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The Garden of Evaluation Approaches Visualization

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Background: The Garden of Evaluation Approaches (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2024a) maps evaluation approaches against eight dimensions of practice and situates them in their philosophical orientations and methodological dispositions.

Purpose: The garden's guiding question is, "How do evaluation approaches compare in terms of dimensions that facilitate use and application?" Primary intended users are evaluation practitioners, and secondary intended users include ecosystem actors (e.g., clients, program participants, funders), educators, researchers, and theoreticians.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Exploratory sequential mixed methods.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data collection and analysis included locating and reading primary sources for each evaluation approach. One team member thematically coded each source for evidence of its stance on each of the eight dimensions of practice, its philosophical orientation and methodological disposition, and steps for implementing the approach in practice. This qualitative evidence was used to generate ordinal ratings for the eight dimensions using a rating scale developed by the team, and to classify the approaches' philosophical orientations and methodological dispositions. Drafts of handouts summarizing qualitative and quantitative data were reviewed by the two other team members, with dialogue and deliberation among all members used to come to consensus.

Findings: The first iteration of the garden includes seven approaches: fourth generation evaluation, Made in Africa, nation-to-nation evaluation, practical participatory evaluation, sistematización de experiencias, theory-driven evaluation, and transformative participatory evaluation. Each approach is represented as a flower within the garden, with each petal corresponding to the approach's stance on one of the eight dimensions of practice. The colors of the flowers represent the underlying philosophical foundations of each approach. The pattern within the central disc of each flower represents the methodological disposition encouraged by the approach. Summaries of the empirical mixed-methods analysis are made transparent in supporting handouts. Future work will grow flowers for additional approaches and continue to map out the garden.

Keywords: *approach; theory; model; evaluation practice.*

The Garden of Evaluation Approaches recently debuted (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2024a). This metaphor and its related flower visuals map evaluation approaches[1] against eight dimensions of practice and situate them in their philosophical orientations and methodological dispositions. In this article, we present a brief background on and motivation for the garden, before moving on to an abbreviated description of the garden and flowers. We conclude with a discussion of the garden's intended purpose, use, and users, and we reflect on the benefits and limitations of the garden metaphor.

Garden Background and Motivation

The development of the garden of evaluation approaches, a metaphorical framework mapping evaluation approaches against eight dimensions of practice, has evolved over a decade of collaborative efforts by interdisciplinary coauthors. Several interrelated aspects led to the planting and blooming of the garden.

One aspect was our role as evaluation educators; two of us are tenured faculty, and one of us strengthens others' evaluation capacity through a federally funded evaluation hub. We have also collectively and individually facilitated professional development workshops on evaluation approaches at the American Evaluation Association's Summer Institute, and reaching the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), the European Evaluation Society (EES), the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), and many other organizations and audiences around the globe (e.g., Montrosse-Moorhead, 2017; Montrosse-Moorhead & Schröter, 2017; Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Schröter, 2016; Schröter et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Alkin and Christie claim that evaluation theory "is helpful only if one fully understands the theory and is able to conduct it in a reproducible form consistent with the intent" (2023, p. 9). Our ongoing work during evaluation capacity strengthening efforts, in professional development workshops, and in university courses with colleagues, learners, and students suggests that Alkin and Christie are correct, and yet existing research shows that evaluation education and training underemphasize evaluation theory (Becho, 2019; Coryn, et al., 2011; Dewey et al., 2008; Miller & Campbell, 2006). This research suggests there is more work to do to strengthen the connection between evaluation theory and practice. Moreover, our work in educational settings suggests that evaluative thinking and doing evaluation informed by theory (as opposed to reproducing a theoretical prototype in and for practice) is an alternative bridge for stronger connections between theory and practice, and anecdotally, more akin to what evaluation practitioners want to be able to do in practice. "Can you combine approaches?" is a question we are often asked. This question, we think, is rooted in the idea that practice is complex, and that one must balance, among other things, how one *prefers* to practice versus how one can *actually* practice, given the evaluation parameters and the context in which the work is occurring. This explains why one focus of the garden is on enabling practitioners to better integrate the use of approaches in practice, a point we expand upon later.

A second aspect that motivated the garden was our own evaluation practice. While we work in different evaluation contexts and with a diverse array of evaluation clients, all three of us maintain active evaluation practices. In discussions with one another, two things became sharper. One was that we all had significant training in evaluation theory during our graduate work. We knew what the approach prototypes were and how to use them in practice. Two, our transition from graduate school to professional life was marked by a common experience. Despite our differing work, we all transitioned away from following one particular approach prototype to using varying prototypes to think through what needed to happen in a particular evaluation. In short, approaches became the tools to think with about practice rather than the tools that prescribe practice. In our capacity-strengthening and professional development work, we've learned that this experience is not unique to us.

A third aspect was our own research on evaluation related to evaluation approaches. Some of this work has been related to the translation of theory into practice (Becho, 2019; Boczar et al., 2023; Christie et al., 2005; Coryn et al., 2011). Other work has been about evaluator education, which touched upon the importance of knowledge of evaluation approaches (Dewey et al., 2008; Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2022; Schröter, 2022; Schröter et al., 2023). Another stream called out evaluation approaches as part of the subject-matter knowledge that is unique to evaluation and highlighted disciplinary boundaries in which

[1] In keeping with guidance offered by others (Alkin, 2004; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014), and as explained in Montrosse-Moorhead et al. (2024a), we prefer and use the term "approach" rather than "theory" or "model."

approaches are applied (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2017; Montrosse-Moorhead & Griffith, 2017; Schröter & Watts, 2017; Schröter et al., 2022). Collectively, this work reinforced the importance of knowledge and use of evaluation approaches in practice.

A fourth and final aspect was scholarship that shaped our own thinking about how to classify approaches. For example, the debates in published scholarship, at professional conferences, and more recently within social media platforms, about what counts as an "approach" and, related, about whose and which theoretical contributions ought to be included in evaluation approach classifications (Hood et al., 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2018; Thomas & Campbell, 2020; Shanker, 2023). Other published work spoke to the ways in which evaluators needed to consider and integrate theory, philosophy, ethics, methodology, and so on with the demands of and in the context of practice to address real-world and often serious problems (Bledsoe & Graham, 2005).

Garden Structure and Content

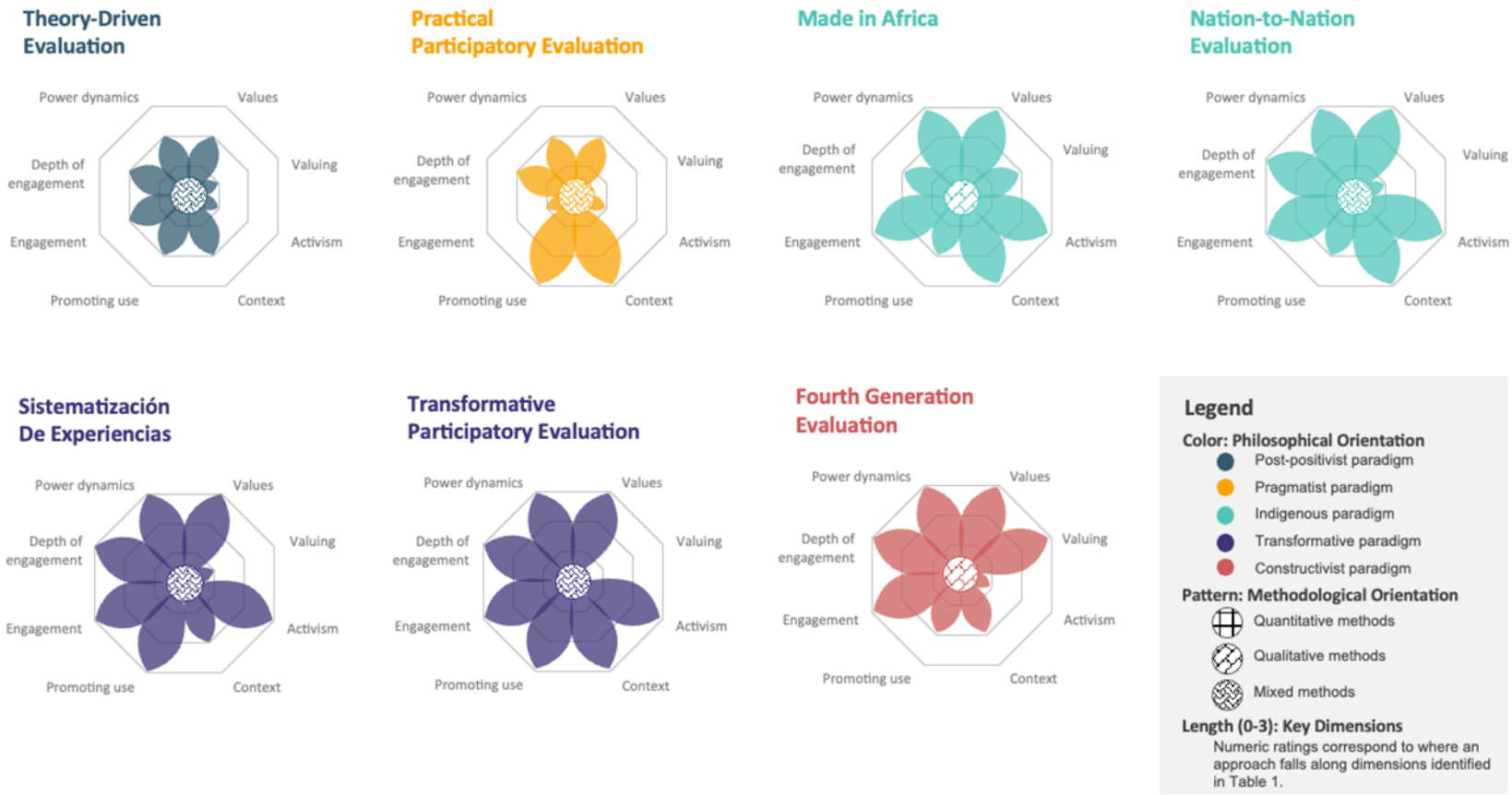
The garden of evaluation approaches is a metaphor for organizing, understanding, thinking about, and doing evaluation. Each approach is represented by a flower (Figure 1). Each flower has eight petals, which describe the approach's treatment of (a) values, (b) valuing, (c) activism for social justice, (d) context, (e) promoting use, (f) who is engaged in the evaluation process and (g) at what depth, and (h) power dynamics in making evaluation decisions. The length of each petal corresponds to the approach's stance on each of these eight dimensions. Visually, this allows for comparisons of where and how the approaches differ in their prescriptions for evaluation practice.

The garden also sustains important consideration of paradigms and methods promulgated by particular approaches. The colors of the flowers matter; they represent the underlying philosophical foundation of each approach. The patterns within each flower's central disc matter; they represent the methodological disposition encouraged by each approach. The use of color and pattern in the flowers furthers understanding of where and how each approach differs.

The flowers, their colors, and the patterns of the central discs are based on an empirical mixed-methods analysis of included approaches guided by the question: How do evaluation approaches compare in terms of dimensions that facilitate use and application? To facilitate the process, the team developed an ordinal rating rubric and scale for the eight dimensions of practice, then used that scale with primary sources to further classify each approach. We iterated upon this rubric as we used it to summarize and analyze evaluation approaches (see Table 1 for the current version).[2] In essence, data collection and analysis included reading seminal work for each approach and making transparent how this reading led to the creation of each flower. More specifically, one team member deductively coded each source for: (a) the eight dimensions of practice, (b) the philosophical orientation and methodological disposition, and (c) steps for implementing the approach in practice. Drafts of handouts summarizing qualitative and quantitative findings were reviewed by the two other team members. All members engaged in dialogue and deliberation to come to a consensus and finalize the handouts. The handouts document and make transparent how each flower was created. Final versions of the rating handouts are available online for free on the project's open science framework (OSF) page (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2023). As more flowers bloom and the garden grows, handouts will continue to reside on this OSF page.

[2] The rating rubric is also available at Montrosse-Moorhead et al. (2024b).

Figure 1. The Garden of Evaluation Approaches: A Multidimensional Mapping of the First Seven Flowers



Note. From *The Garden of Evaluation Approaches Open Science Framework Project*, by B. Montrosse-Moorhead, D. Schröter, and L. W. Becho, 2023 (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/MKXGC) and The Garden of Evaluation Approaches, by B. Montrosse-Moorhead, D. Schröter, and L. W. Becho, 2024, *American Journal of Evaluation*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/10982140231216667 . Copyright 2023/2024 by authors.

Table 1. The Garden of Evaluation Approaches Rating Rubric: Key Dimensions for Comparing Evaluation Approaches

Petal & Definition	0	1	2	3
Values Values refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance for evaluators includes the surfacing and use of values in an evaluation. Values include the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of those involved in the evaluation about what is of value, good, important, worthwhile, desired, needed, or preferred. Values guide, implicitly or explicitly, what happens at each stage in the process and how the work at each stage is carried out.	Unknown / Missing	Values have no role in the evaluation. The approach argues that evaluators should minimize the influence of values.	Values are important, but the evaluation approach doesn't play an active role in surfacing those values.	Values are central, and the evaluation approach plays an active role in surfacing and using them to guide the evaluation.
Valuing Valuing refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance for evaluators includes an implicit or explicit process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of something.	Unknown / Missing	Valuing has no place in the evaluation, and no evaluative judgments are generated.	Valuing is important, but the evaluation approach doesn't explain the evaluators' role to engage in or facilitate a judgment about merit, worth, or significance.	Valuing is important, and it is the job of the evaluation team to engage in or facilitate a judgment about merit, worth, or significance.
Activism for social justice Activism for social justice refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance for evaluators to take clear action in support of a cause, and its positioning of advocacy or activism as the primary purpose of evaluation activities.	Unknown / Missing	Advocacy or activism is not central to the evaluation.	Advocacy for social change is used to frame the evaluation.	Activism for justice frame is used and positions the evaluation as a driver of or tool for social change.

Petal & Definition	0	1	2	3
Context Context refers to an evaluation approach's guidance on the extent to which evaluations directly and actively attend to their surrounding cultural, historical, and/or political contexts or systems.	Unknown / Missing	Context is not a consideration. Evaluation is mostly decontextualized.	Context is a consideration and is inventoried, but it does not drive evaluation activities (e.g., context is mainly used in the commissioning and planning stages and may or may not be integral in interpreting data).	Context drives the evaluation's conceptualization and activities. The approach considers attending to and integrating context essential and includes processes for doing so throughout the evaluation.
Promoting use Promoting use refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach guides evaluators to directly and actively facilitate use. This use could be use of evaluation findings, or of knowledge gained through the process of engaging in an evaluation. Use can be immediate and large, or slow and steady, occurring over time.	Unknown / Missing	Use is not a consideration; evaluation provides evaluative findings only.	Use is important, but the evaluation doesn't play an active role in promoting its' use.	Use is essential, and the evaluation takes active steps to maximize or influence use
Engagement in the evaluation process Engagement refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance to evaluators on who is involved in evaluation planning, interpretation, reporting, and decision-making. These groups of people might include those who work on the design, implementation, and/or management of an evaluation (e.g., donors, funders, taxpayers), those who are the immediate recipients of a program (e.g., program participants, or those who receive services), and those who are not direct recipients but benefit nonetheless (e.g., families of people who participated in the program, others conducting similar activities).	Unknown / Missing	Only groups who hold formal power over the evaluation, such as the funders, sponsors, or evaluation team are involved in evaluation decision-making.	Those who hold formal power, along with groups who implement the program activities, are involved in evaluation decision-making.	A variety of groups are involved in evaluation decision-making, including those with formal power, program implementers, intended users, program recipients, participants, community members, or partner organizations.

Petal & Definition	0	1	2	3
Depth of engagement in the evaluation process Depth of engagement refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance on the extent to which different groups of people are engaged throughout an evaluation, and in what roles (i.e., no role, consulted, partners, or co-directors).	Unknown / Missing	No or limited involvement in evaluation phases.	Those involved are consulted in some or all evaluation phases.	Those involved are partners, co-directors, or directors in some or all evaluation phases.
Power dynamics in making evaluation decisions Power dynamic in making evaluation decisions refers to the extent to which an evaluation approach's guidance about who is engaged in decision-making and how.	Unknown / Missing	Top-down decision making by those with formal power (e.g., funders, donors, commissioners).	Cooperative decision-making between the evaluation team and engaged groups.	Collaborative, inclusionary decision-making involving a broad range of engaged groups.

Note. From The Garden of Evaluation Approaches, by B. Montrosse-Moorhead, D. Schröter, and L. W. Becho, 2024, *American Journal of Evaluation*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/10982140231216667 and *The Garden of Evaluation Approaches Rating Rubric*, by B. Montrosse-Moorhead, D. Schröter, and L. W. Becho, 2024 (osf.io/24we3). Copyright 2024 by authors.

The first version of the garden includes seven approaches (listed alphabetically): fourth generation evaluation, Made in Africa, nation-to-nation evaluation, practical participatory evaluation, sistematización de experiencias, theory-driven evaluation, and transformative participatory evaluation. In our 2024 publication (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2024a), we provide greater detail on why these seven approaches were selected as a starting place for the garden and detail future plans.

Garden Intended Users and Uses

The garden of evaluation approaches was built with several users and intended uses in mind. Primarily, it is intended for use by evaluation practitioners. We believe the garden will provide a way for practitioners to engage in reflection and dialogue about which approaches to use for the settings in which their evaluation work is occurring, to be aware of what they might miss by opting for one choice over another, and to think about where, why, and how to combine approaches. We also believe it can be used by practitioners to create (a) their own flower based on how they prefer to practice and (b) the flower that is possible or preferred within a given evaluation setting. This use can be especially helpful for spurring conversation about where there is overlap between (a) and (b), where there is not, and whether and to what extent any differences have the potential to lead to conflicts.

Secondary users include ecosystem actors, evaluation educators, researchers, and theoreticians. Ecosystem actors (e.g., clients, program participants, funders) might use the garden in discussions about their evaluation needs and conversations with evaluators during evaluation planning and implementation. Evaluation educators and trainers might use the garden to illustrate approaches and the variety of different prescriptions for practice. They might also use it as a teaching tool, asking learners to create their own evaluation flowers and associated handouts. Researchers focused on studying evaluation as the object of inquiry (i.e., research on evaluation) can use the garden taxonomy or a flower within it as a conceptual framework to, for instance, compare the idealized version of an approach (its prototype) to what it looks like when applied in the real world across contexts; to add petals or flowers to the garden based on new literature; to map the evolution of approaches by showing how, when, and why their flowers changed; or to study how practitioners make decisions about how to choose, and if applicable, combine approaches. Theoreticians could use the garden, particularly gaps illuminated by the visual, to elaborate and expand discussions of existing approaches, such as by building out and making public an approach's stance related to missing flower petals.

Reflections on Benefits and Limitations of the Garden

Every visualization, including the garden of evaluation approaches, has its benefits and limitations. One benefit of the garden is that it provides a multidimensional mapping of approaches to better illuminate similarities and differences. It also allows for evolution as new approaches and ways of thinking about practice surface. Additionally, it facilitates communication on the intentional mixing of evaluation approaches (for an example, see Bledsoe and Graham, 2005). The garden was created with inclusion as a guiding principle and currently includes nation-to-nation evaluation, Made in Africa, and sistematización de experiencias approaches. As more of the garden is mapped, inclusion will continue to be a guiding principle. We have also anchored evaluation approach flowers to detailed handouts for each approach, which provide intended users with clearly conceptualized, literature-based, and visually accessible summaries of approaches to evaluation. These handouts also serve to make transparent how we engaged in empirical mixed-methods analysis of included approaches.

There are also several limits to the garden and flowers. One is that growing the garden takes time, and while flowers continue to bloom, the model is not yet inclusive of all possible approaches. Practice is complex. The garden and flowers reflect this complexity, meaning that one needs to spend a little time understanding the structure to be able to use it. We are also actively considering some of the petals and thinking about questions like: Should culture be considered part of context (as it is in the visualization's current iteration), or be called out alongside context so the petal is renamed "context and culture," or should culture become its own separate petal? Is there a need to include a new evaluation purpose petal or a petal that talks about the timing in which an approach is most often used in practice? We are also well aware of our own positionality and actively reflect on it in the context of this work by considering: What impact does using a Western frame, rooted in the philosophy of science, have on the garden? What are the benefits of using a Western frame, and where are opportunities to integrate other perspectives? What can other frames illuminate that was previously

hidden? What does it mean to be us (three white women, two from the United States and one from Germany) and to do this work?

Concluding Comments on the Garden

Shadish long ago recognized that "without evaluation theory, evaluation practice is little more than a collection of methods and techniques without guiding principles for their application" (1998, p. 13). More recently, Mark noted that approaches "can help navigate the choices associated with different schools of thought and varied method options" (2018, p. 134). Our hope is that the garden of evaluation approaches and the flowers within it can help evaluators navigate these choices in practice and in ways that build the field.

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