanied by the criteria for selection of said theorists, which

remained unknown to us until we conducted this study.

Evaluation Theory Tree as a Tool For Learning

When discussing Alkin and Christie’s evaluation theory tree, we articulated how the tool has been used to facilitate our general understanding of evaluation theory. As a tool often used in introductory program evaluation courses to present evaluation theory, one author reflected on how the evaluation theory tree was used throughout her learning experiences. She explains,

... [I]t was like a foundational piece. It was used as an introduction to theory. So, theory stems from this tree. So it's [evaluation theory tree] for somebody that doesn't have a good understanding of what evaluation theory is. It's easy to think that only people on here, is considered theory.

One of us added that the evaluation theory tree provides organization to the learning of evaluation theory. She explains that the evaluation theory tree provides a way for students to learn about theory and the theorists that have contributed to the field. Subsequently, she explains that the Alkin and Christie evaluation theory tree “*acknowledge[s] that evaluation theory is mainly white and male.*”

Further, one author reflected on the expense of using the Alkin and Christie evaluation theory tree as an organizing and foundational tool for learning evaluation theory. She explains,

For me, it would just be a repetition to say, in as much as it's an organizing tool, I think it reifies that this exclusion of people of color, right like it, if, when put into a visual, it becomes more powerful in saying what matters and what doesn't matter. And so, I feel like it's used as an organizing sort of mechanism, but it's also used to solidify what is legitimate or to legitimize certain evaluators and not others.

Since Alkin and Christie’s evaluation theory tree highlights the work of mainly male and white theorists, using the tool as a foundational tool restricts students of color’s ability to connect to evaluation theory. With limited representations of women and people of color, as black female students we struggle to connect with evaluation theory, ultimately making learning and conceptualizing challenging.

I feel like the way that evaluation theory was taught to me emphasized that being non white, is not valued. And does not enter a certain level of academic discourse. And so because in this field, Black and brown people, scholars, evaluators are excluded from this level of theorizing. For me, it's a microaggression, because it says you can never, like you can never ascend to this level. And so I left those classes feeling like I could never come up with an evaluation theory like, that's not where I function.

Absence of Black and Brown Scholars

We acknowledged that our experiences with learning about theorists on the evaluation tree highlighted the erasure and exclusion of Black and brown scholars/theorists. The lack of inclusion of Black female theorists on the tree seemed to be intentional exclusion and an attempt to erase their involvement in further development in any way. One author mentioned,

Just solidifying that exclusion, that deletion or erasure, I think is a feeling that I took out of that program, those classes.

This erasure is not something that is a recent occurrence. We acknowledged how excluding Black women's contributions is a systemic issue in education as a whole. One author stated,

And I think it ultimately erases all their contributions to the rest of the field. Like regardless if they have this field [evaluation] or not, we know they've been around since the 1930s. So there's no way that they didn't contribute to any of this other stuff that's on this evaluation tree. But where do they contribute to, it is unknown. And a lot of it is due to structures beyond our control from like the 30s and 40s. Because back then, like African American scholars, their work wasn't being published. So how do we go about finding that?

We also mentioned the intersectionality of being Black and female. Although some issues, such as the dominance of whiteness, may have been addressed in foundational evaluation courses, discussion around the maleness of the tree seemed to constantly fall short. On Alkin and Christie's (2004) evaluation theory tree, there were only five women represented. Even then, none of the women represented were Black. Our intersectionality as

both female and Black makes our lived experiences unique but emphasizes our learning experiences with the erasure of Black women's contributions throughout evaluation history. We acknowledged that in later iterations of the evaluation tree there were more women added (Alkin et al., 2012), and in even later iterations (Mertens & Wilson, 2018), women of color were included. Yet, the inclusion of Black female theorists on the evaluation tree were limited to the social justice branches of the tree.

When reflecting on how the whiteness and maleness of evaluation theory was considered, we noted that although our professors noted this issue, it often felt like a "check box." One author explained,

But I feel like we were checking boxes. It was, I felt like they needed to learn evaluation theory. But I also needed to acknowledge that the evaluation tree was white, and male, I did that check. Now let's go back to learning evaluation theory and continue to perpetuate the issue, the underlying issue of that it's male and white.

The lack of attention given to the issues of whiteness and maleness presented in evaluation theory further perpetuates these problems while normalizing the whiteness in evaluation theory.

One author suggested that teachers of evaluation theory need to foster critical thinking when introducing evaluation theory. She suggests,

But I think as a good teacher, you also should be teaching your students to be critical. So yes, we may not have the access to, we may not per se have easy access to what the Black scholars in the 30s and 40s contributed to the field of evaluation. But we could set it up in a way that we allow students to investigate and see what they find and just to be critical, or discuss things that they agree or disagree. We were not given that opportunity to be critical of the theories, it was just like, yeah, there's a problem with it, but it's the way it is, and accepted.

Providing space for critical thought on evaluation theory will allow students to investigate the contributions of theorists of color as well as challenging the norms around evaluation theory. By being critical of evaluation theory, students will be able to go beyond just a surface-level understanding of the issues of whiteness and maleness. Additionally, by further investigating the contribution of scholars of color in evaluation

theory, students of color will be able to connect to the theory of evaluation.

Lack of Alignment Between Course Content and Researcher's Values

As mentioned previously, our intersectional identities as female, Black, African graduate students (among others) create a unique learning experience. In addition to the lack of representation highlighted previously, learning evaluation theory presented a lack of alignment with our personal and professional values and beliefs. We mused that social constructivism theory cannot apply in this case because the values and interests of Black women are not represented in the teaching of evaluation theory. This lack of connection makes it difficult for us to understand. One author stated:

Although the tree is like an easy tool, a helpful tool, it may not always be the best tool. And so our training was very based off the values of the white man. Like, that's what the field is based off of, I get that, but so was our training. But it's not responsive to any of the people that we work with. And probably not the people that these theorists work with either.

Social constructivism theory postulates that individuals learn through the connections they make with the content through their identifying factors. However, we acknowledged that although there were theorists/theories that stuck with us, those were taught and/or emphasized in classes, not because they align with our values, beliefs, and/or interests.

Discussion

We discuss the results of our study in three sections to answer the following research questions: (1) How do Black female evaluation students conceptualize evaluation theory? (2) How do Black female student perspectives and experiences impact learning and understanding evaluation theory and the evaluation theory tree? (3) How does the representation of theorists in evaluation impact the learning experiences of Black female graduate students?

How is Evaluation Theory Conceptualized

Overall, we did not conceptualize evaluation theory very well. At the time of this research study, we were all more than four semesters into our graduate

evaluation program but we could not clearly, concisely, and confidently define evaluation theory beyond it being a collection of principles that guide the practice of evaluation. Specifically, we were able to list evaluation theories but could not articulate clearly each theory or differentiate it from other, closely related theories.

In our reflections, there were several sources of our confusion. One source of the confusion is the non-specificity of prescriptions of evaluation theories. In part, this is due to the highly contextual limitations and considerations of individual evaluations, which limit the practicality of subscribing to the prescription of an evaluation theory to the letter (Chouinard et al., 2017). Additionally, the non-specificity of the prescriptions of evaluation theories were also due to general overlap among the theories themselves, which surfaced during our reflections into evaluation theories and what distinguishes them from each other. In our understanding, all evaluation work considers robust and defensible methods that are useful to evaluation stakeholders and makes value an essential component of an evaluation (Scriven, 1998; Patton, 1997; Rossi et al., 2004; Newcomer et al., 2015), and while theorists are distributed among the branches based on where they lay the most emphasis (Alkin & Christie, 2004), there is clearly plenty of room for overlap both across and within the three branches.

Our confusion also stems from disagreement within the field of evaluation on what distinguishes a framework from a theory from an approach. What is at one time called a theory is, in the next moment, referred to as an approach. We are not alone in this confusion (Shadish, 1998; Miller, 2013; Cousins, 2013). Empirical studies of the evaluation theory-practice are ascribed to find that predicted distinctions did not manifest in the theorists' articulations, albeit years after their theories were coined. In fact, Miller (2013) surmised, in a comment to a logic modeling project of three evaluation theories, one from each branch of Alkin and Christie's tree, that much is still needed in the way of theorizing as theories. In addition, Shadish, as far back as 1998, also called for common metaevaluation nomenclature. This same confusion with evaluation taxonomy led to Cousins' (2013) question, "When does a theoretical framework become a theory?" (p. 67). While this non-specificity of nomenclature is seemingly innocuous and the lack of metatheoretical evaluation nomenclature with which to categorize theories and theorists has been noted prior (Shadish, 1998), when considered together with the whiteness and maleness of the evaluation tree (discussed later) it warrants outright justification

for the selection of approaches/models attributed to theorists and those relegated to being called approaches and models.

In our reflection on who is a theorist and why, we consider the broad definition posed by Shadish (1998) that evaluation theory is “a set of diverse theoretical writings held together by the common glue of having evaluation practice as their target.” It follows, then, that all those with theoretical writings with evaluation as its target are evaluation theorists. Some of the theorists on the tree, however, did not set out to be theorists (e.g. Cousins 2013; Greene, 2013) and in describing their evaluation practice and approach were abstracted to the level of theory.

How the Tree Impacts Learning

As we were reflecting, we noted that the Alkin and Christie (2004) tree was often used as a fundamental tool used to organize and facilitate our understanding of evaluation theory in our introductory courses. However, the tree primarily organizes theorists rather than the evaluation theories themselves within the categories of use, methods, and values. This focus is evident as the tree lists only the theorists’ names, without explicitly presenting the theories they developed. The emphasis on the division of the branches (use, methods, values) without an explicit theory attached, and the emphasis on theorists instead of theories, caused confusion for us when learning evaluation theory.

Additionally, as a foundational tool for learning evaluation theory, to us, the tree emphasized what is and is not considered a theory. The theme continued throughout our tenure in our evaluation courses, as we began this study as 2nd- and 3rd-year graduate students and are now 3rd- and 4th-year students. Classifying evaluation theories became apparent based on the representation of those who were included on the tree. That being said, the evaluation tree includes mainly white, male professors. The tree made clear that the contributions of Black and brown theorists were not

seen as significant in the field, which is also evident in scholarly literature (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Further, within this finding, learning theories of social constructivism emerged as connection to how the content being taught impacts one’s epistemology (Goldie, 2016). Due to the limited representation available on the evaluation theory tree, reflective discussion and journals revealed that during our learning experiences we struggled to connect to evaluation theory. By not seeing theorists that looked like us, we struggled to connect to evaluation theory and did not know where our voices belonged. As stated by philosopher Stephen Downes (2008), knowledge has many authors, knowledge has many facets, it looks different to each person, and it changes moment to moment. A piece of knowledge isn’t a description of something, it is a way of relating to something.

In Figure 1, we developed a visual representation of what the theory tree actually looks like. Icons representing the theorists’ gender and perceived race were organized as they were represented on the evaluation theory tree, and further exhibited the lack of inclusion of Black and brown theorists. Furthermore, this lack of representation on this theory tree also exists in writings, while Black contributors are often referred to as scholars and not theorists. Critical race theorists consider this critical role of race in the structures of the educational system (Delgado et al., 2017). Joseph-Salisbury (2019) describes the whiteness of intellect explicating that Europeans are the possessors of intellect and Black and brown people are inferior. While graduate courses and programs cannot cover every detail, and in our ignorance of what qualifies one to be a theorist, we turn to the educational curriculum concept of a hidden curriculum. While making no attempt at speaking to intentions, we note that what is excluded suggests what is not important (Esposito, 2011). This notion connects back to postcolonial theory that highlights the concept of “othering” minority groups from the dominant culture (Carter, 2004).

Figure 1. Evaluation Theory Tree Image



Note. Adapted from “An Evaluation Theory Tree,” by M. C. Alkin & C. A. Christie, 2004, *Evaluation Roots: Tracing Theorists’ Views and Influences*, 2(19), 12–65 and a synthesized image search of theorists on the evaluation theory tree.

Through the promotion of white, male scholars, the evaluation theory tree works to promote and normalize whiteness in the education of evaluation theory. Many evaluation scholars have advocated for reorienting the evaluation curriculum, especially in terms of evaluation theory, to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of evaluation practices (Hall, 2018; Hood, 2001; Hood & Hopson, 2008; Thomas & Madison, 2010). Thomas and Madison (2010) specifically argue that integrating social justice into the teaching of theoretical, methodological, interpersonal, and professional knowledge is essential because it not only broadens evaluators’ perspectives but also leads to more equitable and culturally responsive evaluations. This reorientation ultimately improves evaluation practice by fostering greater awareness, inclusivity, and relevance to diverse communities. They explain that the inclusion of social justice will enable evaluators to “challenge existing evaluation hegemonic ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological practices that diminish groups at the margins of society and normalize injustice” (p. 570). As evaluation theory is reflective of the contributions of mainly white, male theorists, the lack of representation of scholars of color in the evaluation theory

curriculum perpetuates the dominant histories of institutionalized whiteness (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Recent female scholars of color (Boyce, 2021; D’Andrea Martínez et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2023) have developed models and approaches to infuse social justice into training and mentoring of novice evaluators to center culture and context and to interrupt the status quo.

As the whiteness and maleness of evaluation theory have been noted by scholars throughout the field, it is important to consider the learning experiences of students of color when learning and conceptualizing evaluation theory, in which CPT plays a major role. Hall (2018) alluded to the whiteness and maleness of evaluation theory when questioning the role of race in evaluation. He states, “More importantly, I include the question of whether the underlying assumptions that guide the approach, strategies, guiding questions, and evaluative criteria of the evaluation may inadvertently contribute to inequitable treatment” (Hall, 2018, p. 572). Omodan and Tsetetsi (2020) investigate how the lens of social constructivism provides a way to think about how the teaching and learning process produces adequate knowledge. Through social constructivism, we hope to better understand the experiences of Black women

students in higher education as they begin to make meaning of evaluation theory.

How We Experienced Learning Evaluation Theory

In the 2004 development of this evaluation theory tree there was no mention of any Black women theorists (Alkin & Christie, 2004). This exclusion and erasure embeds postcolonialism in the teaching and pedagogy of evaluation theory. As evaluators of European descent dominate the evaluation theory tree, contributions from other cultures and colonies are not just omitted, but are almost degraded. It demonstrated the “us against them” phenomenon. As stated by Carter G. Woodson (1933/2011) in the *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. 5).

Works of Black evaluators were seldom known by students, and even when we did learn about them, it was usually in advanced evaluation courses such as our culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) course.

Our program is actually one of the few evaluation programs that offer and require a CRE course. In this course, students are exposed to evaluators of color. However, this separation of mainstream theory (taught in our foundational courses) from theorists of color (mainly taught in our CRE course) creates segregation and an implicit hierarchy. This separation exists throughout the field of evaluation, where you often see evaluators of color contributing to CRE literature and social justice branches of the evaluation tree (Mertens & Wilson, 2018) and less recognized for contributions to the other branches (methods, use, and values) on the evaluation tree and exposes the unspoken values mentioned in hidden curriculum theory. In addition, scholars acknowledge that CRE literature and curriculum rarely discuss both theoretical and practical applications (Hood et al., 2015). As curriculum is often influenced by issues of race, class, and gender, the domination of white curricula and segregation of multicultural curricula no longer appears abnormal (Esposito, 2011).

Finally, we had difficulty with understanding evaluation theory through the pedagogy of this evaluation tree because of our lack of connection to

the content. We all three sit at the intersection of many different identities, but we all experience the intersectionality of being Black women. The theorists we see on this tree do not look like us so, therefore, do not share our lived experiences, and even more so, it is difficult to apply these theories to the populations we evaluate, as they are often underrepresented, as exemplified in social constructivism.

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