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In graduate evaluation education, research has shown that theory to practice is overshadowed by a focus on practical methods which results in evaluation education tension and a tenuous understanding of evaluation theory to practice when evaluators complete their graduate studies. Little is understood about evaluation theory to practice from acquisition to conceptualization. This dissertation endeavored to understand this phenomenon using qualitative methods. Through 13 interviews of evaluators identifying as either academic-based or industry-based practitioners, it was determined that these evaluators were educated in evaluation theory *and* practice, that both groups accorded evaluation theory high importance, and the idea of the personal theory was identified from the data corpus. Findings indicate that this phenomenon warrants further exploration and has implications for future research, graduate evaluation education, and the evaluation discipline at large.

UNDERSTANDING THE GAP IN THEORY TO PRACTICE IN EVALUATION

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my best friend and parents, without your love, support, and sacrifices this journey would not have been possible. To you, this work is dedicated with the most heartfelt gratitude.

APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Our current socio-political state and everyday lives include implicit or explicit actions that entail engagement in valuation or appraisement. Nearly everything around us in one way or another is being appraised; whether it is the efficacy, or performance of an employee, policy, program, or organization being ascertained (Dahler-Larsen, 2012). Our personal and professional lives focus on assessing and appraising, ultimately determining whether something is as effective as it purports to be. This act of determining what is working along with what is not working; assessing the efficacy of something or ascribing value to it is called evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2012 & Schwandt, 2015).

It is vital to understand more about the concept of "theory to practice" from different perspectives as theory to practice is a foundational element/issue of the evaluation discipline. This work enhances our knowledgebase of theory to practice in both practical environments and education environments and thereby, provides much needed foundational insight into evaluation theory to practice.

Evaluation and Evaluation Theory

Evaluation often leverages theories to best address the needs of the evaluand, or object of the evaluation. Theories in general are tools for sense-making which underlie nearly every academic discipline to guide continued study and practical operations within said disciplines. Theories continuously evolve, grow, and develop as research and practice progresses. They evolve with technological advances as well as when socio-political priorities and perspectives shift. Scriven (1998), defines theory as "…providing a conceptualization or an account" (p. 57). Shadish, Leviton, and Cook (1991) define theory as an organizational mechanism that is intended to provide explanatory, predictive, and/or guidelines for engagement with a specific

topic or knowledge base. The definition as provided by Shadish et al. (1991), is one that is not only applicable to social science theory but also to the physical sciences.

In evaluation, the concept of "theory" operates in similar ways, whether purely theoretical in nature or heavily oriented to evaluation practice. It is important to note that evaluation theories tend to differ from social science and physical science theories in that evaluation theories are typically an amalgamation of approaches, frameworks, and guidelines that aid the evaluator in conceptualizing and/or explaining evaluation activities and findings (Alkin, 2013). In being an amalgamation of approaches, frameworks, and guidelines (Alkin, 2013), evaluation theory therefore includes a range of theoretical compositions intended to foster effective evaluation practice (Shadish,1998). Evaluation theories do not necessarily meet the criteria for theory as put forth under traditional conceptions in that most evaluation theories do not have the necessary elements of what a "theory" should entail (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Scriven, 1991).

Alkin (2004 & 2013) articulates two types of evaluative theory models: (1) prescriptive models and (2) descriptive models. Prescriptive models are the most prevalent and provide "…a set of rules, prescriptions, and prohibitions and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how it should be done…" (Alkin, 2004, p. 5). Descriptive models provide a means to predict, describe, as well as explain elements of evaluations through specific statements or generalizations associated with the evaluation activities (Alkin, 2004). Scriven (1991) contends that because descriptive and prescriptive theories exist, this has been a point of confusion and subsequent critique for evaluation theory. He further parses evaluation theories into local theories, general theories, and metatheories to help us better understand the roles of theory in evaluation (Scriven, 1991).

When it comes to the evaluation discipline itself, Schwandt (2015), explains that there is a professional precision in the definition of evaluation. Practitioners with a specialized knowledge of evaluative methodology and systematic means for a "…professional mode of knowledge production" embody a "professional approach" within the discipline (Schwandt, 2015, p. 1). This specialized knowledge (tantamount to the elements noted by the authors in the above pages), feed the activities of the evaluators and reciprocally, the evaluators' activities and knowledge gained from employing them further bolster the epistemological foundations underpinning evaluation. This epistemological foundation or knowledge base is vital in crafting evaluation theory along with its continued evolution (Schwandt, 2015).

For the purposes of this research, operational definitions for evaluation, evaluation theory, and theory to practice have been crafted.

- *Evaluation*: Activities and/or processes intended to determine the value, merit, worth, and efficacy of a program or curriculum (the evaluand). Ascertaining outcomes from the evaluand with an aim toward improvement may also be the intention of these activities and/or processes.
- *Evaluation theory*: An amalgamation of ideas which attempts to explain and conceptualize evaluation activities, processes, and justifications, and/or provide a model of practice for engaging in evaluation activities.
- *Theory to practice*: the acquisition and utilization of evaluation theory in an evaluation practice context.

Please note, these are not the only terms which one needs to understand operationally to glean the full meaning of this work. The below section discusses the terminology and associated operational definitions to a greater degree.

Evaluation Vocabulary

Beyond the definitions of evaluation, evaluation theory, and theory to practice, there are a few additional terms which are vital to understand operationally within the confines of this work for the work to be fully understood. These key terms are listed below in Table 1. However, there are numerous additional terms which may require greater clarity to fully glean the meaning of the text. I have attempted to identify as many of these terms as possible.

Table 1. Key Terms

Term	Definition
Academic-based Evaluator	An evaluator who self identifies with being primarily seated in an academic setting regardless of the sector(s) that they work in.
Evaluand	The target of the evaluation or subject being evaluated.
Formal Evaluation Training	Any form of evaluation training program participated in at an accredited university/college which culminates in a degree (Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral) or certificate.
Graduate Evaluation Program	An accredited university/college-based program that grants either a Masters or Doctoral degree upon completion.
Industry-based Evaluator	An evaluator who self identifies with being primarily seated in a non-academic setting regardless of the sector(s) that they work in.
Informal Evaluation Training	Any form of training received in a setting external to an accredited university/college program which does not culminate in a degree or certificate. This includes on-the-job training, workshops, conferences, etc.

The above terms may be defined in a different manner within the confines of other texts. The definitions provided solely pertain to the research within this dissertation. Thus, the nature of these definitions requires that they only be applied to the material in this text and not extrapolated beyond it.

Educational Tension in Evaluation Theory and Practice

The applied nature of evaluation requires that the practitioner have skills which are not solely contingent upon its social science theoretical foundations. There are a plethora of skills and associated intersectionality of said skills which are required to engage in evaluation endeavors effectively and successfully. How these skills are synthesized within evaluation education and the interplay between theory and practice results in an educational tension being present in the discipline.

Evaluators have a smorgasbord of theories to pull from and apply to effectively engage in their evaluation work (Alkin, 2013; Alkin & Vo, 2017; Chouinard & Boyce, 2017; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). So where does the evaluation education tension come from? Is it solely this overwhelming pantheon of theories available to ascribe to and employ in the evaluator's work that fuels the tension of theory to practice in graduate evaluation training programs? Could it be the sheer number of available theories, or could it be the cognitive dissonance fueled by dealing with applicable yet competing theories being examined for use in an evaluation? Perhaps the fact evaluation theory is not actually an instruction manual for working through an evaluation and thus, creates frustration in evaluation graduate student learners seeking that extra guidance (Chouinard & Boyce, 2017; Chouinard et al., 2017; Boyce & McGowan, 2019). What if there is an implicit assumption that graduate students will learn about theory to practice in practicums and as novice evaluators through on-the-job training (Trevisan, 2004; Dillman, 2013)?

The tension and, in some cases, disconnect between teaching theory to practice may originate not only with the above noted issues but also with the driving evaluator competencies behind many of the learning objectives embedded in evaluation courses. The American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Guiding Principles (2018) and the AEA Evaluator

Competencies (2018) articulate numerous domains and the respective elements which compose the domains which evaluators should engage in as competent practitioners. Of the 49 individual competencies nested across the five competency domains which compose the 2018 AEA Evaluator Competencies, only two are clearly associated with evaluation theory (AEA - American Evaluation Association: Competencies, 2018). Of the 26 AEA Guiding Principles nested within five principled domains, only two of these are explicitly tied into evaluation theory (AEA - American Evaluation Association: Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2018).

Examination of the remaining competencies and guiding principles illustrates a proclivity towards application of specific skills and principles in practice (AEA - American Evaluation Association: Competencies, 2018; AEA - American Evaluation Association: Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2018). However, there are competencies associated with continued growth and development as an evaluator. Additionally, an evaluator who is well acquainted with evaluation theory and the purposes it serves will recognize the implicit presence of evaluation theory in numerous competencies found in the Professional Practice domain and the Methodology Domain (*AEA - American Evaluation Association: Competencies*, 2018A). As in the case with the evaluator competencies articulated by the AEA, within the AEA Guiding Principles, there are four additional principles which are associated with evaluation theory beyond the two which explicitly are (*AEA - American Evaluation Association: Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, 2018B). To the evaluator who is engaged in the reciprocal theory to practice relationship (the contention that theory informs practice and practice informs theory evolution (Schwandt, 2014; Schwandt, 2016), these additional principles are obviously associated with evaluation theory.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to continue refining a reciprocal relationship if the relationship started out uneven to begin with. Recall that relationships imply reciprocity and

solid relationships have equal reciprocity (Schwandt, 2015). Thus, in the case of evaluation theory, theory would inform practice and practice would in turn inform theory.

The evaluation theory to practice component is not as heavily focused on and/or is not intentionally taught to graduate student learners (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; LaVelle, 2020). If learners are not getting this piece as part of their graduate evaluation training education, then they are already starting the theory to practice relationship in a deficit. It is probable then, that these students are primed to rely more heavily on their practice skills rather than their theoretical skills. Their methodological skills would likely have a weaker link to evaluation theories and thus, potentially impact the quality of the evaluations in which they engage. This issue illustrates why it is so important to have a high level of attention on evaluation theory and specifically, evaluation theory to practice. It is vital to mitigate this probable deficit.

Starting an evaluation career with a theoretical and practice-based deficit can have dire consequences. Novice evaluators can start their careers with an imbalance of a methodological orientation over a theoretical orientation and theory informed practice creates an over reliance on the methods themselves (Schwandt, 2015). This in turn will likely reduce how much an evaluator ultimately draws on theoretical information in implementing evaluation practice as well as impair the reciprocal relationship that is idealized; the partnership that is supposed to be present for the competent and ethical evaluation practitioner.

Problem Statement

Our society continues to increase the level of accountability of social and educational programming (Dahler-Larson, 2012). Funders want to ensure that their money is being spent as intended, policy makers want to ensure that policies function as designed and implement new policies which operate more effectively and beneficially, and program managers want to

continue to provide services that their clientele find helpful as well as continually improve their offerings (Dahler-Larson, 2012). Evaluation is pervasive throughout many facets of our lives and thus, there is a great need for competent evaluation professionals to determine whether these programs and policies are operating in a manner that achieve their stated goals. A crucial ingredient to the growth of competent evaluators as well as the continued evolution of evaluation is a strong foundational graduate education. This facilitates practicing evaluators' understanding and employment of evaluation theory to evaluation practice.

The American Evaluation Association's (AEA) guidelines for competent evaluation practice indicate that applying theory in practice and thus, applying the appropriate methodology for a given evaluation is a competency for evaluators (*AEA*, 2018A; *AEA*, 2018B). However, a significant problem exists in relation to addressing these guidelines and infusing theory into practice as research to date has found that theory to practice is overshadowed by a practice focus in graduate evaluation education (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; LaVelle, 2020). As a result, there is a substantive disconnect: when evaluation theory is not tied into practice more effectively during an evaluator's graduate evaluation training, the extent to which practitioners are prepared to engage in evaluation theory to practice at graduation is unknown. A tension between theory to practice in graduate evaluation education is evident, an etiology of which is not fully understood. From these issues, critical implications which impede evaluation practice arise. If evaluators-in-training do not have learning experiences which include an articulated explanation and engagement in how one would apply evaluation theory to practice in a variety of different evaluation contexts, then the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice will be inhibited (Schwandt, 2015). The result is that the advanced trained evaluation practitioner is graduating with a deficit in understanding/employing the relationship between theory to practice.

Study Purpose

The emphasis on practical skills in both educational programs and in working evaluation contexts has the potential to leave gaps in emerging evaluators' understanding of evaluation theory and how to leverage theory in practice. Additionally, the emphasis on practical skills hinders the reciprocal nature of evaluation theory and evaluation practice. Failure to fully grasp evaluation theory can result in fewer effective methods being employed in practice and potentially result in low quality evaluations.

As a means of mitigating these potential consequences stemming from inadequate understanding of evaluation theory to practice it is necessary to broaden the knowledge of the educational processes associated with theory to practice in evaluation graduate education. Current students and alumni of graduate level evaluation programs are uniquely positioned to provide insight on their educational experiences in relation to theory to practice as well as to how the theory to practice relationship manifests in evaluation settings. In gaining in-depth insight into these processes from current graduate evaluation program participants and alumni, we can gauge the extent of the issue further and plot a course to effectively remedy identified issues and/or identify avenues of further exploration.

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How and in what ways do evaluators conceptualize theory in evaluation?
    - How do practicing evaluators define "evaluation theory"?
        - What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and in academic-based settings define "evaluation theory"?
2. How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in evaluation?

- How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in theory to practice?
- Which elements of their training best prepared evaluators to engage in theory to practice in evaluation?
- What are the implications from practicing evaluators' experiences in teaching theory to practice in formal graduate education?

3. How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice?
    - How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?
        - What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and academic-based settings characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?

Importance

The American Evaluation Association explicitly encourages evaluators to employ approaches, methods, and theories in the appropriate ways in order to properly enhance and inform evaluation activities (*AEA*, 2018A; *AEA*, 2018B). Additionally, they want evaluators to continue building on that knowledgebase via professional development and continuing education activities. However, a clear path to doing this has not yet been established and many doctoral and masters level graduate evaluation training program curriculums continue to have a prominent focus on practical skills with little emphasis on the relationship to theoretical basis (LaVelle, 2020).

In seeking to understand more about the manifestation of theory to practice learning in graduate level evaluation programs and its manifestation in practice guided by the listed research questions, this study provides critical information that gives greater insight into this otherwise minimally explored element of evaluation. This research provides a foundation for the development of improved educational outcomes for graduate evaluation students in relation to theory to practice and thereby, produce more competent evaluators directly out of their respective graduate programs. Additionally, by understanding more about theory to practice in evaluation education, the field has a greater understanding of this crucial element in being a competent evaluator and employ the findings in understanding more about the path to professionalization in the evaluation discipline.

Researcher Positionality

One of the features of qualitative research is the influence that the researcher exerts on the research itself. The researcher is inextricably linked to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, it is important to seat myself as the researcher and acknowledge what I bring to the table by virtue of being me.

My ascriptions are colored by who I am experientially as well as by my values as these are integrally linked and an important part of my core being. Experientially, I was predominantly trained on-the-job and through self-study in evaluation prior to pursuing my doctoral degree in evaluation. My positionality is further influenced by my social justice orientation which stems from personal experiences as well as formal education including my bachelor's degree in Sociology, my master's degree in Psychology, and my master's degree in Forensic Mental Health Counseling. Each of these degrees in conjunction with my doctoral degree centered social justice along with issues associated with equity, diversity, and inclusion. My personal

experiences influence my research persona as well as my professional being in that I was adopted by parents who themselves are guided by an equitable and social justice orientation.

In approaching evaluation, I generally don a contextually oriented lens to what theories, approaches, and subsequent methods are employed. Despite this work not being an evaluation, but rather research on evaluation intended to broaden our understanding of how theory to practice is understood and conceptualized, it is important to note my evaluation positionality as this impacted the theoretical and conceptual frameworks devised for this research. My positionality also impacted how the questions used on the interview protocol employed for data collection are constructed as well as played a role in my engagement with the data during analysis.

I must make it clear that I do not fully ascribe to any one paradigmatic or philosophical perspective. However, I do ascribe to a fusion of the Constructivist paradigm (Mertens & Wilson, 2018) and Contextualism (Nagel, 2014). Within the constructivist paradigm, there are multiple realities and therefore, the reality is constructed through co-construction to include these multiple views of reality (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). In Contextualism, "knowledge-attribution language" is conceptualized internally and/or externally as part of the knowledge construction process (Nagel, 2014, p. 92). These epistemological perspectives guided my approach to this qualitative research.

Summary

There is a distinct tension present in evaluation education regarding the relationship between theory and practice. However, the etiology of this tension is not fully understood. It is evident that some of this tension stems from the notion of theory to practice as well as the amount of evaluation theory and practical evaluation skills that evaluators receive in their formal

education. Curricular studies have shown that most programs tend to spend more time teaching the practically-oriented skills over theory (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; LaVelle, 2020). Understanding how evaluators connect theory to practice is important to ensure that they are receiving the optimal theory and practice training.

The following chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of the literature in relation to evaluation theory to evaluation practice. It does so by providing a discussion of the key developments in evaluation theory, graduate master's, and doctoral evaluation program theoretical and practical foci, along with exploration of the tension that exists within graduate evaluation education and evaluation practice. Chapter three delves into the methodology employed for this work as well as the logic and reasoning for its usage to explore the research questions that guide this research on evaluation. Chapter four provides a highly detailed report of the findings from this research while chapter five provides a comprehensive discussion of these findings.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 delves into what evaluation theory is and explores some of the key thoughts as well as associated literature that underpin the conception of the relationship between theory and practice in evaluation. The chapter examines the discourse and current understanding of graduate evaluation education in relation to understanding theory to practice. It illustrates some of the pivotal issues which have been identified in graduate evaluation education and lays the foundation for the research that is the focus of this dissertation.

The Underpinnings of Evaluation Theory

The following section provides insight into evaluation as well as the underpinnings of evaluation theory. First, several definitions and purposes of evaluation are presented. Next, the paradigms which seat evaluation theory are provided. Finally, the various Evaluation Theory Trees are presented and discussed.

Evaluation and Theory

In nearly all facets of our lives we engage in valuation and appraisal. Regardless of whether these actions occur at a subconscious or conscious level, they do occur. The focus of the valuation or appraisal may be worth, efficacy, performance, and many other things at a variety of levels including the individual level, group level, program level, organizational level, etc. These behaviors may be formal or informal and are present in both our personal and professional lives. When we ascribe value or merit to something by probing its efficacy, we are engaging in evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2012 & Schwandt, 2015).

In evaluation, practitioners attempt to troubleshoot, problem solve, and thus, enhance the object of evaluation (Shadish, Leviton, & Cook, 1991). It is important to note that there are quite

a few definitions that exist for evaluation. Within this work, only a few of these definitions are covered. However, the operational definition being employed for this research is: Activities and/or processes intended to determine the value, merit, worth, and efficacy of a program or curriculum (evaluand). Ascertaining outcomes from the evaluand with an aim toward improvement may also be the intention of these activities and/or processes.

It is also important to understand that evaluation is a relatively young discipline, having only been birthed in the 20th century. Regardless of its infancy, valuation and thus, evaluation pervades all levels and aspects of our lives. This is especially true in American culture, regardless of if valuation/evaluation is accountability or performance-oriented (Dahler-Larsen, 2012 & Schwandt, 2015).

As with evaluation, numerous definitions of theory exist. This is also true when conceptualizing evaluation theory. Theories are means for sense-making which underlie nearly every academic discipline to guide continued study and practical operations within these disciplines. Theories continuously evolve, grow, and develop as research and practice progresses. Theories evolve with technological advances and socio-political priorities/perspectives change as well. Scriven (1998), defines theory as "…providing a conceptualization or an account" (p. 57). Shadish, Leviton, and Cook (1991) define theory as an organizational mechanism that is intended to provide explanatory, predictive, and/or guidelines for engagement with a specific topic or knowledge base. Evaluation theories operate in similar ways, whether they be purely theoretical in nature or heavily oriented to evaluation practice.

Schwandt (2015) provides a definition that emphasizes a professional aspect of the evaluation discipline. According to him, practitioners with a focused or specialized knowledge of evaluative methodology and systematic means for a "…professional mode of knowledge

production" embody a "professional approach" within the discipline (p. 1). These professionals are producing knowledge intended to aid in ascertaining the value or merit of the target (the evaluand); in other words, evaluate the target/evaluand (Schwandt, 2015 & Scriven, 1991). This specialized knowledge base feeds the activities of the evaluators. Reciprocally, the evaluators' activities and knowledge gained from the activities in turn feed back into the knowledge base ultimately bolstering the epistemological foundations underpinning evaluation. This knowledge base or epistemological foundation lends itself to the crafting of evaluation theory (Schwandt, 2015; Schwandt, 2014; & Schwandt, 2017).

Alkin (2013), describes evaluation theory as aligning with models and approaches to evaluation activities. He states that there are two types of models: (1) prescriptive models provide a framework from which the evaluator works and (2) descriptive models provide a means to predict and explain elements of evaluations (Alkin, 2013). Shadish (1998), explains that evaluation theory is not singular in nature but rather a range of theoretical compositions that are related in that they are associated with evaluation practice.

Shadish (1998), further explains that evaluation theory is a composition of and representation of the values that the theory authors hold in association with evaluation. Shadish (1998), like many other esteemed evaluators including Mertens and Wilson (2018), references Scriven's work in defining evaluation theory by explaining that some of the theories crafted for evaluation are specific to a given field or discipline while others are overarching theories which provide axiological fodder for evaluations (Shadish, 1998 & Scriven, 1991). For this research, the following operational definition of evaluation theory is employed: An amalgamation of ideas that attempts to explain and conceptualize evaluative activities, processes, and justifications and/or provide a model of practice for engaging in evaluative activities.

Paradigms

As noted above, Shadish (1998) believes that the individual's values are intricately woven into evaluation theories. Paradigms are similar in that they are the sense-making schemas that color the evaluators' perceptions and feed into the way in which the evaluation is engaged. Paradigms/schemas that evaluators ascribe to ultimately feed into what lens, theory, approach, or model (if any are explicitly employed) one uses. Paradigmatic orientations can be found outside of evaluation and are present in nearly all inquiry-based endeavors whether explicitly or implicitly noted.

According to Mertens and Wilson (2018), paradigms have epistemologically based origins. Essentially, paradigms are the belief system or the lens through which the individual sees the world. It is how one's reality is accomplished, and how one essentially rationalizes or explains the operation of the world and the things around them. Paradigms are composed of four key philosophical assumptions namely, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (methodology or methodological) assumptions, according to Mathison (2005).

The four philosophical assumptions of ontology, axiology, epistemology, and methodology are distinct and yet entwined. Ontology is the philosophical assumption exploring the essence of reality. How does one construct reality (Mertens & Wilson, 2018 & "Research Philosophy - Research Methodology," n.d.)? Axiology is the philosophical assumption that focuses on understanding and constructing ethical dictums (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). The philosophical assumption of epistemology explores "…the nature of knowledge" along with the relationship of the inquisitor(s), audiences, and the knowledge itself (Mertens & Wilson, p. 36, 2018 & "Research Philosophy - Research Methodology," n.d.). Methodology is the fourth philosophical assumption which entails understanding the underpinnings of how knowledge is

discovered and gathered. From the philosophical assumption of methodology, we derive the understanding of how to identify the appropriate methods to garner the desired knowledge (Mertens & Wilson, 2018).

There is reciprocity in the answers to each of the guiding questions asked by the respective philosophical assumption. The methodological systems or means in which information is acquired ultimately relate back up to our epistemological desires and understanding. Thus, the methodology deals with the way that information is gathered to build the knowledge base or our epistemological basis. That epistemological basis is colored by the associated ontological basis, the elements which comprise our view of reality, which in turn is imbued with our axiological views. Additionally, the methodology employed to address the epistemological needs is influenced by the axiological views which are in turn influenced by ontological views.

When we think about the various perspectives, approaches, and views that exist within the evaluation discipline, ultimately, we are thinking about the variations between epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology. How these different pieces coalesce is ultimately how the research perspectives or paradigms form. Paradigms in turn influence evaluation theory development and usage (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). According to Mertens and Wilson (2018), there are four major paradigms in evaluation, (1) postpositivist, which is associated with the Methods branch of the Evaluation Theory Tree, (2) pragmatist, which is associated with the Use branch of the Evaluation Theory Tree, (3) constructivist, which is associated with the Values branch of the Evaluation Theory Tree, and the transformative paradigm, which aligns with the Evaluation Theory Tree's Social Justice branch.

The relationship between the philosophical assumptions and associated paradigms are best summarized in Table 1. This table is as also highly relevant to the depiction of the Evaluation Theory Tree as per Mertens and Wilson (2018), which is discussed later. Table 1 is constructed using Christine and Alkin's (2004 & 2013) interpretation as well as Mertens and Wilson's (2018) conceptualization of the paradigms, perspectives, and the Evaluation Theory Tree's contributing elements to construction.

Table 2. Philosophical Assumptions & Paradigms

	Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology	Methodology
Postpositivist (Methods Branch)	There is a singular reality.	Knowledge must be identified and located external to the individual.	Objective (self-removed) inquiry is required to identify knowledge. Values are not infused in knowledge.	Hypotheses are employed and typically explored via quantitative means.
Pragmatic (Use Branch)	Reality can be singular (subjective) or objective in nature. The view taken is contextual.	Knowledge is constructed based on the parameters necessary for the type of evaluation being performed (contextual).	Values may be neutral or present depending on the context of the evaluative inquiry.	Methodology is aimed at facilitating usage of the findings and thus, mixed methods are typically employed.
Constructivist (Values Branch)	Reality is contrived of multiple views and thus, must be interpreted from these viewpoints.	Knowledge is co-constructed by the relevant parties/ individuals to have meaning.	Knowledge and the derived facts cannot be separated from values.	Multiple views construct reality, knowledge, and ethics, therefore, qualitative inquiry is heavily favored here.
Transformative (Social Justice Branch)	Reality does not necessarily stem from the dominant discourse. Multiple realities exist.	Knowledge is co-constructed with marginalized/ disenfranchised groups.	Ethics, values, and knowledge are intertwined.	Elevation of voices is critical here and thus, employment of mixed method inquiry is advocated.

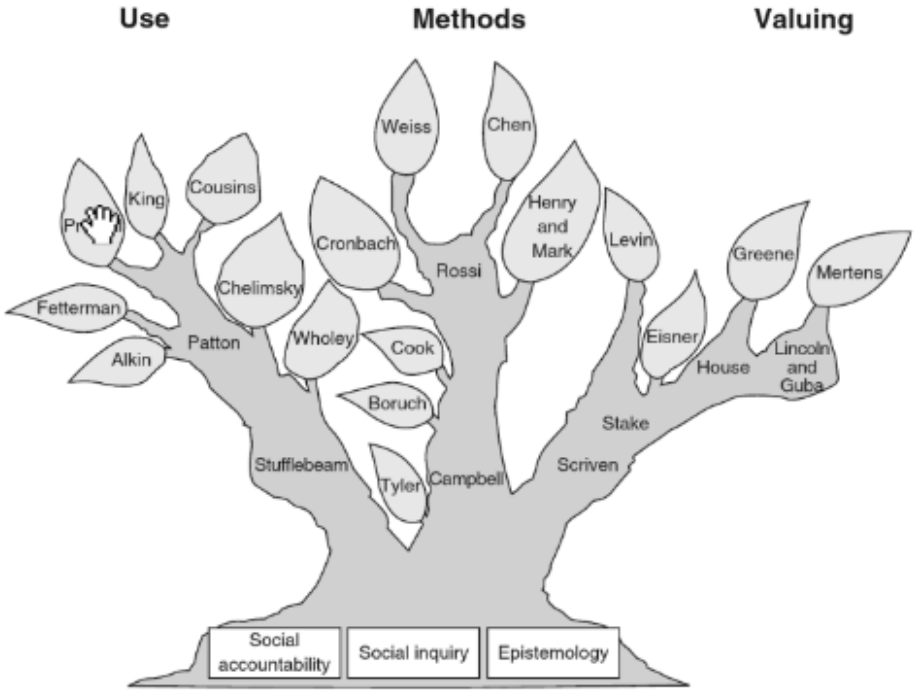
The Evaluation Theory Trees

So, what is/are the Evaluation Theory Tree(s)? In 2013, Alkin conceptualized an evaluation theory tree which provides a visual depiction of the "roots" of evaluation along with the three major "branches" of the discipline as he, Alkin, perceive the discipline to have

developed. The roots of this tree represent the foundation upon which evaluation is based and the branches represent the foci of the evaluative theorists placed upon them. The prominent theorists are placed along the branches at locations intended to be indicative of their placement on the tree in relation to their respective orientation (Alkin, 2013). The roots of the tree include three elements from which the three branches are related. The first root is Social Accountability while the second root is Social Inquiry. The third root is Epistemology (Alkin, 2013).

Alkin (2013), populates his tree with three distinct branches listed from left to right in this two-dimensional drawing; the first branch is Use, the second branch is Methods, and the third branch is Valuing. The leaves that populate the tree shoot off of each of the branches and along the trunks as well as in various places along the tree. The names of prominent theorists within the evaluation discipline are contained on the leaves. Their respective placement on the tree is intended to represent how they would fall paradigmatically. Figure 1 is the tree as conceptualized by Alkin (2013) in its second published iteration.

Figure 1: Evaluation Theory Tree 2013



Note. Source –Alkin, 2013, p. 12.

Despite depicting the branches of the evaluation theory tree from left to right with Use being the leftmost branch, Methods being the central branch, and Valuing being the far-right branch in their presentation and discussion of the branches, it is the middle branch that is first for them. Christie and Alkin (2013), note that that middle branch supporting the Methods branch grows explicitly from the social inquiry root. As insinuated by the name of the branch being Methods, the individuals who populate this branch and the branch itself represents the construction of knowledge and the tools by which it is constructed. The theorists represent various modes and methods of approaching knowledge construction in their explanation and analysis of their evaluation theory tree.

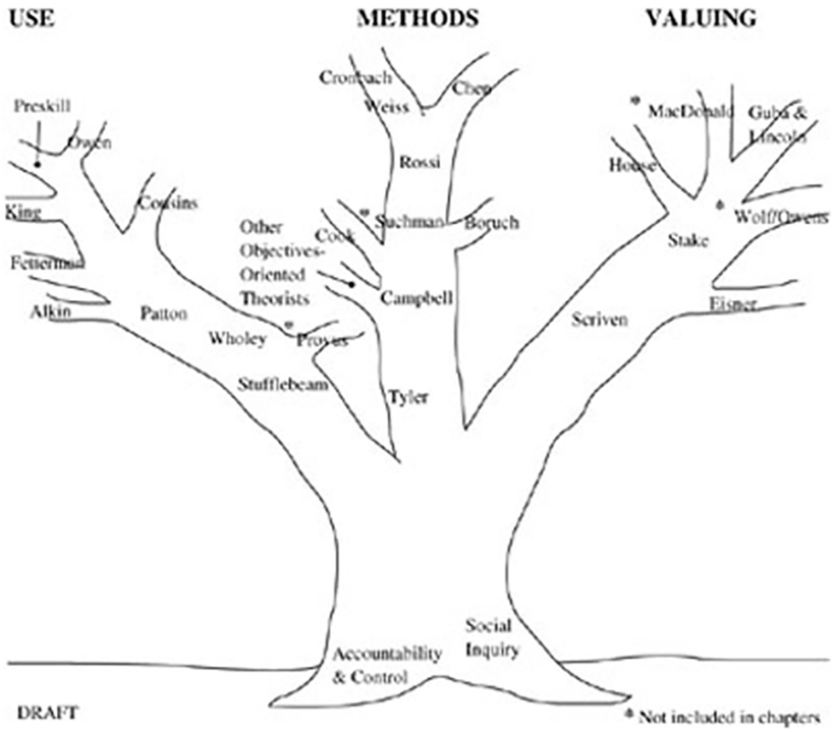
Christie and Alkin (2013), then moved to the Valuing branch explaining that the Valuing branch houses theorists who place the emphasis on the valuation of what is being evaluated. Theorists included in this branch generally adhere to definitions of evaluation which highlight the act of valuing in them. This branch also aligns with an axiological perspective. Theorist placement on this branch is associated with whether or not the respective theorist ascribes to valuing being either subjective or objective in natures. Alkin (2013), then moves into what they consider to be the third branch. Ironically, it is located first in the depiction of the tree. The primary focus of the Use branch and the theorists who have been placed on the branch is in the way that the evaluation knowledge, or the knowledge that is constructed through the evaluative endeavors (in other words, the evaluation findings), ultimately gets used for decision making. Thus, use of the findings is the primary concern of the individuals who are placed on this branch and others who ascribe to the specific Use branch.

By starting in the middle, moving to the right, and then moving back to the left branch, it is important to note that all three distinct branches are not entirely independent from one another. There is some reciprocity between the three different branches. Christie and Alkin (2013), point out that if this specific evaluation tree model were presented as a 3D model, that the branches would circle around with use and valuing touching each other, despite the 2D rendering having them on opposite sides.

Recall that Christie and Alkin (2013), placed the theorists on their respective locations on the Evaluation Theory Tree in relation to how they believe each one fell paradigmatically. In 2003, Christie performed an empirical study which polled prominent evaluation theorists to learn more about how they see their own theories as well as how they see themselves in terms of paradigms, thoughts, and perspectives. In essence, Christie (2003), was asking these theorists to

provide greater articulation about their theories and frameworks and to categorize themselves paradigmatically and theoretically. The tree generated from that work in 2004 differs from the 2013 tree predominantly in that the roots only include "Accountability and Control" and "Social Inquiry" (Alkin, 2004, p. 13). Figure 2 below depicts this initial tree.

Figure 2: Evaluation Theory Tree 2004



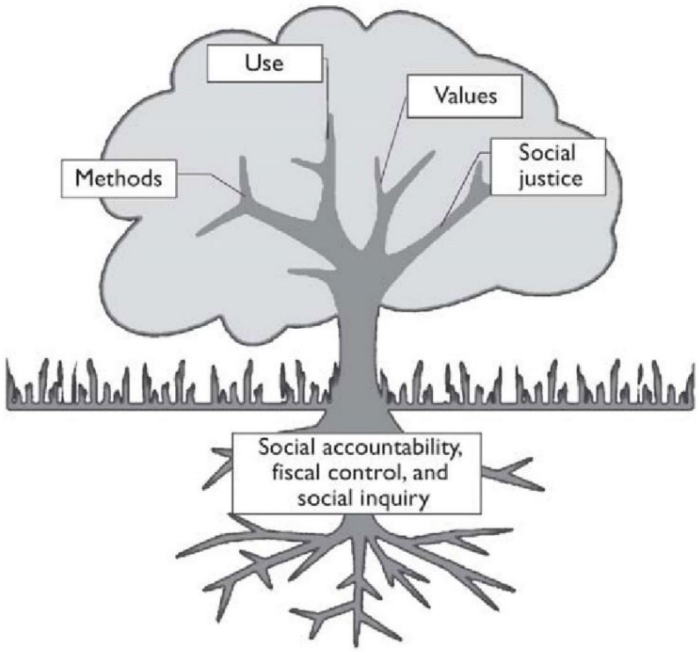
Note. Source –Alkin, 2004, p. 13.

A key premise to Mertens and Wilson's (2018), revision of the evaluation tree as originally conceptualized by Alkin (2004 & 2013), Mertens and Wilson articulate the relationship between paradigms, theory, evaluation models, and approaches to a greater degree as well as in a manner that is a slight departure to that of Alkin's (2004 & 2013), articulated relationship. In the conceptualization put forth by Mertens and Wilson (2018), the paradigms employed by the evaluator are the foundational influence for the associated theories as well as

the models and approaches ultimately employed by the evaluator. Mertens and Wilson (2018), add a fourth branch as one of the critical changes to the evaluation theory tree as originally conceptualized by Alkin (2013). Mertens and Wilson maintain the Use, Methods, and Values branches, but add the fourth branch of Social Justice (2018). Another pivotal change, which is not explained in quite the same way as the placement and order of the branches offered by Alkin (2013), is that Mertens and Wilson (2018) change the order from left to right of the branches to represent Methods on the left side use. Following that, they move to the Use branch, Values branch, and lastly, the Social Justice branch is incorporated. Another substantial change made to the evaluation theory tree is that the roots have been modified to no longer be specifically ordered and none of the roots are aligned with any specific branch as is the case with the social inquiry route being aligned with the Methods branch in Alkin's (2013), tree. Instead, in Mertens and Wilson's (2018), revision we find a top-down listing of social accountability, fiscal control, and social inquiry. They have also removed epistemology and replaced it with fiscal control.

Finally, another significant change is that Mertens and Wilson's (2018), depiction is intended to align with the four paradigms that they present. These four major paradigms again being postpositivist, pragmatic, constructivist, and transformative. Figure 2 is the Evaluation Theory Tree as visualized by Mertens and Wilson (2018).

Figure 3: Evaluation theory tree - a revision 2018



Note. Source – Mertens and Wilson, 2018, p. 40.

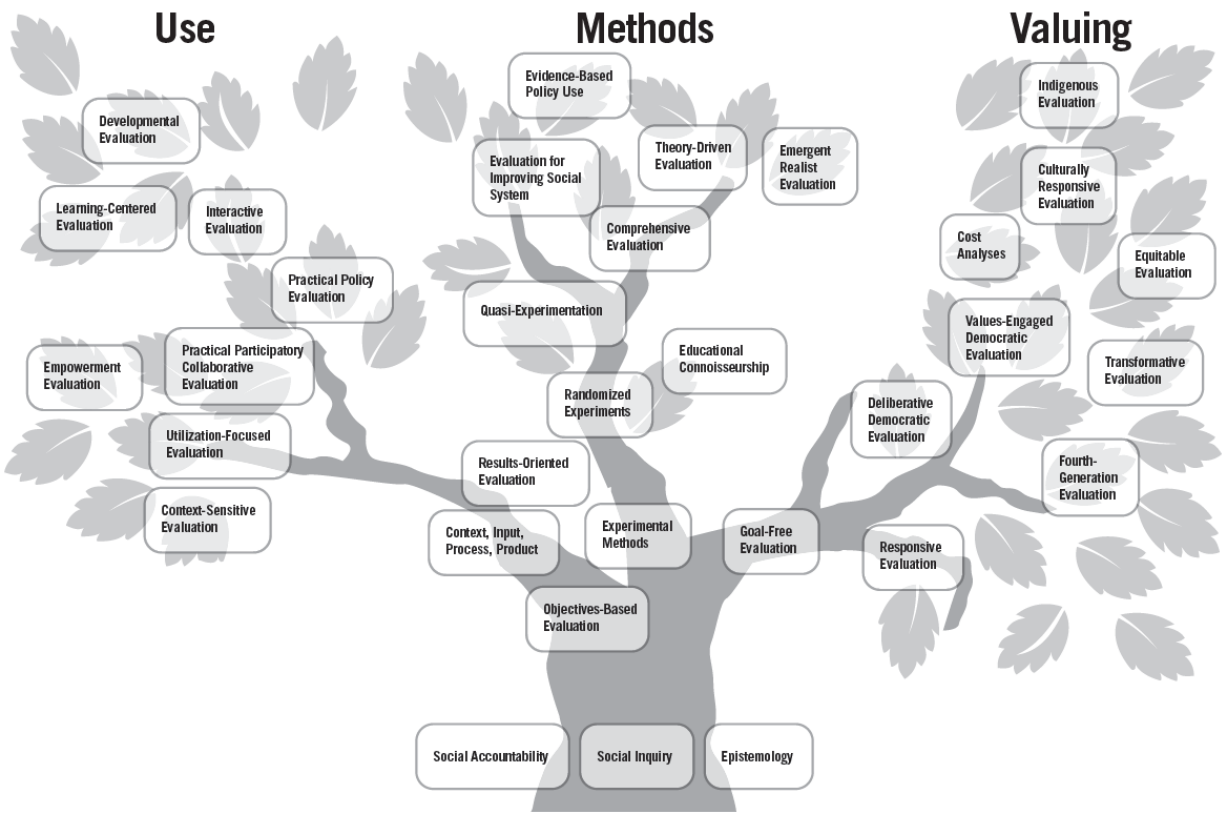
While the conceptualization between the Methods, Use, and Values branches do not really change substantially between Alkin (2013) and Mertens and Wilson (2018), the addition of the Social Justice branch does add to the evaluation theory tree substantially.

The inclusion of the Social Justice branch for Mertens and Wilson (2018), speaks to a substantial elevation of the axiological philosophical assumption. This transformative paradigm that is mapped onto the Social Justice branch not only speaks to a significant shift in the axiological views of individuals or theorists who would be placed on that branch, individuals who would fall into this category believe that ethics, values, and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. Thus, undoubtedly have an impact on each other. Of critical importance here is that when looking at the epistemological, ontological, axiological, and methodological philosophical assumptions associated with the Social Justice branch, there is an impetus for the representation

of individuals who normally do not receive recognition or advocation that is accurate or realistic in their own perspective. The Social Justice branch serves to understand and construct knowledge with the individuals from whom the knowledge is sought as well as to elevate and advocate the voices that are part of the knowledge construction. These voices tend to belong to individuals who historically have been marginalized, disenfranchised, or are not part of the dominant group in one way or another.

The current sociopolitical climate warranted a revision to the Evaluation Theory Tree(s). This revision came in early 2023 via the third edition of Evaluation Roots put forth by Alkin and Christie. In the updated conceptualization of the Evaluation Theory Tree, the branches remain the same as before as do the roots of the tree. However, the roots are more aptly described as being "the why of evaluation" (Alkin & Christie, 2023, p. 12). The pivotal difference between the iterations of the tree come by way of the removal of evaluation theorists' names and instead the inclusion of specific theories. The theories included reflect additional, more modern theories as well. Additionally, the theories are positioned in a manner that indicates their primary and secondary emphases (e.g., a theory that is use-oriented but has a secondary emphasis on methods will be closer to the methods branch while still situated on the use branch) (Alkin & Christie, 2023). Figure 4 below illustrates latest iteration of the Evaluation Theory Tree.

Figure 4: Evaluation Theory Tree 2023



Note. Source – Alkin and Christie, 2023, p. 13.

Whether or not a tree is the optimal depiction of evaluation theory along with the inclusion of specific individuals within the various theoretical categorizations has yet to be determined also. Regardless of how the overarching categorizations of evaluation theory are depicted, it is still critical for graduate evaluation students to understand this information, its evolution, and its associated relationship to evaluation practice.

The Theory/Practice Relationship

The relationship between theory and practice is a complex one. It has been conceptualized as being dichotomous, linear, cyclical, as well as reciprocal (Schwandt, 2015; Schon, 1983). Within the confines of these pages, I will focus on the dichotomy, linearity, and reciprocity perspectives. The literature which underpins this discussion stems from multiple fields beyond the evaluation discipline.

The False Dichotomy, Linearity, and Reciprocity

The separation of theory and practice has often been described as a false dichotomy (Schon, 1983). In essence, this is the idea that theory is a construct that is somehow separate from practice, an individual construct that stands solitary from practice. It is the notion that they are fundamentally separate entities which require the evaluation practitioner to select one or the other (Schwandt, 2015; Schon, 1983). However, this view is simplistic in nature as it fails to account for the connection between theory to practice that is, for example, present in practical theories. Others have argued that there is a linear relationship between theory and practice, arguing that theory leads to practice. Still others, like Schwandt (2015) speak of reciprocity between theory and practice, noting that theory informs practice and practice in turn, informs theory.

Evaluation Theory and Practice in Graduate Education

It is important to note that graduate evaluation programs provide an opportunity for graduate students to obtain critical technical skills related to evaluation practice as well as to gain understanding and insight into theoretical considerations in evaluation. However, evaluation is not yet a professionalized discipline. Therefore, while there are professional guiding standards

(citation), and suggested competencies (citation) there are no prescribed educational requirements or certifications to be considered an evaluator.

Despite there being no prescribed educational curriculum for evaluators at the time of this writing, scholars are trying to understand what the optimal evaluation curriculum should look like and the interplay between theory and practice (LaVelle, 2020). The following section broaches fundamental issues which result in critical differences in how graduate evaluation students engage with learning evaluation theory to practice as part of their educational programs. These issues exist for a variety of reasons. While this research did not seek to focus on educational implications beyond the scope of the stated research questions (see page 7), this section touches on other related issues that are of great consideration and debate within the field of evaluation at the time this text was written. These issues which are associated with evaluator education lend themselves to the existence of tension between theory and practice.

Educational Tension

LaVelle and Donaldson (2010), discuss the many steps that evaluation has taken in moving towards being a professionalized discipline, specifically calling out academic works aimed at increasing the relational understanding of theory and practice as well as academic works exploring evaluator training practices. LaVelle and Donaldson (2010), performed research with the goal to understand what university-based evaluation programs existed in the United States as well as looking at the curricular structure of the programs offered. In the study, it was found that very few courses were explicitly geared toward teaching evaluation theory. Instead, most of the courses emphasized the practical application of evaluation methods and concepts (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010). Christie (2003) aligns with the concerns expressed by LaVelle and Donaldson (2010), by broaching the issue in pointing out the marked paucity of necessary

scholarly research to facilitate further understanding and development of evaluation theory and practice. Christie (2003), notes that the abundance of scholarly research in evaluation is centered on increasing utilization of evaluations.

Davies and MacKay (2014) recognized the lack of empirical knowledge associated with the training of evaluators and explored university-based evaluation programs to gain greater insight into training practices. Through their work, Davies and MacKay (2014), were able to replicate the evaluation programs that had been identified by LaVelle and Donaldson (2010), using different methodologies several years after LaVelle and Donaldson's work. Of great interest was that the bulk of the information found related to introductory evaluation course curriculums. The curriculums varied greatly in how much time was allocated to the topics typically included in introductory courses. The bulk of the topics focused on (and for the greatest amounts of time) were practice-oriented in nature. A large swatch of the respondents (47%) indicated that they typically spent three or more weeks teaching about evaluation approaches in their courses (Davies & MacKay, 2014). Also noted in their findings was that very few offerings of advanced evaluation courses were reported to be given and thus, very few students were afforded opportunities to take part in such courses. Most of the degree programs emphasized or required evaluation skill-oriented courses in addition to the introductory evaluation classes (Davies & MacKay 2014). The lack of emphasis on theory in learning objectives and the greater presence of practice or skill-oriented evaluation course elements is quite apparent in this work. Additionally, the immense variation in program requirements they noted along with other researchers, proves to be problematic because the determination of a "trained" evaluator is difficult to ascertain (Davies & MacKay, 2014; Schwandt, 2015; LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; Lavelle, 2018).

In 2018, LaVelle revisited the university-based graduate evaluation training programs finding similar parallels to the work done previously (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; LaVelle, 2018). They found a notable increase in the available training programs, however, the wide range of programmatic degree completion requirements remained of concern. Emphasis on practical and skill courses/content was apparent in the courses offered within the programs reviewed (LaVelle, 2018). Despite the presence of fieldwork or practicum requirements, and useful mechanisms to facilitate engaging in theory to practice, most programs did not include a substantive element focusing on theory and/or theory applied to practice (Trevisan, 2004; LaVelle, 2018). Dewey, Montrosse, Schroter, Sullins, and Mattox (2008) found while employers of evaluation sought evaluators with interpersonal report writing, project and team management, *and* evaluation theory skills, few students of evaluation reported training with an emphasis on these skills. Further, findings from an online study of 403 practicing evaluators' perceptions of competencies indicated that 82% of respondents rated "Understands the knowledge base of evaluation (terms, concepts, theories, assumptions)" as important, but only 25% felt there was a need for additional training in these concepts (Galport & Azzam, 2017).These findings substantially leaves a lot of questions as to how well the students graduating from each program grasps theory to practice as a result of their educational experiences.

The Gap in the Literature

Based on the work enumerated and discussed above, there is a substantial variance in the requirements for the successful completion of each program despite granting the same degree. This variance in educational criteria, particularly when looking at the loading of methodologically focused courses over theoretically focused courses, has the potential to create disparities in relation to understanding theory to practice in evaluation.

Herein lies the problem and thus, the gap: if evaluation theory is not tied into practice in a stronger manner or more explicit manner during one's graduate training in evaluation, then it becomes extremely difficult to engage in the partnership that should be evaluation theory and practice. If evaluators-in-training do not experience learning which includes a well-articulated understanding of how one would apply evaluation theory in a variety of different evaluation contexts, then the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice will be difficult to cultivate. Under these circumstances, the evaluation practitioner is already starting with a major deficit in their practice by lacking an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.

Despite the potential for lacking the requisite theory to practice understanding, the American Evaluation Association (2018) explicitly wants evaluators to employ approaches, methods, and theories in the appropriate ways to properly enhance and inform evaluation activities. However, the latitude that graduate evaluation programs have in designing their curricula, as evidenced by Lavelle's work, makes ensuring that evaluators graduating from these programs are hitting these specific targets and therefore, competent as per the AEA (2018A & 2018B). As a result, we have a gap of unknown size that must be understood and bridged in an effective manner.

Bridging the gap between theory and practice in the graduate evaluation setting is a feasible task once the breadth of the gap is better understood. Graduate evaluation programs can leverage a variety of methods to facilitate grasping the associated learning objectives of students. Many of these methods have been employed in other social science disciplines very effectively as well as in evaluation education.

Theory to Practice Teaching Methods

Connecting theory to practice in a university-based evaluation education setting is generally not an easy endeavor. Different settings and contexts employ different approaches. Why does the method employed to teach learners about theory to practice matter? It is evident that many of the approaches currently employed include facets of experiential learning which are intended to really facilitate not only understanding the given theoretical application in that specific context but facilitate extrapolation beyond the present context and into others which may not entirely mirror the given one. This extrapolation is critical to competent theory-based practice. Hodges and Kuper (2012), point out that practice and knowledge are intertwined.

Practice and knowledge are intertwined in many professional disciplines. In medicine, a variety of techniques are leveraged to teach graduate medical students about the constructs and concepts that they need to be successful in their field. This is also true of several other academic disciplines. Lectures are leveraged if the material being taught is best suited for it. Problem-solving exercises and problem-based learning are also utilized to aid training theory to practice in graduate medical students. Naturally, real-life experiences provide a wonderful experience for medical students to see theory in action in practical ways (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015).

In social science disciplines, just as in medical education, the use of problem-based learning is helpful in teaching graduate students about theory to practice (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015). Problem-based learning facilitates the discourse of ideas, in vivo researching of new information, application of existing theories, and engagement in the reflective examination of the entire process to facilitate learning at multiple levels (Strand & Popescu, 2018).

Problem-based learning often employs a problem whether in the guise of a case or vignette (Zaidi et al., 2019; Strand & Popescu, 2018). Case-based learning overlaps in many

ways with problem-based learning. However, in case-based learning graduate students are given a case where they actively work through it using their theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge Whereas, problem-based learning can vary in scope and nature (Anderson, 2019). Problem-based and case-based learning are both experiential teaching methods.

Role-playing is another experiential teaching method that gives graduate students partaking in the activity the opportunity to think and react on their feet in a safe, practice environment. This method too, allows the synthesis of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge to be played out in the given scenario (Alkin & Christie, 2002). Reflection is often employed as part of role-playing in order to give students an opportunity to dissect the interactions and apply an additional level of critical thought to what happened in the scenario. Thus, further parsing the situation and identifying elements for consideration in the future. Reflective learning in general affords graduate students another experiential way to engage with theory and practice. Graduate students are able to engage with applied work and explore the theoretical underpinnings of the work by seeking to identify the respective theories (Brookfield, 1998).

There are some key points that must be noted about the enumerated teaching methods. To start with, it is important to acknowledge that only a subset of teaching methods are discussed within the confines of this paper. The list included here is not exhaustive in nature. It is also important to note that each of the teaching methods noted actively engages the graduate learner in conceptualization theory in practice; they provide a means for the graduate learner to bridge the gap between learned theory and application in practice using critical thought and examination in the process. These methods also facilitate extrapolation of the learning experiences to other

scenarios beyond those that the studentsare exposed to as part of the learning process. Each of these teaching methods has strengths. However, each method also has weaknesses.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Teaching Methods

As with any method, teaching methods have positive elements or strengths as well as negative elements or weaknesses. It is important to understand that not every method is optimal for every subject or for every learner. Below are some of the key pros and cons of each of the teaching methods leveraged for teaching theory to practice discussed in this work (Kolb, 2017).

Lectures are very useful when it comes to specific types of information and can even be conducive to certain student learning styles. Lectures allow considerable amounts of information to be conveyed to students in short periods of time. Depending on the mechanisms in use for the lecture, lectures tend to be one of the most cost-effective means for teachings (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015). Contingent on the scope of the lecture, the amount of time required to create one tends to be less than the amount of time needed to develop a dynamic and interactive experiential lesson.

Lectures can be spoken with no visual aids or can draw on a myriad of visual aids to further enhance the lecture beyond the words spoken by the lecturer (Kolb, 2017). Whether or not visual aids (and what kinds) are leveraged to expand upon the lecture, influences the utility of the lecture to the audience. A lecture can be tailored to the needs of the audience in alignment with the subject to be lectured on. Lecturing can be an excellent method to use to orient graduate students to theories and elements of applying theory to practice at a conceptual level.

While there are many strengths to the use of lectures, there are numerous weaknesses associated with this teaching style. The way the lecture is “spoken” can impact how the content is received by the audience. If a monotone presenter speaks at the audience with no inflection/emotion, it will prove difficult to attend to as lectures often rely heavily on cognitive

executive faculties (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015). However, if a lecturer relayed the content to the audience in a more animated fashion, one appropriate to the content, then the audience will have a higher probability of grasping the material being lectured. There is a caveat though, finding the optimal balance in the teaching aids employed with the lecture is critical. Having flashy or animated content embedded in the lecture does not always necessitate learning. It may create engagement and interest, but it is important to utilize such elements carefully and practically to facilitate not only engagement, but also learning (Kolb, 2017).

When lectures are used to teach theory to practice with graduate students, it inherently creates issues for the practical arena as the very nature of lectures does not permit the type of application necessary to foster moving theory into practice. In other words, the extension of the concepts accrued through the cognitive nature of the lecture is not possible to the extent necessary to really facilitate bridging the gap between theory and practice as lecturing is "learning in isolation" without the enhancement of real-world application (Kolb, 2017, p. 71). Problem-based learning steps beyond the mode of lecturing in that it allows the application and relation of learning to problems which have a greater tie to the real world. Problem-based learning has the ability to draw in graduate students and enhance the level of motivation they experience in learning the target theory to practice material (Abercrombie et al., 2015).

Problem-based learning is defined as a method of teaching as well as a curricular approach. The intent of problem-based learning is to engage students in active learning which emphasizes problem-solving using one's knowledge base, research skills, and critical thinking (Milman & Kilbane, 2017; Strand & Popescu, 2018). The method was originally crafted as a means of working with medical students; a means to safely apply theoretical and practical skills in relatable, realistic scenarios (Milman & Kilbane, 2017).

Problem-based learning is very adaptable to both the physical and virtual classrooms. Strand and Popescu (2018), employed problem-based learning in the development and associated scaling of a trauma-informed curriculum for graduate level social work students. These students learned conceptually about the 12 Core Concepts of Trauma first and then employed these theoretical concepts using the problem-based learning format. The format of Strand and Popescu's (2018), course was small group work where students parsed a variety of short scenarios or vignettes. Students applied the concepts within their analysis, identified other areas which required further research/information, and talked through addressing the problem while utilizing the 12 Core Concepts of Trauma. Upon the conclusion of the small group work, brief presentations were made by each group to the class and then a class wide discussion was held (Strand & Popescu, 2018).

Within the virtual classroom, the same problem-based learning objectives that are emphasized in physical classrooms are emphasized; application of the acquired knowledge and skills, student control over the problem-solving approach while employing critical thinking and additional information acquisition as necessary and synthesizing new knowledge through the problem-based learning activity process (Strand & Popescu, 2018; Milman & Kilbane, 2017). The way the problem-based learning process unfolds within the virtual context will ultimately look very different than small groups congregated within a classroom, however, a similar result can be achieved. The students engage in the application of their existing knowledge and skill and ascertain different solutions to the problem at hand and therefore, can begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a more tangible way.

Problem-based learning has the strength of allowing the synthesis of theory and practical skills and the subsequent application of this knowledge/skill to relatable and realistic problems.

The problem-based learning method has the added strength of enhancing interpersonal skills when conducted in a group setting as illustrated in Strand and Popescu's (2018) course offerings for graduate social work students. Critical thinking skills are fostered in the application and identification of additional knowledge and skills as well as with the presentation of the "solutions" that others working on the problem may have come up with. Problem-based learning can be engaged virtually as well as in person and similarly, worked on in small groups or individually.

As with any teaching method, problem-based learning has some weaknesses. According to Zaidi and Nasir (2015), it is a method that tends to have relatively few weaknesses. One critical weakness (that does not always exist) has to do with the caliber of the vignettes or problems being used in the problem-based curriculum. A poorly crafted problem could lead to a plethora of issues, including the possibility of ultimately failing to illustrate the intended processes that the students are supposed to work through to ascertain the solution(s). In the case of a well-written problem that lacks authenticity or plausibility, this can detract from the problem-solving process and potentially impede the intended learning objectives and information synthesis (Milman & Kilbane, 2017).

To properly craft high caliber problems for the problem-based learning curriculum, a considerable amount of time and energy is required. This time and energy translate to a higher cost for curriculum development as opposed to some other types of learning modes and curriculums. Beyond initial development, the curriculum will often require revisions, as well as the appropriate training for professors to implement the teaching model as effectively as possible (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015). As indicated in Strand et al.'s (2014), work, numerous revisions were required to the course and the associated cases to optimize them. Additionally, to ensure faculty

were oriented to teaching in the problem-based learning method, faculty learning collaboratives were set up for the first several years to provide training before course implementation and ongoing support while the courses were being taught (Strand et al., 2014).

Strand and Popescu (2018), mentioned that their course sizes were fairly small to accommodate the intimate setting of the small groups. This too is seen as a weakness of the method as this means that the accessibility of such courses using this methodology is limited to a very small number of graduate student learners (Zaidi & Nasir, 2015). The issue of class size tends to be less of a problem in social science graduate programs than it may be in a medical student context, where courses tend to be a bit larger than the accustomed cap of 25 to 30. Therefore, this particular weakness lacks relevance to the realm of graduate evaluation education as opposed to how it might be in other disciplines.

While problem-based learning has been illustrated as being present in multiple disciplines as indicated above, a similar albeit different teaching approach that is also present in multiple graduate academic disciplines and through the teaching methodology literature is case-based learning. There are great similarities between the strengths and weaknesses of case-based learning and problem-based learning. Interestingly enough, the two teaching methods are often confused. A critical difference between the two methods is that in problem-based learning, the problems being employed are designed for the given purpose of being utilized as a part of that curriculum to facilitate students achieving the learning objectives. Whereas case-based learning leverages cases which come from actual occurrences or events (McCabe et al., 2009; Hilvano et al., 2014; Cifuentes et al., 2010).

Case-based learning builds on leveraging the graduate student's knowledge base and practical skills by employing them in the service of walking through the given scenario or case

using critical thinking skills and analytical faculties. The case-based learning method is rife for "what-if" scenario analyses and for engaging in reflective practice. It is the realness or authenticity of the cases that facilitate opportunities to apply knowledge in practical scenarios. Case-based learning is applicable and useful in many disciplines including social work, psychology, business, and engineering (Anderson, 2019). One of the strengths of the teaching method is its ability to easily cross multidisciplinary boundaries (Anderson, 2019).

According to Anderson (2019), the case-based learning method has been found to give graduate students learning within its frame, and opportunities to put knowledge into play that few others teaching modalities to allow. The critical lens that graduate student learners don to engage in the process of analyzing the cases fosters critical thinking and aids in forming the desired connections between theoretical knowledge and practical applications/skills. As another means of enhancing the learning process in case-based curriculums, the ideal cases are authentic and relatable to the context of the class (Anderson, 2019; McCabe et al., 2009).

Most of the cases employed in case-based learning curriculums are actual cases. These cases may be redacted or modified slightly for a variety of reasons, but ultimately, they maintain their authentic form. Since substantive case development is not required in case-based learning curriculums (there is a notable omission of the many steps in proofing the cases as compared to those articulated by Strand et al. (2014) as part of the problem-based learning curriculum development), the curricular planning stage is much shorter than in other methods such as problem-based learning. The shorter length of the overall curricular development stage coupled with the iterative nature of revisions to cases being unnecessary (as compared to problem-based learning), the overall implementation process of case-based learning tends to be quite cost-effective. This makes the curricular model more accessible to graduate programs seeking to

employ a curricular bridge between theory and practice but does not have the funds for many of the potential curricular options. The cost-effectiveness of case-based learning and its comprehensive nature also lends to the sustainability of the curriculum (McCabe et al., 2009).

There are many benefits to the graduate student learner in partaking in case-based learning. The graduate student learner has the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills to existing, real cases and learn from classmates and professors as to how they would approach elements of the case. Graduate student learners can engage in this theoretical and practical application of knowledge and skills without concern or fear of making mistakes as it is not a real situational application with consequences. Case-based learning can be implemented as part of in-person curriculums as well as effectively through online instructional means, a particularly useful curricular attribute in the age of COVID (Luo et al., 2018). While the case-based learning method provides graduate student learners with an authentic, analytical forum for advancing their knowledge and skills, participation in such a forum may present difficulties for some graduate student learners.

Few drawbacks with case-based learning have been identified. However, graduate students who lack experience with working in case-based learning curriculums may require additional assistance from the professor to more effectively adopt the orientation necessary to engage in the curriculum in a more utilitarian fashion (Anderson, 2019). In such scenarios the professor needs to orient the students to the necessary lens to actively and productively engage in this type of curriculum. Further engaging students in the case-based learning method, really facilitating active analysis of the case that links the theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the intended manner can be a weakness of this method as well. Facilitating this optimal engagement poses challenges for professors in such courses. Despite this methodological

weakness techniques have been developed for professors to use to address this very issue, an issue for students that is very much part of the overall learning process (Anderson, 2019).

As with problem-based learning, case-based learning is a student-centered teaching method that requires adaption by those who are more accustomed to a teacher lead classroom curriculums. The student-centered approach required by case-based learning also requires the professor to be able to allow the process to happen but to know when to intervene. This can be difficult to navigate for some professors and thus, these professors may benefit from orientation and/or training in the case-based learning method (Anderson, 2019; McCabe et al., 2009; Strand et al., 2014). Beyond these noted limitations of case-based learning, very little exists within the academic literature to suggest additional weaknesses of this teaching method.

Role-playing, like case-based learning, is another method that provides an interactive way of engaging with course materials for the graduate student learner. Role-playing is a creative teaching method that allows graduate students in multiple disciplines a way to apply theoretical knowledge and practical skills in a safe and controlled setting (Riera et al., 2010). Students can learn to navigate interpersonal nuances and connect with materials and subjects on an emotional level (Zaidi et al., 2019). Role playing has a lot of strengths and relatively few noted weaknesses. Role playing has been utilized in medical fields and social science fields successfully.

Role playing provides a safe space where graduate student learners can marry their theoretical knowledge with their practical knowledge/skills to enhance generalized confidence in theory and its relationship to skills as well as reduce anxiety associated with the various experiences they have during role-playing (Riera et al., 2010; Alkin & Christie, 2002). The students are then able to extrapolate from the role-playing situations to other situations and contexts. Graduate student learners learn to take theory and apply it in scenarios where the

manner of its application is less than evident (Alkin & Christie, 2002). Role-playing aids in positive habit building and helps graduate student learners improve interpersonal communication. An added benefit is that participants learn to sympathize with others better through their relevant role-playing experiences (Riera et al., 2010).

Role-playing is very useful in teaching graduate student learners about theory and practice, whether they be separate, or the two components linked together as part of the role-play. Role-playing allows graduate student learners to be active learning participants and hone in on critical concepts and skills that they might otherwise engage in as part of on-the-job learning or via practicums where the stakes are much higher. Graduate students engaging in this teaching method are able to learn to negotiate situations and contexts better in-vivo through the in-vitro practice of role-playing (Alkin & Christie, 2002). Role-playing enables the development and practice of problem-solving skills as well (Alkin & Christie, 2002; Newcomer et al., 2015).

Another added benefit noted by Alkin and Christie (2002), is that utilizing role-playing in teaching theory to practice provides a rich learning experience while saving considerable time and money. This is because other modes of learning these skills can be employed, such as actually engaging in an evaluation in the case of Alkin and Christie (2002). However, less resources are required to facilitate role-playing curricula as opposed to facilitating real life applications of the theory and skills. As with the other methods for teaching theory to practice mentioned earlier, there is a low cost for implementing this type of curriculum. Additionally, one can hone their skills through role-playing without having real world consequences.

While role-playing removes the possibility of real consequences due to its safe space, it can prove to be a bit of a weakness if the teaching modality when graduate students do not engage in the activity in optimal ways. The professor must be able to adapt and negotiate such

scenarios so that they can still be leveraged for learning acquisition (Alkin & Christie, 2002; Newcomer et al., 2015). While adaption during utilization is important, another area of difficulty comes with how to integrate role-playing within a theory to practice course. For Alkin and Christie (2002), they prescribe a format for building their entire course around the use of role-playing. Many other courses will include role-playing activities as an enhancement to the existing curriculum. While neither of these course formats is a weakness, for some, ascertaining the balance of using role-playing as a useful tool within their course can be tricky. Overall though, this student-centered teaching method does not have many weaknesses in its application.

Teaching methods may not have many weaknesses in appearance. However, without reflection on the use of the method, it would be difficult to identify weaknesses beyond those that are glaringly apparent in the execution of the method. Thus, reflection is another teaching method employed in graduate theory to practice curriculums. According to Parsons (2009), "Reflection in practice is the process of comparing what is to what was hoped for or expected" (p. 30). In parsing this comparison, one can identify the areas which require remediation. However, reflective activities encompass much more than what Parsons (2009), noted.

Reflective teaching requires the graduate student learner to partake in introspection, interrogating their (the individual student's) own beliefs as well as analyzing their own engagement with course materials in a manner intended to build self-awareness. As many disciplines hold that being reflective is critical to enhancing the practitioner's work throughout their career, reflective teaching often aims to lay the foundation for reflective practice use throughout one's career (van Draanen, 2017).

According to Jewiss and Clark-Keefe (2007), "Involving students in critical self-reflection is important for any kind of inquiry" (p. 335). Whether employing theory or engaging

in the practice, it is critical for future practitioners (regardless of discipline) to recognize the subjectivity that they, as the graduate student learner and future practitioners, bring to the table. It is important for the graduate student learner to recognize the intersection and relationship of all the pieces at play (Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007).

Teaching through reflective methods brings heightened awareness of self for the graduate student learner as they progress through course materials and dance with theory and practice. By engaging in reflective methods, the graduate student learners are better able to enact sense-making of how they relate to course content, how their own perspectives and beliefs colored their interpretation of course content, and how they employed theory and practice in relation to being the tool of implementation (Chouinard et al., 2017). This introspection of oneself as instrument and in how the pieces of the puzzle are being parsed by the graduate student learner should lend itself to validity from an interpersonal standpoint (Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007).

Employing reflective teaching methods in theory to practice graduate course contexts has many benefits as enumerated above. Additionally, the method facilitates making more explicit connections between theory and practice (Chouinard et al., 2017; Jarvis, 1999). While there are many strengths of using reflective teaching, there are some areas which require redress associated with reflective teaching methods. Recognizing the role of subjectivity in one's application of theory to practice proves to be of great utility and can certainly lend credibility to the work of said individual (Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007). However, when ones' subjectivity is merely recognized but not challenged, a disservice is done to that graduate student learner as they do not have the opportunity in this case to comprehend alternative perspectives and understanding of the content which is being reflected upon.

Another potential weakness of implementing reflective teaching methods to facilitate connecting theory to practice in graduate university settings is the potential for vicarious triggering or trauma (Strand & Popescu, 2018). Reflective teaching methods allows introspection and facilitate connections when employed effectively. However, it is important to identify safeguards and resources for graduate student learners who may be triggered as part of the reflective process. Openly addressing this possibility within the course is a prudent measure to raise awareness of triggers and vicarious trauma for students and provide additional means for the students to identify such occurrences as they engage in their reflective work.

Reflection is one of numerous methods that can be used in graduate evaluation courses to facilitate achieving the stated learning goals. Many of these methods have been utilized effectively in practice-oriented professionalized disciplines for substantial lengths of time. Some of these methods have been employed effectively already within the confines of graduate evaluation education. However, ensuring that graduate evaluation students are truly competent in their understanding of theory to practice poses some difficulties.

Bridging the Gap in Graduate Evaluation Education

Teaching theory to practice in graduate university settings has notoriously been tricky. To better facilitate connecting theory and its application in practice, a variety of different teaching methods/approaches have been employed. Five of those approaches were discussed in this paper because of their prevalence of use in the classrooms of disciplines where theory is so heavily intertwined with practice as well as because of the methods' presence in the academic literature discourse. It should be acknowledged that there are considerably more than these noted methods which included lectures, problem-based learning, case-based learning, role playing, and reflection. The key strengths and weaknesses of the five modes of learning were reviewed with

each presenting far more strengths than weaknesses, save lecturing. Lecturing has utility in teaching about theory to practice. However, based on the review of each of the methods in this paper, those that are active learning methods (problem-based learning, case-based learning, role playing, and reflection), have more strengths associated with their use and aiding the graduate student learner in bridging the gap between theory and practice better. Research has shown that active learning methods do facilitate meeting the course objectives (Boyce & McGowan, 2019). Continued exploration and academic discourse on methods of teaching theory to practice in undoubtably warranted and would provide graduate student learners great educational benefits.

Summary

It is difficult to get at the etiology of understanding the gap between theory to practice in evaluation when there are so many definitions of evaluation itself along with what constitutes an evaluation theory. Despite crafting an operational definition for both evaluation and evaluation theory for the research at hand, this challenge remains. Even the differing illustrative evaluation trees are a point of contention as opposed to alignment for evaluation theory. The paradigms prove pivotal in that the differences between them illustrate the differences in perspective with which evaluation theory to practice is viewed. While diversity of thought is often viewed as a point of strength, here it adds to the confusion in conceptualizing theory to practice.

With such a substantial diversity of thought in evaluation's theoretical underpinnings, the tension present in education is not surprising. The findings that most programs and courses focus on practical considerations for evaluation are also not surprising (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010). Redress has begun via the utilization of different teaching methods and strategies. However, remediation and mitigation of this educational tension is not easily attained and requires understanding the etiology of the gap in learning theory to practice.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the logic behind the methodology and methods utilized for this study. The chapter breaks down the research methodology by explaining the purpose and associated objectives of the research, providing the underpinning for the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the research, and a logical basis for the methodology being employed. In addition to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, this chapter also explains my positionality as a researcher. The methodology employed is broken down into the data collection methods and associated implementation timeline, the sample utilized for the research, the data analysis performed, and data quality.

Research Purpose and Objectives

This research sought to understand the manifestation of theory to practice from academic training to evaluation practice in the lives of working evaluators. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How and in what ways do evaluators conceptualize theory in evaluation?
    - How do practicing evaluators define "evaluation theory"?
        i. What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and in academic-based settings define "evaluation theory"?
2. How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in evaluation?
    - How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in theory to practice?

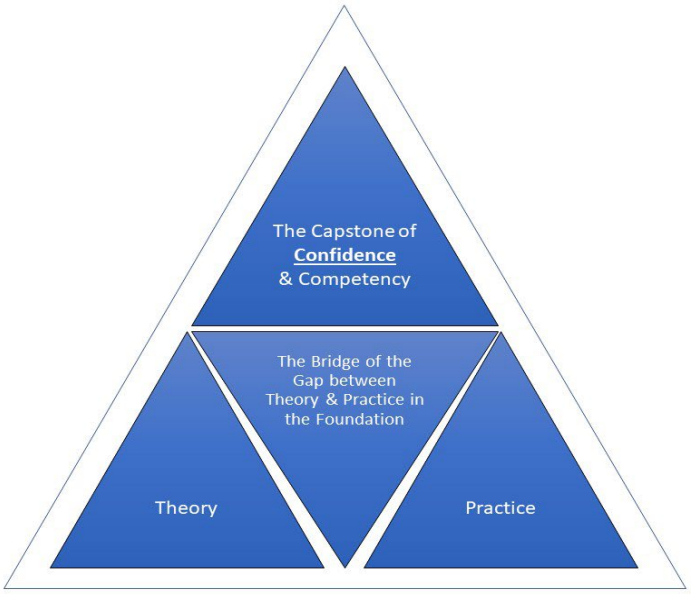
- Which elements of their training best prepared evaluators to engage in theory to practice in evaluation?
- What are the implications of practicing evaluators' experiences in teaching theory to practice in formal graduate education?

3. How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice?
    - How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?
        i. What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and academic-based settings characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework which drove my research characterizes the competent evaluator as having a solid foundation upon which their professional self is based (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Conceptual framework



The Conceptual Framework depicts evaluation theory and evaluation practice as being the cornerstones and thus, pivotal to a solid evaluation foundation for the competent evaluation practitioner. The gap between theory and practice (understanding the etiology of which was the underpinning of this research endeavor), is depicted by a triangle that remains slightly detached from the extremely important cornerstones in order to accentuate its representation of "the gap". Pending filling this gap between theory and practice, we have the capstone which represents the competent evaluator. In alignment with the AEA Competencies (2018A) and numerous prominent evaluators, theory to practice is a critical ingredient in the recipe for the competent evaluator (Schwandt, 2014; Shadish et al., 1991; Shadish, 1998; & Scriven, 1998).

Triangles are used to illustrate the relationships between the components along with encompassing each component in one large triangle as triangles are typically seen as one of the strongest geometric support structures in architecture (*Triangles Are the Strongest Shape | Thinking about Geometry | Underground Mathematics*, 2016).

The Conceptual Framework provides the bulk of the conceptualization for this research. A theoretical framework was not devised for the work because the methodology that was employed largely adheres to Grounded Theory and this methodology dictates that the research begin with as little pre-conceptualization as possible in order to maintain the researcher's openness. The inclusion of a Conceptual Framework is a departure from true Grounded Theory as conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Research Methodology

Overall, this study employed a generic qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) with heavy reliance on grounded theory concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldana, 2021; Charmaz, 2014) in order to develop methods and analysis strategies. This methodology was

selected because this area of evaluation research has very little research associated with it. To get at the etiology of the issue, craft a theory for/of understanding, and ascertain the optimal way to explore "the gap" further, qualitative interviews were employed. Qualitative interviews provided a means of understanding the problem to a greater extent via exploration through the lenses of those who interact with the issues at hand on a regular basis.

Qualitative interviews were selected as the tool for exploration for multiple reasons. Qualitative methods provide an "open and flexible" means for exploring the nature of the issues at hand (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p.4). Qualitative methods, namely one-to-one interviewing, were selected because this method provides the strongest avenue for meaning building as it relates to the subject of inquiry. Additionally, this approach provided a way to cultivate key concepts and thus, variables to facilitate further exploration of the subject matter (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The cultivation of variables for future exploration is of particular utility since the subject matter being explored here cannot yet be quantified within this respective context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Taking an inductive, interpretive approach to this work fostered more generalized conclusions in relation to study findings (Schwandt, 2001 & Saldana, 2015). This inductive lens also lent itself to the methodology that was employed for this research. Since little is known about this topic at present, theory intended to foster an understanding of the topic was developed based on the data collected in conjunction with the guiding research questions. Theory generation to conceptualize the study findings stem from the data collected in search of understanding the phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The methodology selected not only aided in collecting data that was rich and appropriate to understanding more about theory to practice in evaluation, but it also provided a strong mechanism to frame and interpret the data.

An exploratory research design was employed for this work. Since the etiology of theory to practice in evaluation was largely unknown, the research design was structured so that it catered to open exploration of the phenomenon. The determination of definitive, conclusive answers to the research questions driving the exploration of the phenomenon was not the intent of this work. Rather, greater knowledge about the fundamental underpinnings of the phenomenon along with the development of an underpinning theory were the intent of this dissertation research.

The qualitative design of this study lent itself the best to the exploration of the guiding research questions while keeping in mind the ultimate intent of understanding more about the fundamental underpinnings of theory to practice in evaluation and crafting a theory relating to the phenomenon. Since little literature/research was available on understanding theory to practice in evaluation, the utilization of qualitative methodology provided the greatest amount of flexibility to explore the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 4). Additionally, since little is known about the etiology of theory to practice in an evaluative context, quantifying the phenomenon proved inappropriate. Thus, qualitative methods were selected to explore this phenomenon in order to better uncover the qualities and nuances of said phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The qualitative methodology selected, namely, the one-to-one interview, was chosen because it allowed me to probe the phenomenon in a flexible manner but while being guided by key probative questions to facilitate addressing multiple factors related to theory to practice. One-to-one interviews provided a forum for exploration that was adaptive and flexible as well as without the influence of anything beyond me and the respondent within the confines of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Areas probed within the interviews included evaluator

identity (academic or industry), the perception/conception of evaluation theory, and the use of evaluation theory in practice. Additionally, the education experiences relating to theory to practice in evaluation were explored.

Research Design

Utilization of qualitative interviewing for this inquiry provided a robust means to target the guiding research questions as well as understand the phenomena in greater detail. First, I outline the population and sample for the study, then I discuss the two sources of research data (survey and interviews) along with the data collection process and management. Finally, I share my process for analyzing the data.

`Population and Sample Selection

The general population for this research endeavor was individuals who identify as practicing evaluators. In order to garner the most comprehensive data possible particularly in association with the evaluation education element, the target population identified was individuals who identify as practicing evaluators and have attained graduate level educational degrees (either a master's degree or a doctoral degree) or were currently working towards a graduate level degree. In order to ensure that respondents met the criteria for study inclusion, a brief screening survey was employed. On this survey, respondents indicated whether they identified as practicing evaluators and their educational level. If the respondent was not excluded based on those two items, then they were presented with some additional brief demographic questions and then given the calendaring application link to sign-up for an interview slot that worked best for them.

The study sample was obtained by utilizing convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling. The initial convenience sample was drawn from the professional networks of myself

and the advisors of this work. The snowball sample was cultivated by the initial respondents who reached out to their respective networks informing them about this research and providing contact information for me. The sampling methods yielded 10 participants from convenience sampling and three via snowball sampling. Data collection was terminated after the 13th interview's analysis as saturation was believed to have been reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Sources of Data

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol that was created for the expressed purpose of this research. I also employed a brief anonymous screener survey to pre-screen respondents for inclusion eligibility in the research.

The Screener Survey Instrument

The screener survey consisted of one item which screened for inclusion and then 7 items collecting demographic information from eligible participants only. Additionally, the screener survey described the study and a copy of the UNC Greensboro Institutional Review Board approved consent form. The demographic items on the screener survey were utilized in previous research by Boyce et al. (in press) and Reid et al. (2020). As part of their research, they utilized cognitive interviews as part of the survey validation process. Great care was taken in creating a culturally responsive/sensitive demographic section for that survey. Each of the demographic items on the screener survey was taken from the demographic section of the survey employed by Boyce et al. (2017) and Reid et al. (2020). The screener survey was hosted via the Qualtrics online survey software suite platform. A copy of the screener survey is available in the appendix of this dissertation.

The Interview Protocol

This 10-item interview protocol was developed for the expressed purposes of this dissertation research. The protocol was structured to align with the semi-structured nature of the interviewing style employed. The protocol reflects a conversational style that was the hallmark of the semi-structured interviewing approach employed by me to gather rich qualitative information from respondents.

While the manner of the manifestation of theory to practice was unknown, the existing body of literature provided some assistance in the development of the questions included on the protocol. The guiding research questions devised for this research were the primary foundational source used to aid in crafting each of the items on the interview protocol. This was due to the framing of the research questions being related to the gaps within the established body of evaluative literature. Nine of the 10 questions on the semi-structured interview protocol relate directly back to the research questions. However, the 10th item included on the protocol was included to provide the respondent with the opportunity to share any unstructured feedback/thoughts with me before the conclusion of the interview.

Multiple iterations of the semi-structured open-ended interview protocol were devised before the final form was achieved. Feedback on each successive iteration was received from dissertation committee members (expert panel review) for this dissertation research to create a strong instrument that would aid in capturing data that would speak to the guiding research questions. The final form of the interview protocol was designed with each of the items corresponding to specific research questions. Items that address Research Question 1 include protocol items 2,3, 7, and 1. Item 6 addresses Research Question 2 and items 4, 5, and 6 address Research Question 3. Lastly, item 8 addresses Research Question 4. While the protocol was

designed with specific items loading to different research questions, I found that there was some overlap in the content of the responses to different items and how they informed the answer to each respective research question. A copy of the full protocol is located in Appendix A.

Reflective and Analytical Memos

During the data collection and analysis process, I also engaged in writing reflective and analytical memos. These were created by me as part of the data collection process and during the analysis process. I created reflective memos after each interview. In these memos I reflected on how I believed the interview went, how I could improve future interviews, key topics, and my thoughts in general about the interview. The analytical memos were created during the coding process and reflected patterns seen and other thoughts directly related to analyzing and sense-making of the data corpus.

Data Collection Process and Management

Data collection was performed in a single phase leveraging the two sampling methods (convenience and snowball). Participants were presented with the informed consent as the first item of the screener survey and provided with the file that they could download from the survey electronically. Participants who continued on to be interviewed were then asked if they read the informed consent, asked if they had any questions/concerns about the consent, read off a truncated version of the consent which emphasized the participant's rights to cease recording and/or the interview at any time, asked again if they had any questions or concerns, and then asked verbally if they consented to participate. I obtained a waiver for the study's informed consent which meant that IRB did not require participants to provide a signature on the informed consent form.

I conducted semi-structured interviews utilizing a 10-item protocol. The respondents dictated the general flow of the interviews to ensure high quality data was collected. As part of the interviews, member checking was employed in vivo to ensure that the meaning participants intended to convey was received in the desired manner. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 60 minutes and were audio recorded as well as transcribed. Follow-up procedures were established informally with respondents if additional information needed to be collected from them.

The audio data from the interviews was transcribed using Otter.ai and Rev.com. Both transcription services ensure confidentiality of the data. The transcripts were anonymized as was the screening survey data collected. Thus, no identifying information was stored with either data source. Data was assigned a participant number for organizational purposes and the participant numbers are stored in an encrypted, password protected Excel file saved within an encrypted and password protected electronic folder to which only I, as the researcher, have access.

I used ATLAS.ti 22 to analyze the data, which allowed for the project file to be password protected. That data is stored and was analyzed on a biometrically secured, encrypted, and GPS-tracked computer. The data was backed up via UNC Greensboro's Box drive subscription in my personal drive which is only accessible via double factor authentication. Additionally, the Box folder where the project files are backed up is password protected. No data has been kept in physical/hard copy. The data will continue to be maintained securely electronically for 10 years after the research completion. Upon reaching the end of the 10-year time frame, the data will be digitally shredded using TrendMicro's Secure Shred program or a comparable secure shredding/erasing program.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data was collected from two sources: the screener survey and interviews. The screener survey captured demographic data from respondents in addition to determining if they were eligible for participation in the study. The demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics only, namely, frequencies using SPSS 26. The interviews were coded using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program ATLAS.ti 22. I incorporated my reflective and analytical memos into the ATLAS.ti 22 project file as well. However, the reflective memos were not employed in the analysis process as they largely ended up focusing on how I performed as interviewer and where I could improve in future interviews. The analytical memos were used to help synthesize understanding of the data but were not leveraged as a data source.

ATLAS.ti 22 is well suited to perform qualitative analyses. Each transcript was set-up to be a primary document within the software program and coded twice utilizing Saldana's (2021) two cycle grounded theory coding methods. First cycle coding leveraged initial or open coding techniques while the second cycle coding employed focus coding techniques (Saldana, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011). After two cycle coding was completed, the data was then themed in a way that best answered my research questions in order to facilitate presentation within the findings chapter of my dissertation.

Methodological Limitations

While the study yielded findings that greatly contribute to the literature, I have identified several limitations that impacted the study in both its methodology and findings. An anonymous screener survey was used to determine eligibility for participation in the interviews as well as to collect demographic information from potential respondents. However, the use of an anonymous

survey resulted in the inability to generalize about the interview population as it is unclear whether the respondents who were interviewed were the same ones that responded to the survey. This concern was raised because of the possibility that one of the survey respondents ultimately did not participate in the interviews and that there are 12 survey responses and 13 interview participants. Due to participation in the research being entirely voluntary, potential respondents were not required to complete the screener survey as part of the data collection process.

The qualitative method employed leveraged grounded theory methods for sense-making of the data collected through the one-to-one interviews. Grounded theory is a powerful means of engaging with phenomena when little is known about said phenomena. However, grounded theory relies on the judgment of the researcher and their associated interpretation of the data surrounding the phenomena. Misinterpretation or superimposing interpretations on data is a very real limitation and concern of the methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, it was important that I, as the researcher, was cognizant of this concern and engage in research tactics/techniques intended to enhance data trustworthiness to combat this. Methods often utilized in grounded theory research to enhance the robustness of the data along with the trustworthiness of said data were employed in this qualitative inquiry. However, if the study were conducted again, the interview protocol would be augmented leveraging the experience with it from this study as well as via cognitive interviewing techniques with participants to understand more about how they are interpreting the questions as presented to them. While this inquiry is not a true grounded theory study, it heavily leans and borrows on strategies used in service of grounded theory research.

Trustworthiness

Data quality and trustworthiness for the research data were established using several methods. Specifically, methods associated with enhancing the data quality and associated rigor of grounded theory studies were leveraged. These methods include allowing the interview participant to predominantly guide the interview trajectory as well as being very explicit and purposeful in criteria for inclusion in the research study. Additionally, having a diversity of perspectives represented in the sample adds to the data quality (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The research was conducted with great sensitivity to the stories that each participant relayed in their interview. Understanding and enhanced sensitivity was achieved through in-vivo member checking and paraphrasing during the interviews with each participant. Additionally, to capture researcher influence/bias, reflective journaling was performed after each interview along with reflective memo writing was performed during the analysis process. A thick description was employed in writing and relaying the findings of the qualitative data analysis. Analytical memo writing was employed throughout the analysis process as well and utilized in the synthesis of the theory developed as a result of the data.

It is also crucial to note that since the researcher (myself) is so tightly linked with the data and its associated interpretation, that the theory generated is merely cursory in nature. The conclusions made based on the body of data that was collected are merely foundational in nature and provide the basis for guiding future inquiries into this subject matter (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Summary

A qualitative approach that borrowed heavily from grounded theory methodology was employed. I engaged thirteen practicing evaluators who represent a diversity of experience in the

field and identified either as academic or industry-based in one-to-one interviews guided by four foundational research questions. Using the CAQDAS ATLAS.ti 22, I developed thick descriptions of the data analyzed and engaged in critical activities ensuring data quality. The two-cycle coding method implemented for analyzing the data yielded cursory answers to the guiding research questions and facilitated the generation of a theory to aid in future exploration of the subject (Saldana, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These findings are enumerated and expanded upon in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The following section presents the findings of this inquiry by research question. First, demographic information about the study participants is presented. Second, the guiding research questions are presented along with the associated qualitative evidence. The qualitative evidence is presented by being grouped into categories and themes with associated quotes to provide grounding in the lived experiences and perspectives of participants.

Participant Demographics – Screener Survey Findings

I provided participants with a link to an anonymous screener survey as part of the recruitment process. Twelve study invitees completed the screener survey. In addition to verifying eligibility, the anonymous screener survey collected demographic information about the respondents. All 12 respondents indicated that they currently or have previously worked as an evaluator, thus meeting the study's primary inclusion criteria. Please note, study eligibility was verified for each participant at the beginning of the interview as well due to the anonymous nature of the screener survey.

One male and 10 female identifying respondents completed the screener survey. One respondent opted to omit their gender identity. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 59 with the majority (58.3%) indicating that they were 39 years old or younger. Respondents were given 7 categories from which to select the race/ethnicities with which they identify and an 8th category where they could write how they identify. Two respondents indicated that they identified as Black/African-American/Caribbean and Latinx/Hispanic. Eight identified as White/Eastern European and 2 identified as being Black/African-American/Caribbean. Education-wise, one participant's highest education was a bachelor's degree, one had obtained a master's degree, and 10 obtained doctorate degrees.

Respondents were asked to indicate what their primary sector of employment was and 8 indicated Academia/Higher Education, two said K – 12, 1 indicated Non-profit/Philanthropic/not-for-profit, and one selected Other. In specifying the sector captured under other, respondents indicated that they are an independent consultant. The respondents engaged in evaluation of the numerous sectors including Academia/Higher Education (n=9), for profit (n=1), Government (n=7), K-12 (n=8), and Non-profit/Philanthropic, Not-for-profit (n=7). In responding to how many years of experience the respondents had as evaluators, the responses ranged from 1 year to 18 years. See table 3 for a summary of these findings.

Table 3. Screener Survey Respondent Experience

Sector of Employ	n	Minimum Experience	Maximum Experience	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academia/ Higher Education	8	6	18	12.88	3.8336 years
K – 12	2	1	17	9	11.3137
Non Profit/ Philanthropic/ Not-for-profit	1	15	15	15	-
Other	1	10	10	10	-

Research Question 1

The first research question guiding my inquiry was as follows:

1. How and in what ways do evaluators conceptualize theory in evaluation?
    - How do practicing evaluators define “evaluation theory”?
        i. What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and in academic-based settings define “evaluation theory"?

Evaluation Theory Defined

As part of the interview, participants were asked to provide their own definitions for evaluation theory. Using definitions and conceptualizations provided by the participants, I developed an overarching definition of evaluation theory: Evaluation theory is a mechanism by which to approach, frame, justify, or develop a roadmap for engaging in evaluative practice. In the following sections, I explain the different components of this definition in further detail and compare responses from industry-based and academic-based evaluators.

Theory as Approach

Most interviewees utilized the terms "theory" and "approach" interchangeably and in defining "evaluation theory" itself, used the term "approach" as part of their definitions/conceptualizations.

The following quote illustrates the likeness of theory to approach in evaluation: "Approaches and frameworks, I think we use those terms synonymously with theories, right? So, like I said, small, theories of, culturally responsive evaluation is an approach or a theoretical approach or a theoretical framework to evaluation." An example of bucketing theory and approach together comes in the form of this quote: "the theories and approaches of the past, the present as well as set up a structure so that we can have maybe have better theories…". Here, a respondent likens theory with approach quite directly: "When I think of evaluation theory, what comes to mind immediately is approaches to evaluation."

Theory & The Evaluation Tree

When discussing theory in evaluation, many of the respondents immediately conjured the iconic image of the evaluation tree (Alkin, 2004; Alkin, 2013). A participant said that "what comes to my mind, of course, is like the classic Alkin Tree or Alkin and Christie tree with the

three branches." One participant articulated the symbolism that the tree has for them: "I mean, the first thing that comes to mind is the tree, but I'll be completely honest. When I think of the tree, I really don't think of all the names in the tree. I think more of the community of practice and building upon that." A common theme was that the respondents were taught about the evaluation tree, as evidenced by this respondent's statement, "When I think of evaluation theory, so a whole lot of stuff bubbles up for me. So, starting with what I was taught, what I read in Marv Alkin's Evaluation Roots, right?"

Industry-based vs Academic-based definitions of Evaluation Theory

Recall the definitions of industry and academic-based evaluators as articulated in Table 1 of this dissertation. Industry-based evaluators are evaluators situated in any context outside of higher education and do not identify with being academic-based whereas academic-based evaluators are those situated in higher education and identifying with the higher education context. When conceptualizing theory, there were great similarities in how industry-based vs academically situated evaluators saw each other (and themselves) leveraging/defining evaluation theory. In general, both sectors represented in the sample believed that industry-based evaluators did not utilize or leverage theory in the same way as academic-based evaluators. In essence, there was little to no difference between industry and academic-based evaluators and how they conceptualized and subsequently defined evaluation theory based on the data collected for this study. As indicated by the following quotes, the conceptualizations were very similar in nature. One academic-based evaluator said, "I also think a lot about academia because I think a lot of practitioners don't engage with evaluation theory in the way that academics do."

Another respondent, an academic-based evaluator also, described the perceived difference in the utilization of theory in practice as being related to exposure:

> I think industry is probably more technician focused, but also, I think there's an interesting flavor of practical theory, right? I'm going to come in with what I know, whatever it is from whatever training I had, whether it's public health or a specific degree in evaluation. I'm going to go into industry, and I'm going to use those, and maybe the flavor of whatever organization I'm going into, whether it's an EEI-focused firm or whatever, and I'm going to kind of adhere to those values in practice, where I think with academia, I think the distinction is we're exposed to all of the things. We have that toolkit of continuous professional practice development based on all the new stuff that's coming, right?

It was apparent for this sample of industry and academic-based evaluators, that they tried to leverage evaluation theory in their practice. This participant expressed their feelings along this line by saying,

> I say now because I think initially, I was given the impression that something different was happening. But as I have gotten to know more evaluators and interacted with more evaluators who work in different contexts, or identify as being situated in different contexts, what I am experiencing is many of them are drawing upon, I guess evaluation theory to frame their work. That's not to say all, but many that I've interacted with are doing that.

In summarizing the importance accorded to theory in practice by practitioners in both industry and academia, there appears to be no difference, and that both groups as represented by the sample interviewed feel that evaluation theory is important.

Functions and Elements of Evaluation Theory

The demarcation between evaluation theory and traditional notions of theory is illustrated by the responses received to probing how the participants of this study define evaluation theory. Numerous functions and elements of evaluation theory were identified through their responses. These functions and elements include Big T and Little t as applied to evaluation theory, evaluation theory as being a roadmap or framework for engaging with evaluation, expounding values, and evaluation theory as being responsive in nature.

Big T & Little t

Big T and Little t are concepts originating in the sociological discipline but have since permeated numerous other disciplines including evaluation. In essence, Big T refers to the larger, accepted theories while Little t refers to those theories which are less accepted (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Big T and Little t's interpretation for the level of theory, i.e., macro theory, mezzo theory, and micro theory, seems to influence how an individual characterizes these concepts. It begs the question that this respondent gets at in their response: "And it does go back to like, 'What do we mean by theory though?' because if we start to think about theory as approaches, I think that's true. But if we start to think about theory as capital T, here's what we know based on a bunch of evidence over time, we miss that." Another respondent captured this questioning of how we define theory along with the diversity of theory that has become evaluation theory by saying:

> I also think about theory-driven evaluation, right? And how there is a whole branch of evaluation approaches that are focused specifically on theory, but again, what do we mean by theory? There is kind of what I would maybe call small T theory instead of capital T theory. Then, I digress into what kinds of actual theories, like academic theories, do we pull from as evaluators? I wanted to kind of do my homework on this, but

> I didn't, so I'm just going to spitball social science theories, psychological theories, systems theory. All of these kind of broader level, not necessarily an evaluation theories, come to mind. Oh, and learning theories. Some of these are things that I think that evaluators should have in their toolkit.

Theory as a Roadmap

Some respondents characterized evaluation theory as a Roadmap or guide as to how to engage in evaluation practice. The roadmap was characterized as providing a guide to interactions and decision making as well as a framework or structure for conceptualizing the evaluation. Additionally, it was seen as a means for providing justifications in the evaluation process. One respondent said,

> I think my theory is kind of the framework that we use or the roadmap that we use to structure whatever that we are doing. It gives us if I'm putting forth an argument and put it in a theory form, that theory helps me to identify the different components of what I should be looking at. So, in that way I'm just using it as a framework to understand or to do some work.

Another person said, "Yes, evaluation theory. As I said before, I use it as a framework or as a roadmap for whatever work that I'm doing." In explaining how they guide their interactions, one respondent said, "So these are frameworks that guide the questions we ask that guide how we interact with stakeholders, that guide that guide, the ways in which we do our data collection and analysis." Finally, characterizing theory as providing justifications, one respondent explained; "When I think about theory, I think about the justification for why evaluators do certain things. And I think of the categorization or classification of the different reasons or justifications for why we do our work or how we should do our work."

Theory as Values

Several respondents spoke about the relationship between evaluation theory and values. One respondent expounded, “How can we make our approaches, our evaluation approaches, or little-T theories more accessible, more practical, and not have so many different things going on all at once, when really what we're talking about is values. Values in practice means you have to have tools, methods, and strategies.” That same respondent further explained that,

> When I think about the little-T theory of approaches, I think about the need for us to really get clarity on what counts as just us reporting values. Then, what tools go along with those values, tools, strategies, mindsets, ways of being, whatever, go along with those values, and I don't think we're doing that. I think there's a conversation happening over here.

Another respondent said in relation to theory and values, “So I think when I think of like prescriptive versus descriptive, I think of like value, so how they, they talk about how people should be doing something…”

Theory as Responsive

In defining and subsequently describing evaluation theory, a couple of participants who responded discussing theory as being responsive felt that theory must be flexible; it must be responsive and thus, evolve as practice and knowledge evolves. One respondent articulated:

> Evaluation is one of those fields where it's not, we found the right one and this is the end, all be all. It is not like the Pythagorean theorem where it's like, this is the rule, it's finite, it is clear. There are some staple theories that we can base off of, but they are always going to be responsive to people and the context and culture that we're in, and it's dynamic. And

> so with evaluation theory, it has to be dynamic. It has to be changing. It's based on living organisms…

Another respondent espoused,

> I think there are differences. But guidelines would be more stringent like you how you move from point A to point B, or this is what you have to do, which is kind of can be fixed. This is how you do it. But the theory is flexible, just as I said, initially, like when I heard this professor saying, or what you're saying does not fit the theory. And I was like saying, why don't you revise the theory to fit what I'm saying. So if you can, you can expand the theory, you can test that maybe the assumptions of that theory and see whether they still applicable or not, but with guidelines, this is how we do it.

One of the participants brought up the idea of temporal validity to evaluation theory. In essence, that evaluation theory must be responsive and change over time to maintain its relevance and thus, be applicable to the current frame of time. In discussing temporal validity, some of what that participant said included, "the studies that we did in the 60s probably don't work very well anymore. And whether it's because people did crap research back then or because people have changed, I don't know. I worry about the idea of Temporal Validity as a big problem. It's a huge problem, especially around education, race, and identity."

Research Question 2

The second guiding research question for my inquiry includes an overarching question and three sub questions. This research question was intended to ascertain the educational experiences of the participation evaluators in relation to practical evaluation methods and evaluation theory and extrapolate this to inform teaching practices based on what was most

effective for the participants along with their suggestions for enhancing graduate evaluation education.

2. How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in evaluation?
    - How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in theory to practice?
    - Which elements of their training best prepared evaluators to engage in theory to practice in evaluation?
    - What are the implications of practicing evaluators' experiences in teaching theory to practice in formal graduate education?

In the interviews, each of the participants reported either having a doctorate (n=10), masters (n=1), certificate (n=1), or currently pursuing a graduate degree (n=1) in evaluation as part of their formal education. Participants' evaluation training was divided into two categories, formal training components and information training components. Formal training is defined as training culminating in an accredited degree or certificate.

Formal Training

Formal evaluation training is defined in this work as any form of evaluation training program participated in at an accredited university/college which culminates in a degree (Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral) or certificate. This research's participants' formal training experiences varied in shape and scope. Participants spoke about their training experiences at a high level as well as the elements that composed their training experiences including coursework, graduate assistantships, and internships. Coursework, graduate assistantships, and internships were three of the most salient categories which arose from the participants'

interviews. Additionally, a theme which arose from the interviews was that having a formal background in social sciences in general (e.g., coursework in psychology, sociology, social work, etc.,) facilitated grasping evaluation theory to practice.

Evaluation Coursework in the Formal Training

When asked about their formal evaluation training, participants enumerated evaluation coursework as they listed the elements of their formal education. One participant said, "You do the coursework, you learn the basics, and then you come, and you practice it." While another participant said that, "coursework that mimics what professional evaluators do in terms of request for a proposal, developing a full evaluation plan, presentations, conversations with stakeholders and specifically PIs" was of great utility to them in their formal training.

Graduate Assistantships in the Formal Training

Participants included graduate assistantships as part of their formal education, often enumerating it as they detailed a list of the components of their formal evaluation education. As one participant said, "…that was a degree in educational psychology with the program evaluation specialization. And that is where I received like a most of my formal training, like lots of evaluation courses, supervised assistantship evaluation experiences. And so a combination of kind of informal as well as formal evaluation training." While another participant explained that they had "…graduate assistantships that were in the evaluation space as well. Also, methods classes, right? I took regular research methods class, and then I took qualitative…".

Another participant explained that they had graduate assistantships which they supplemented with consulting work. "I had my graduate assistantship, but then in the summer, I would try to get either some international consulting work or something locally to do to maintain my consulting business."

Internships in the Formal Training

In talking about their internship experiences, participants often included their internships with other training elements associated with their formal education. One participant simply stated that they "…took numerous internships in evaluation or in applied research while I was there…" Another participant shared:

> I was working in a couple different labs for my informal evaluation work practitioner work. And then after three or four years, I needed an internship and I found my, one of my advisors colleagues out in Atlanta needed a statistics and evaluation consultant and I started working for that person did that for a year or two. And I did a little bit of independent consulting on the side as well.

Social Science Facilitates Understanding of Theory to Practice for Participants

An interesting influence in their education, and particularly in their acquisition as well as understanding of theory to practice in evaluation, is whether one of their previous higher education degrees was in a social science. The greatest attributive effect/attention was paid to psychology and sociology from the social sciences. Participants characterized evaluation as borrowing from or being an amalgamation of other social science disciplines. They felt that having a social science background was very beneficial for evaluation theory to practice.

In characterizing learning in other social sciences and transferring the knowledge to evaluation, one participant had to say:

> Okay, so psych, social, sociology. You've got people that are coming in with public health backgrounds. People are coming from all different walks of life, and I think part of that is really being able to leverage your experience and your way of knowing that came from all of that and to

> evaluate them, right? There's a beauty in people coming from different places. That said, there's a beauty in having a little bit of standardized knowledge around these things too, right?

In noting the interdisciplinary nature of evaluation, another participant noted:

> because it has drawn upon multiple other disciplines, where they use this term theory. I think what we're actually doing are we're using approaches that may be influenced by theories and other fields, right. So, for instance, if you look at culturally responsive evaluation, it is influenced by theories, or draws upon theories, if you look at some of the early writings, from other fields.

Acknowledging the commonalities of the social science theories with evaluation theories, another respondent remarked: “I think personally, I see some common theories, but I don't know that they're widely known. Or someone else would recognize them, per se.”

Speaking in relation to the utility and subsequent benefit of having a social science background, another participant provided a scintillating illustration in their response. The participant explained the utility of the social science background couched in exemplars:

> You know, whether or not this psychology sociology, looking at the theorists that kind of fall into those realms, or it makes me think of the whole generalist versus specialist debate? Personally, I'm of the mind that being somewhat of a specialist is really beneficial. That having at least a basic understanding of social science principles, and theories and practices can really help you design and implement and effective evaluation. That being said, I have colleagues and friends who are more of generalists and

don't have a social science background as much and they are still quite very skilled and knowledgeable about the work that they do. They just tend to partner with the people who do have the social science background. And so I think regardless of the way you go about it, I think somebody on your team needs to have that kind of training. I think it's beneficial to do that. But, for example, the limitation that I experienced because I have the training and background and developmental psychology, specifically in positive psychology is that I don't feel equipped to go into health related spaces to do that type of evaluation. I would be able to come consult and help out, but I don't think I would be as equipped to run such an evaluation. Because I am so far removed from that literature base that it would be really hard for me to get started in that that like financial literacy, all that type of stuff, but put me in an AEA context, and I feel very comfortable, I would still probably get a content expert, like one of the I was working for an organization that did like a lot of computer science education stuff. I'm not a computer scientist, I tried that degree for about a year. I can do a little coding, but that's not my area of expertise. I don't know what that literature is. So having somebody who has that, who can bring that in is really helpful. So if I were to create a program to teach evaluation, I do like the model that [omitted] provides; you don't get a degree in evaluation, you get a concentration in evaluation, on top of whatever other degree that you're getting, organizational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, cognitive

> psychology, whatever it is, you're adding evaluation to that. As opposed to just getting a degree in evaluation and thinking of the social science removed from all that.

While the place of a social science background was quite salient in the interviews in relation to evaluation training in theory to practice, as evidenced by the illustrative quote above, another salient category of training was the hands-on (experiential learning) experience participants garnered through their graduate training programs.

Informal Training

Recall the operational definition of informal training employed for this research; any form of training received in a setting external to an accredited university/college program which does not culminate in a degree or certificate. This includes on-the-job training, workshops, conferences, etc. Participants spoke about their informal training considerably more than the formal elements of their training. Different informal training categories that participants articulated include on-the-job training, conferences, and reading.

On-the-job Training

On-the-job training arose as a theme discussed by most of the respondents. The insights provided by respondents regarding their on-the-job training indicated that on-the-job synthesis of knowledge gained in the classroom is extremely important in the evaluator's growth.

When discussing on-the-job training, one participant said that "I would think most of my training is on the job. So, I would say I'm more of like one of those accidental evaluators, in the sense that that's how I started in evaluation." Another participant reflected on their on the-job-training saying that,

> I began with informal training. When I obtained my master's in research psychology, I received a lot of methodological training and quantitative methods; a little bit in qualitative methods, but not much. Then I obtained a position [omitted] and it was an evaluation position, although the title wasn't evaluation. It was research associate. I really received a lot of on-the-job training there, like a lot of reading on my own. I attended a couple of workshops and stuff like that.

The above quote links the three main categories that ultimately composed the informal training theme. These categories include on-the-job training, professional conference attendance, and reading. The next section focuses on the professional conference attendance category identified.

Professional Conference Attendance

Participants indicated that they attended professional conferences and acquired more knowledge about evaluation through their attendance of the conferences. One participant described their experiences with conferences by saying that,

> I have participated in kind of trainings offered by local level, or local affiliates. So, for a while, I was involved with the [omitted] things and I did, a long time ago, like, 14 years ago, conferences and stuff like that, and workshops. I would go to those. And then there was a [omitted], and I would attend those to attend talks and stuff like that.

Like many of the respondents, the American Evaluation Association annual conference has been a professional conference of choice to attend. In detailing their experiences with conferences and learning another participant wove in the other informal learning categories identified by saying,

> I go to AEA usually pretty religiously. Same with the Eastern Evaluation Research Society Conference. I think the only courses or pre-conference workshops that I've taken are like Gail Barrington's how to be an independent consultant. And then most of my

> informal or formal training, however you want to call it, has been data visualization focused through Stephanie Evergreen and Anne Emory. I don't think I've taken any of the Encompass [courses]. I have never gone to the Summer Institute. Most of it has been my formal training, working with clients, and then my very ever growing repository of evaluation books up here.

Another participant indicated that they found great value in conferences, in the AEA's annual conference particularly. In reflecting about their experiences, the participant said that AEA was one of the best places that they got training from. Additionally, they detailed how they read the AEA365 blog nearly every day to enhance their evaluation knowledge. This blog was a great source of value for the participant. However, the AEA conferences and associated workshops were a huge learning source for the participant. In their words,

> I went to AEA conferences and summer Institute's and took a lot of workshops. Michael Quinn Patton's utilization focused workshop and later on principles focused and Stephanie evergreens data visualization workshop, and somebody else was doing project management and somebody else was doing one on writing success stories and your evaluation reports. And I took a quantitative analysis [course], which I didn't have in college. So I took a two day course with Katherine McKnight on quant skills. Stuart Donaldson always taught program theory and John Lavelle, program design. And so I got a huge education year after year going to two conferences a year. Wow. And I feel like, collectively, in the last, like 15 years, I think I've learned more about evaluation than I did in my initial classes. But I got a really good foundation from my university.

Reading (Beyond the Classroom)

As indicated in a few of the responses presented to the other categories of the informal learning theme, participants engaged in independent reading to advance their understanding of evaluation. Each of the quotes salient and relevant to this category have been presented as part of other categories. Therefore, only a small portion of the participants' statements are presented here.

It is important to note the participants discuss reading in conjunction with other informal training methods/forums. Additionally, this discussion of reading is distinct from reading that is associated with graduate level formal training programs. The participants situated their reading in two ways, the first being reference materials to aid their practice while the second type of reading materials were those intended to build their knowledge base in evaluation. These two distinctions are present in the quote snippets presented below.

One participant said that "Most of it has been my formal training, working with clients, and then my very ever-growing repository of evaluation books up here" while another participant who discussed this category said that they, "really received a lot of on-the-job kind of training there, the kind of like a lot of reading on my own. And I attended a couple of workshops and stuff like that." Finally, another interviewee who spoke of reading as a means for bolstering their informal evaluation education: "…that made me dig even deeper into the literature to educate myself even deeper…"

Defining Theory – The Practitioner's Definition

Another finding of note in relation to Research Question 2 is that the way theory is defined seems to be directly related to the training that the evaluator has received. Recall the definition created based on the synthesis of the definitional characteristics provided by the

participants; an evaluation theory is a mechanism by which to approach, frame, or develop a roadmap for engaging in evaluative practice. The synthesis of the responses garnered from the respondents enabled the creation of this definition and a newer definition relevant to today's modern evaluator. This newer definition is important to the continued evolution of evaluation as it provides additional understanding of theory and its purpose along with more precise and relevant verbiage.

Implications for Formal Graduate Evaluation Training

Participants gave recommendations for ways to improve formal graduate evaluation education. While this feedback was given by most of the participants, it was not parsed into levels of graduate education (e.g., master's or doctoral) but just given as general feedback. Participants enumerated numerous critiques related to their experiences with graduate evaluation training. The top sub themes identified under this theme include the order of theory and practice courses, practicum classes, and bringing theories into the classroom.

Ordering of Theory and Practice Courses

Participants spoke about the order in which evaluation theory focused courses and evaluation practice focused courses are intended to be taken in graduate evaluation education course sequencing. In some cases, participants suggested changing the order from what was perceived as "normal". This order was described as students learning about theory first and then evaluation practice. In some cases, theory and practice were described as linked; however, most participants discussed theory and practice as though they were two separate and distinct entities.

A participant wondered what taking practice-oriented courses prior to theory oriented courses might look like. They explained this by saying,

> I always wonder, and this is just based upon my own student experience, and then kind of being in my first couple of years of teaching, what would it look like to teach an applied course prior to a theory course? I have a colleague who and I think this is really cool that what they're going to be doing is teaching a theory course, and they're going to be bringing in more around intersectionality. And so, again, going back to that idea of like, theory expanding, right, based upon what we know, and what we're learning.

Another participant reflected on the ordering/structure of evaluation theory and practice courses in their own teaching by saying,

> Many, many years ago, I started a little bit of a debate with another evaluation professor. So, the way things started at our university, there was a semester long course on evaluation practice. And then there was a semester long course focused on evaluation theory. And the way it was structured is during the evaluation practice course, we would develop an evaluation plan and we did this as a cohort as a class, we had a local client. And as a class, we developed an evaluation plan. And then second semester, while we were studying theory, we were also collecting data and you know, implementing that evaluation. Things are not going well, that I hear.

As insinuated by the final sentence of the last quote presented above, the two semester course sequence where practical components are presented in the first course and evaluation theory presented in the second course is not going well. Whether this is due to the combining of the practical experience component with the courses or due to the order of presentation (practical then theory components) is unknown. However, it was inferred by the respondent that students were struggling with the course sequence and associated evaluation activities.

In thinking about fully understanding practice to better apply evaluation theory, a participant articulated that, “I'm not saying it has to be a full semester of practice without ever learning a theory. I think the blended approach could work. But I think people have to understand what practice is and what it looks like. And then start learning how theory informs practice.” This participant was getting at the idea that theory and practice should be presented together instead of sequentially. The presentation of the two components sequentially allows the student to better understand the relationship and thus, apply the theory more effectively in practice.

Thoughts on Practicum Classes

Participants relayed that practicums proved useful to them in a variety of ways. However, they relayed some negatives with positives as evidenced by this statement from one of the participants, “… I do feel like I got a good amount of training and logic models, right, and how to come up with a logic model for a program and preparing how to think through what an evaluation would look like. More hands on guidance, like during, like practicum, or whatnot, would have would have been really nice, I think…”. Another participant explained that, “For me again, you can always say that we don't give what you don't have. And so, what I'm giving is what I've learned over time, like when I was a student, at benefited a lot like when I did those practicum classes, there was basically theory coming alive.”

Theory in the Classroom

Some participants explored ways to incorporate theory in coursework more effectively. One participant talked about the inclusion and application of social sciences in evaluation courses. They reflected by saying, “some of it was interesting, but the ability for me to apply some of the theoretical stuff we were learning was not there. How can we bring those kind of

social science theories or other theories that exist out in the world, learning theories, et cetera, into a class where you're getting prepared, that's maybe specific to evaluation, right?"

A different participant presented the idea of identifying common elements of evaluation theories and understanding better through combining them in practice. They explained, "…they're very overlapping. And so, I would like to see theory taught in a way, like I said, where we can understand those commonalities around theories and then what it looks like to blend them into your practice instead of just saying, this month, we're studying developmental. This next month, we're studying this."

Theory courses often have a historical evaluation portion that is presented to the students to better situate evaluation for them. In reflecting on the typical components of evaluation theory courses, another participant spoke to elements they believed to be missing from theory courses:

> It's not only understanding like the history, but what is currently happening that is needed to be infused into a theory course, like this one more. So my colleagues gonna be teaching interest in combining with intersectionality to better prepare students who may be using what's taught in our class, when they go back to their own fields, or look to apply these things outside of formal studies.

Research Question 3

The third research question centers on understanding the importance accorded to evaluation theory in the present and in the future of evaluation as a discipline. As a final element of Research Question 3, the viewpoints (espoused to be different by the two groups of evaluators) of academic-based evaluators and industry-based evaluators were compared. This comparison was done because, as indicated earlier, the two groups believed there were

substantive differences in how they each approach evaluation when it comes to evaluation theory.

3. How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice?
    - How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?
    - What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and academic-based settings characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?

The Importance of Evaluation Theory to Practice

In explaining the importance of theory to practice generally, eight respondents out of the thirteen evaluators indicated that they felt it was important. In describing the way theory to practice was important to them, one participant said, "…But the more I get to know about theories, about theoretical frameworks, about how people do evaluation differently, those different ways of knowing helps in addressing the problems more holistically, instead of just one way and you've done it that way…". Another participant explained the importance of theory to practice by focusing on the benefits of learning theory and its relationship to practice:

> Learning about the theoretical approaches like the different frameworks and approaches, understanding a little bit more about evaluation theory in terms of like methodology talk, thinking about the ologies. Right? Hearing about the, the past evaluators, in terms of just knowledge of the field of evaluation, and how the different theories and approaches came

to be. I think students should learn about those because I think part of the work we do, we have to understand why we do what we do.

Another participant drew an interesting picture of the importance of theory to practice by highlighting the messiness of evaluation theory in relation to other social sciences when asked about the importance of theory to evaluation. Some of what that participant said included“

> I think it's a mess. It's hard to answer this question, because I think it's a mess, and one of my bosses used to say that all the time. I think that essential is probably one of the first things I would say. But again, we are in that weird space of there is what we traditionally call theory, which could be like social science theories, psychological theories, sociological theories, communication theories.

The Future of Evaluation Theory

In addition to understanding how the participants characterized the importance of theory to practice, the participants were asked to detail how they envisioned theory in evaluation’s future as part of their interviews. One additional major theme arose along with the main theme presented above about theory being important in the future of evaluation. This theme was the need for theory to evolve with time (temporal validity). While participants spoke about this in a variety of ways, it was evident that most of the participants felt there was a need for and that there would be inherent growth in evaluation theory as the voices at the table evolve and as we change socially. In thinking about the voices at the table, one participant said,

> I see theory needing to catch up with the times. I go back to the tree, because that representation hasn't been fully reflective of everyone who's contributed to evaluation theory, particularly black, indigenous, and diverse evaluators. So I see theory having to

> catch up to what is actually being done, and the multitude of theoretical groundings that there are. But also representative of all those who are doing evaluation.

Another participant reflected on this idea by focusing more on the participants at the table as opposed to theorists. They explained that,

> Yeah, how I see the future of evaluation, or? I definitely see us thinking maybe more critically about? who's at the table? And who we're asking questions of, and who were collecting data from? Right. So I might use the term respondents that might not be the best term to use. We, I don't know if people still use the term research subjects, or if that's, you know, I've never used that. But thinking more about the individuals who are contributing, and how to, I guess, respect and honor them in different ways, I think research and evaluation has for too long, just taking it for granted that people will give us their data and share with us their experiences. And we basically say "Okay, thanks, goodbye". And then the data belongs to us and our clients.

Another participant provided an expansion on the idea of who is at the table included bringing in other fields. This participant said that they, "…think it has the potential I think as the potential and room to grow, based on those things are based upon and not just, you know, all of those, but I still also think what we learn as a field in relation to other things happening, either in other fields or within the broader society."

In thinking about who is at the table, one element rang out clearly; that temporal validity of evaluation theories is very salient and material to the future of evaluation theory. One of the participants spoke to this explicitly saying that "…the studies that we did in the 60s probably don't work very well anymore. And whether it's because people did crap research back then or because people have changed, or I don't know, I worry about the idea of temporal validity as a

big problem. It's a huge problem, especially around education, race, and identity." Thus, many of the participants spoke to the need to address temporal validity by addressing the voices being included in evaluation theory and practice along with ensuring relevance to the respective time and/or social climate.

Industry-based versus Academic-based Evaluators and Conceptions of Future Theory

In exploring the response differences between participating evaluators who identified as industry-based evaluators in relation to those who identified as academic-based evaluators, no substantial difference was found in the tenor of their responses regarding the conceptions of evaluation theory in the future of evaluation. Both groups articulated that they felt theory was important to the future of evaluation and that theory and practice was important. In their characterizations of why theory will be important/salient in the future of evaluation, both groups spoke about theorist-based relevance as well as the relevance of the voices of evaluation participants. However, there was greater emphasis placed by the respondents on the crafting of evaluation theory as opposed to the target audience of the theories. These notions are illustrated in the respondent quotes provided above. Additionally, this notion is present in the following participant statement,

> There are some standing theories that I think current, revision is ne needed. I think of Kirkhart having revised theirs as recently as 2015. Yes. So there is reflective practice there, but I also see that there is developing of new theories on the horizon. I mean much like we are constantly being hit with new terminology, new understandings of diversity and identities and interactions of the complex human experience, there's going to be a new theory that's going to be more equipped to address those intersections.

Ultimately, both respondent groups felt that there was a definitive place for evaluation theory in the future of evaluation. They characterized this place as being very important in the future growth and development of evaluation theory as well as evaluation practice.

Summary

Respondents provided definitions of evaluation theory from which was synthesized an overarching definition of evaluation theory. In defining evaluation theory, respondents inextricably linked theory to practice. In describing the images conjured by the notion of theory, such as Alkin's Evaluation Tree, a slightly removed from practice depiction emerged. However, with all the different elements of evaluation theory discussed by the participants, the conclusion that each respondent ultimately came to, that evaluation theory is important and inextricably linked to the future of evaluation practice, is clearly evidenced.

Respondents spoke of Big T and Little t theory and how it shaped their practice. They spoke of theory as being responsive and gave the ingredients that they felt shaped a strong evaluation education. These ingredients included partaking in graduate assistantships and having a social science theory background. Additionally, respondents felt that on-the-job training was extremely helpful in their understanding of evaluation theory to practice. Engaging in readings beyond those prescribed in courses also proved to be very helpful for many respondents.

For the respondents, there was very little difference in the importance accorded to theory to practice based on whether one identified as an industry-based or academic-based evaluators. Both groups considered evaluation theory to practice as critical to their practice as well as to the future of evaluation.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The pages of this chapter provide a summary of the key elements of the research presented in the previous chapters of this dissertation followed by discussion of particularly salient elements and their associated importance. I start the chapter by reiterating the purpose of this research and the way in which it filled the gaps in the current understanding of theory to practice in evaluation. I continue to tie in the related literature, the guiding research questions, research performed, and findings in a manner which illustrates how meaning was synthesized and thus, the findings ascertained. The strengths and weaknesses of the methodology employed for this research endeavor are reviewed and parsed as appropriate. I further discuss key findings and their associated implications for graduate evaluation training, evaluation practice, and the evaluation discipline at large. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a synthesis of the dissertation research and potential next steps for this work.

Research Summary

The following section provides a high-level summary of the key aspects and elements presented in chapters 1 through 4 of this dissertation. The section seats the importance, statement of purpose, and the literature review. The guiding research questions are presented again along with justification as to the methodology employed for exploring the questions. It then summarizes the findings from the work that was performed and provides justifications for the findings. Finally, the theory developed based on this body of evidence is presented after the findings associated with each guiding research question.

The Problem, Purpose, and Importance

Our society continues to push accountability in many facets and forms. Program funders want to know how their money is being spent and whether the programs they are funding are effective while program organizers want to know the efficacy of programs and how to make them better. Regardless of the motivation for understanding, evaluation provides the means for understanding. From this, stems a need for competent evaluators.

Graduate level evaluation education provides an avenue for evaluators to gain the knowledge and competence necessary to be strong evaluators. However, a noted pattern of graduate evaluation education is the tendency for the educational experience to be heavily skewed towards practice rather than theory creating a distinct tension (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; LaVelle, 2020). Unfortunately, the tension that ensues is not fully understood and so the remedy to the situation is unclear. While there are multiple negative impacts associated with not learning theory to practice in evaluation graduate education, a particularly salient one is that the reciprocity between theory to practice that is believed to be needed in the evolution of the evaluation discipline, is unable to play out because of an impaired understanding of evaluation theory to practice (Schwandt, 2014).

The study performed for this dissertation sought to understand more about the understanding and acquisition of evaluation theory to practice as it related to graduate evaluation education. Specifically, this dissertation work sought to fill the gaps of the current body of literature related to theory to practice in evaluation by exploring evaluator beliefs, perceptions, and training experiences. In order to achieve this, the dissertation research was guided by the following research questions:

1) How and in what ways do evaluators conceptualize theory in evaluation?
    a. How do practicing evaluators define "evaluation theory"?
        i. What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and in academic-based settings define "evaluation theory"?
2) How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in evaluation?
    a. How and in what ways have practicing evaluators been trained in theory to practice?
    b. Which elements of their training best prepared evaluators to engage in theory to practice in evaluation?
    c. What are the implications of practicing evaluators' experiences in teaching theory to practice in formal graduate education?
3) How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice?
    a. How do practicing evaluators characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?
        i. What differences are there, if any, between how practicing evaluators in industry-based and academic-based settings characterize the importance of evaluation theory to practice in the future of evaluation?

By exploring the above research questions in this inquiry, a foundation has been laid in understanding more about the etiology of acquisition and the perspectives about evaluation theory and practice subsequently broadening the literature basis for this area. Additionally, implications for the professionalization of evaluation can be derived from this work. Lastly, it is important to note that the American Evaluation Association (AEA) contends that competent evaluators can apply and leverage theories, approaches, and methods in a manner that positively facilitates evaluation activities (AEA – American Evaluation Association: Competencies, 2018). This research inquiry has implications (described in greater detail below) related to graduate evaluation education and thus, addresses AEA's contention at an educational level.

In essence, this work provided greater understanding about how theory to practice manifests. It contributed to the current corpus of knowledge by adding knowledge where little to no knowledge/literature existed before. It further contributes to the current knowledgebase by exploring and synthesizing the exploration in a contextualized manner that has not been brought forth before. It provided greater understanding of the acquisition and perception of evaluation theory to practice while also providing critical implications for the teaching of evaluation theory to practice.

The Findings

The summary and the findings are presented by research question below. A high-level overview of the findings are given through presenting a short synopsis of the major themes. Key themes are then expanded upon and discussed further later in this chapter.

Research Question 1

Participants conceptualized evaluation theory as being synonymous with evaluation approaches. They found evaluation theory to be a means of understanding the evaluation, a

roadmap to practice, and often conjured the image of the evaluation tree when reflecting back on the etiology of evaluation theory. In defining evaluation theory, the participants' definitions were synthesized to reflect the following definition based on their responses: An evaluation theory is a mechanism by which to approach, frame, justify, or develop a roadmap for engaging in evaluative practice. The operational definition for evaluation theory crafted for this research was: An amalgamation of ideas which attempts to explain and conceptualize evaluation activities, processes, and justifications, and/or provide a model of practice for engaging in evaluation activities.

Reflecting on the operational definition and the definition originating from the participants, the similarities/overlap were noted. Namely, the justifications component along with the roadmap element of the definitions align very well. While the definition crafted from the participant responses did not utilize the phrasing "model for practice", this clearly aligns with the notion of a roadmap as it invoked the idea of directions or a guide. The two definitions do not differ markedly in any way. Rather, they are synonymous in nature. However, one difference of note is that the operational definition aligns more with the literature in that it captures the notion of evaluation theory pulling together a variety of ideas. Whereas the definition as crafted from participant responses is technocratic in nature focusing on what evaluation theory does or contributes to its user.

An idea that fuses the technocratic definition with the amalgamation of ideas arose in thinking about Big T and Little t, one of the themes which was identified in the data corpus. The depiction of Big T and Little t differ from the literature explored to further understanding of these concepts. The departure from the literature noted was that instead of Little t representing littler known theories, they seemed to represent personal theories for the respondents in this

research. As a result of this in conjunction with other categorical and thematic information identified in the body of data collected for this dissertation, a substantial idea around the personal theory developed.

The Personal Theory

In coding and then theming the interview data, it was evident that many of the evaluators interviewed for the research hold a personal theory in relation to their evaluation work. As one participant described,

> …because there are many things there are many theories out in the world that really explain phenomena or phenomenon, whatever. For example, I always give this funny story, like, I was talking to a friend of mine, actually, it was [omitted] in that that organization, and was working with this person. And then she told me that her mom has a theory that those who are born during the winter, they like cold months, then those who are born in the summer, they like it, it is like, ah, that is really interesting. So then I started asking people, if they tell me, you if they like heat, or if they like cold, they say, Well, what time of the year were you born just to see if this theory works? So there are those types of small things, you know, if we can explain small things like that people's preferences for heat or cold using a theory, that tells us that we can actually evaluate interventions using a theory whether interventions work or not using a theory?

Research Question 2

Most of the respondents were oriented to evaluation theory initially and then educated on methodology and practice. For many of the respondents, synthesis between the theory and practical elements came via their graduate assistantships. It is partially because of the recognition of this pattern and partially because of the way the respondents spoke about their experience with

learning theory to practice, that I contend that these specific evaluators were educated in theory *and* practice rather than theory *to* practice.

This is an important distinction as theory *to* practice implies a stronger synthesis with and between theory elements and practically based elements. Whereas the manner in which the participants spoke about these two elements, specifically, by discussing them more along the lines of distinct elements from each other, it implies that the concepts were not as well intertwined for the participants. Thus, the end result being that view of theory and practice as distinct elements that are not well married within the formal education setting. This finding is a thought provoking one yet is still cursory within the confines of this dissertation. Therefore, it merits greater exploration in the future as should this idea prove true in more cases beyond the ones explored as part of this dissertation, then it has educational implications which require redress.

Why does this theory/practice relationship matter so much? In chapter two, I briefly mentioned Schwandt's belief that theory and practice have a reciprocal relationship (2015). Here, I again bring up this idea and note that the nature of the relationship between theory and practice comes into question based on the findings enumerated above. If we look to Freire's et al.'s (2014) perspective regarding theory and practice, we again find a relationship that is characterized by interdependence and reciprocity as described by Freire (Kirylo, 2020). Schwandt (2015) articulates this reciprocity and interconnectedness as do Schon (1982) and Argyris and Schon (1974). Reciprocity and context are apparent in Stepney and Thompson's (2021) notion of "theorizing practice" where elements of the evaluator's theoretical knowledge are employed in practice based on the context. Similarly, Patton (2014) notes the importance of understanding and recognizing the situation or context and leveraging the appropriate theoretical

components. Hence, why "theory to practice" is referred to by other names such as "theorizing practice" and "theory in practice" by some of the individuals mentioned here (Stepney & Thompson, 2021; Argyris & Schon, 1974).

Based on the findings of this dissertation, there are other areas of graduate theory to practice evaluation education which require redress. Beyond the notion of theory and practice being approached within the graduate education setting as being very separate entities that are not well married at a macro, the review of theories and their engagement within practical courses begs another look. The teaching methods reviewed in the literature review chapter of this dissertation along with the responses by participants related to effective teaching methods indicates that more problem-based, case-based, and participatory activities are warranted in the classroom when learning practical considerations for evaluation practice. These learning methods, cases in particular, provide graduate evaluation students with the opportunity to employ critical thinking skills, theories, account for important contextual variables, as well as have opportunities to engage in reflective practice (Linfield & Tovey, 2021; Tovey & Greene, 2021).

These learning methods would allow greater inter-play between theory and practice for the class participants. Thus, allowing greater understanding and subsequent synthesis of theory *to* practice. Additionally, it will foster the reciprocal relationship that is believed to be integral between evaluation theory and evaluation practice (Schwandt, 2015).

Research Question 3

The practicing evaluators who participated in this research felt that theory is integral to the future of evaluation practice. They argued theory will be very present in the future dispelling notions that practice will focus on practical elements solely and not have theory infused in them. Despite the belief which was capitulated by both industry-based evaluators and academic-based

evaluators, namely that academic-based evaluators employ evaluation theory to a greater extent than industry-based evaluators, both respondent groups felt that there was a tacit importance to evaluation theory and its place in evaluation practice.

While this research did not probe what this importance was or may have looked like, it was an interesting finding that the respondents aligned so closely in their perceptions of the two different respondent groups. It was also very interesting that despite both groups holding these perceptions of their own group and the other respondent group, these stereotypes did not hold true for the respondents in either group. This was evidenced based on how the two groups spoke about evaluation theory and described their own interactions with evaluation theory.

Numerous reasons were provided by the respondents as to why academic-based evaluators had a closer relationship with theory than industry-based evaluators. Some of the reasons presented included because academics are closer to novelty and innovation, academic based evaluators have more time to work on evaluation projects (be they research or practice based), and academics have access to more resources. Despite these articulated reasons, these areas did not seem to make a difference for the sample included in this study. It is important to note, though, that the reasons why this sample had a closer relationship with theory were not probed as part of the interview process. However, by virtue of self-selection to participate in a study focused on understanding more about the manifestation of theory to practice in evaluation, it is entirely plausible that this particular sample did not hold true to their own stereotypes because they place greater importance and emphasis on utilization of evaluation theory in evaluation practice.

Reflections on Choice of Methodology

As indicated above, sampling for the study may have been both a strength and a weakness. Sampling was performed using convenience for the first round and then snowball sampling for the second round of sampling. In leveraging these types of sampling, I was able to cast a wide net and ensure appropriate representation of both academic-based and industry-based identifying evaluators. However, as noted above the self-selected nature of these sampling types may have resulted in the participation of evaluators who hold a higher place for evaluation theory in their practice. The impact or extent of this is unknown and would be difficult to gauge.

The method selected for this endeavor, namely qualitative interviewing, provides a fantastic avenue for exploring phenomena that are largely not understood. This research endeavor utilized methodology that largely aligned with constructivist grounded theory. However, it differed from grounded theory in one key respect. The way in which it differed was that I already had an idea of the "issue" in mind. In essence, I was not approaching the research without preconceived notions but instead with the idea that there is a gap in the literature in this area and that I would like to foster understanding of this gap as well as issues that may be present within said gap based on surrounding literature. This is a fundamental difference from the original ideology of grounded theory as articulated by Corbin & Strauss (2015).

While this fundamental difference between traditional grounded theory and the methods that I used exists, the study largely adheres to constructivist grounded theory methods. Mulolli and Gothberg (2023) note this deviation in their own work but since it adheres in all other facets, justify it as being constructivist grounded theory. Regardless of whether my research is considered to be constructivist grounded theory or not, it is important to note that the methods employed provide a pivotal way to explore an area with little to no understanding or research

within it. This work helps to bridge the gap in the knowledge base while yielding implications to inform current evaluation theory to practice teaching as well as inform directions of future research.

Implications

Findings from this investigation lead to multiple implications regarding graduate evaluation education along with implications for evaluation practice. The section reviews the implications at greater length.

Implications for Research

The research implications of this work were and are profound. From what was discovered through analysis of the interviews, it was evident that this area needs further exploration and certainly warrants that additional exploration. There is a definitive tie-in with the evaluation discipline's professionalization aspirations, particularly in learning theory to practice (Dewey et al., 2008). As many professionalized disciplines have established methods and pathways for learning theory to practice as applicable to that specific discipline.

There is a relationship between the future directions of research in this area and teaching of evaluation theory to practice. For example, a future study could have evaluators or evaluation educators brainstorm how to best include theory in their classes or reflect upon the most useful aspects of their graduate or informal education related to evaluation theory. As the area of research is expanded through investigations, mechanisms by which to teach evaluation theory to practice will be understood further and this can be refined to better serve the students' needs along with the needs of the discipline. Therefore, this relationship also relates back to the implications for professionalization as the educational component within professionalization of a

discipline is a critical element to professionalization. For example, similar to previous research (Galport & Azzam, 2017) respondents believed that evaluation theory is important.

Another way in which future research can be influenced by the work within this dissertation is in enhancing understanding of the acquisition of theory to practice in evaluation specifically. Much of the available literature on this subject stems from other disciplines (ciation). Many of the works within the evaluation discipline are theoretical in nature or just barely scratch the surface of understanding. The breadth of this body of literature warrants widening and bolstering.

Implications for Graduate Evaluation Education

As noted above, the available body of literature on acquisition of theory to practice is sparse. Literature associated with teaching methods in graduate evaluation education is readily available but also would benefit from some bolstering. In particular, further literature in relation to teaching methods utilized to facilitate the understanding of theory to practice in evaluation is needed.

Beyond identifying that there is a need to further understanding of teaching methods to increase understanding of evaluation theory to practice, having diverse methods of conveying and marrying evaluation theory to evaluation practice would be a robust approach to teaching evaluation theory to practice. Additionally, leveraging problem-based and role-playing (Alkin, & Christie, 2002) methods can also facilitate understanding evaluation theory to practice better within the confines of the classroom because evaluation theory to practice can vary based on contextual factors including context, resources, expertise, population, etc.

Outside of the classroom, based on the respondents of this study, it is evident that having a practice-based graduate assistantship facilitated grasping evaluation theory to practice. Thus, it

is a clear implication that having a practice-based graduate assistantship or practicum be an embedded element of the graduate evaluation curriculum. Combining the practice-based graduate assistantship or practicum with a problem-based course oriented towards the acquisition and understanding of evaluation theory to practice would most likely provide graduate evaluation students with a consistently stronger foundation in evaluation theory to practice than many of the current curriculum structures offer. While it was evident that much of the synthesis of theory to practice comes with on-the-job experience, providing the combination problem-based course and practice-based assistantship/practicum would result in evaluation practitioners starting their careers with greater competence in relation to understanding evaluation theory to practice.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study also suggest clear implications for practice. Namely, continuing the synthesis and associated understanding of evaluation theory to practice once in the practice environment is critical for fostering the understanding of evaluation theory to practice. In particular, some of the tactics described by the respondents as informal methods of learning evaluation theory to practice are highly recommended based on the manifestation understanding of evaluation theory to practice ascertained through this work. These recommended tactics include engaging in evaluation-oriented reading, participating in conferences, and partaking in continuing education opportunities such as workshops. Based on the current research, these tactics would further the practicing evaluator's understanding of evaluation theory to practice and expose them to a variety of scenarios and modes of evaluative thinking, broadening their own knowledge base.

Summary

Evaluation usage is on the rise in our current day society. In meeting these demands and producing competent evaluators, graduate level evaluation education must evolve. Specifically, graduate level evaluation education must better understand the mechanisms for acquisition of evaluation theory to practice in order to leverage them and better serve graduate evaluation students. This research endeavored to understand more about evaluation theory to practice. It probed the ways practicing evaluators have been trained, how they conceptualize theory to practice, and how they characterize the importance of theory to practice in evaluation.

From this research stemmed numerous findings of note. However, three findings in particular stand out: the learning of theory *and* practice in lieu of theory *to* practice, the importance and salience of evaluation theory to academic-based evaluators and industry-based evaluators, and the notion of the personal evaluation theory. This work provided important implications for graduate evaluation education while also providing direction for future research on theory to practice in evaluation. Additionally, it yielded implications for evaluation practice. While this research only scratches the surface of what remains to be uncovered and subsequently understood about evaluation theory to practice, this research does provide an important foundation from which additional understanding can be built. Without fail, this dissertation found that understanding evaluation theory to practice is an area that undoubtedly warrants further exploration to enhance evaluation education and practice and thus, enhance the evaluation discipline at large.

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APPENDIX A: APPROVALS AND INSTRUMENTS

Date: 4-1-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY22-496
Title: Understanding the Gap in Theory to Practice in Evaluation
Creation Date: 3-3-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Jaime Moller
Review Board: UNC-Greensboro IRB
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Exempt	Decision Exempt

Key Study Contacts

Member Ayesha Boyce	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact astillma@uncg.edu
Member Jaime Moller	Role Principal Investigator	Contact jrmolle2@uncg.edu
Member Jaime Moller	Role Primary Contact	Contact jrmolle2@uncg.edu

Interview Protocol

1) Describe how you identify as an evaluator (e.g., academic-based or industry-based) and why?
    a. How long have you been working in academia or industry?
    b. What course types, student levels, etc. have you taught and/or client types have you worked with?
2) Describe your formal and informal evaluation training background.
    a. Prompt: Perhaps you completed a degree or certificate program you may have completed or maybe you learned a lot on the job?
3) When you think of evaluation theory, what comes to mind?
    a. How do you define evaluation theory?
4) What differences, if any, do you believe exist in the importance of theory to practice between academic and practice-based contexts?
5) Reflecting on your practice, in what ways do you leverage evaluation theory in it if at all?
6) What role do you see approaches, frameworks, and guidelines taking in evaluation practice currently?
    a. Do you believe there is a difference in the role of approaches, frameworks, and guidelines between academic and practice-based contexts?
7) How do you define approaches, frameworks, and guidelines in your practice?
8) Reflecting on your own practices and the trends you have observe in evaluation, in what ways do you see theory as being a part of evaluation's future?
9) What recommendations, if any, do you have about the ways evaluation theory to practice should be taught in formal educational settings?
    a. Prompt: For example, how much time is spent on theory to practice and/or the teaching methods used to teach theory to practice.
10) Is there anything else that you wish to share with me about theory to practice in evaluation in academic or practice settings or just generally?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT AND RECRUITMENT EMAIL

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Understanding the Gap in Theory to Practice in Evaluation

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: J.R. Moller (PI), Ayesha Boyce, PhD, and Aileen Reid, PhD (Faculty Advisors)

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research is to get a better understanding of how evaluation theory and practice interact.

Why are you asking me?
You have been asked to participate because you identify as an evaluator and have obtained a doctoral degree.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a 5 to 10 minute demographic survey. You will also be asked to participate in one interview that is expected to take about 60 minutes. The survey and interview are confidential and are linked via a unique participant identification number.

No additional follow-up is expected, however, if you wish to contact the Principle Investigator, J.R. Moller, you may reach out to her via email at jrmolle2@uncg.edu.

Is there any audio/video recording?
The interviews will be recorded in both audio and video format through Zoom and because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

The researcher will only listen to the audio during the transcription process while wearing headphones and will work in a secluded/private location to minimize the possibility of anyone besides the researcher hearing the recordings and thus jeopardizing the confidentiality of the participants' identities. Upon completion of transcription, both the audio and video files will be destroyed.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact J.R. Moller (Principal Investigator) or Ayesha Boyce (Faculty Advisor) at jrmolle2@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
The findings from the research may benefit society in that the findings have the potential to shape educational elements associated with theory to practice for future evaluators.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There is no direct benefits to participants in this study. However, you will be contributing to a valuable body of knowledge if you opt to participate in this dissertation research project. Findings from this research will be presented anonymously in my dissertation.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?
All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. All data will be stored on a biometrically secured, GPS tracked, encrypted computer. The data will be backed-up on a secured server (Box) which only the researcher has access to and is approved by UNCG to maintain secured data. No personal identifiers will be stored with the data. Data (surveys and interviews) will be matched using a personal identification number assigned to each participant.

Research findings will be written without any personal identifiers including participant names, rank, place of employ, and the personal identification numbers in order to maintain the

confidentiality of the data. Additionally, statements which could potentially identify participants will be redacted from the findings.
Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

Data will be maintained for a period of seven years after completion of the study. Your data will be destroyed on 05/30/2029. De-identified data will not be stored and will not be used in future research projects.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By verbally consenting to this form/completing the survey and interview, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and you openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By continuing to participate in this research and providing your verbal consent, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study described to you by J.R. Moller.

Dear Evaluator,

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the research study is to understand more about theory to practice in the work of doctoral level evaluators. The findings from this study will help in understanding how theory to practice manifests in doctoral level evaluator practice as well as lay the foundation for future exploring. The findings will be reported as part of the my (J.R. Moller) dissertation.

Participation for this voluntary study includes completing a five minute demographic survey and an approximately one hour long interview. The interview will be conducted remotely through Zoom and the survey will be completed online via Qualtrics.

Interested in participating in the study? Please select the time that works best for you here: https://calendly.com/jrmolle2/theory-and-practice-dissertation-data-interview

Have questions or concerns? Please do not hesitate to contact me at jrmolle2@uncg.edu.

This research is advised by Drs. Ayesha S. Boyce and Aileen M. Reid.

Sincerely,

J.R. Moller (Principal Investigator)

J.R. Moller, M.A., FMHC
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Educational Research Methodology
Program Evaluation
UNC Greensboro
Pronouns: she/her/hers
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