

# Choosing an Evaluation Theory: A Supplement to *Evaluation Roots* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)

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Marvin C. Alkin  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

Christina A. Christie  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

Naomi A. Stephen  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Background:** Unlike scientific theories, evaluation theories are prescriptive: a set of actions and approaches that should be followed when conducting an evaluation. While evaluation theorists have offered a variety of writings describing their theories and approaches, few have offered a specific outline of what the theory looks like in practice. Thus, Alkin and Christie formulated a book to aid evaluators in how to apply theories in evaluations (Alkin & Christie, *forthcoming*). This book culminates in a series of prototypes that outline each theory's goals, appropriate contexts, prescriptions, and observable actions in application.

**Purpose:** In order to aid evaluators in applying theories, this article seeks to provide a basis for comparison that can be used to help evaluators select which theory would be most appropriate in their practice.

**Setting:** This comparison can be applied in any setting where evaluations fit the context prescribed by each of the theories.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Not applicable.

**Findings:** In order for theories to influence practice effectively, theories must be displayed in a way that allows for easy comparison. This comparison of three theory prototypes demonstrates that prototypes can be an effective way for selecting a prescriptive theory when conducting an evaluation.

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**Keywords:** *prescriptive theories; practice; empowerment evaluation; learning centered model; developmental evaluation*

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## Introduction

What are evaluation theories? What purpose are they intended to serve? How might they serve that purpose better? Evaluation “theories” are what we have previously called *prescriptive* theories of evaluation (Alkin & Ellett, 1985). As a practice-oriented field, evaluation (prescriptive) theories are intended to guide practice rather than to explain phenomena. Over time, an extensive evaluation theory literature has been developed, with the intention that these theories be used to guide practice and ultimately lead to the conduct of better evaluation studies.

Evaluation theory was introduced primarily during the 1960s, in response to the federal enactment of Great Society programs, including the Title I programs in education. Most of these programs required an evaluation to understand whether programs were indeed producing the desired outcomes. For the first time, this led to an explosion of U.S. federal funds released specifically for conducting evaluations. This resulted in available funding for those who had been conducting applied social and educational research or measurement studies. However, in many cases these mostly academic or think tank researchers failed to recognize the contingencies of performing evaluations in local or State contexts, including acknowledging the role of stakeholders in an evaluation. For these and other reasons, the rush to meet this need for newly developed programs led to mostly inadequate evaluative results. Some scholars attempted to provide guidance for the conduct of evaluations, but in mostly superficial ways. For example, textbooks that previously were titled “measurement in education” subsequently became “measurement and evaluation in education”, without an appreciable change in content. However, another small group of prominent scholars did indeed contribute new, deeply thoughtful, views on evaluation, some of which included their prescriptions on how an evaluation ought to be conducted.

The purpose of evaluation theory is, and has always been, to explain and influence practice. Over the past five decades, however, we have produced research that shows that

practice is often only loosely tied to theories. There are several reasons for this. First, some theories offer only a limited description of observable actions. Further, evaluation theories are not well selected by practitioners, and importantly, are imperfectly implemented (Coryn et al., 2011; Miller & Campbell, 2006). Additionally, not all theories are applicable to the wide-variety of contexts in which practitioners conduct their evaluations. Moreover, those who do these evaluations may have personal beliefs about what they think an evaluation is and what it should accomplish. There is not an appropriate way to examine theories and compare them relative to individual contexts and to personal beliefs about evaluation. We have sought to address these issues in the current 3rd edition of *Evaluation Roots* (Alkin & Christie, *forthcoming*).

In the third edition, we initially asked authors to provide within their chapter the goal of their theory and a reflection on why they believe that goal is important. We also asked the authors to indicate the kind of context for which their evaluation theory is most appropriate, citing formative, summative, summary formative etc. but also issues of program size or other more unique pertinent aspects of relevant programs. Then, we asked authors to provide a sampling of the prescriptions that were most descriptive of and relevant to their theory. Finally, chapter authors were asked to provide examples of particular observable actions that would demonstrate whether the theory was being implemented according to their prescription, in practice. Needless to say, there was a great variation in the extent to which authors adhered to our request. To address this variation, we developed a final chapter for the book of what we call “prototypes” of each theory. Our prototypes offer a straightforward description of each of the characteristics that we had suggested be included in the authors’ chapters, unadorned by other verbiage. Each chapter author reviewed, modified and approved their theory prototype. Because we are focused on making explicit the procedural practice dimensions of evaluation theory, we hope to, at the very least, provide practitioners with insight into the choices they might make when using a theory as a guide for their practice. Thus, we suggested that readers of

the third edition of the book begin by examining each of the prototypes and determining the appropriate applicability of theories to their particular evaluation purpose, context and goals.

In this paper, we take our process a step further. As follows, we first provide three theory prototypes: empowerment evaluation (David Fetterman), utilization-focused evaluation (Michael Patton), and learning centered evaluation (Hallie Preskill). Next, we provide a comparison of these theories, based on the prototypes, that shows the differences in procedures that might help practitioners determine which theory would be best for use in a particular evaluation. Hopefully, our sample comparative analysis of these three theories will help provide guidance for a fuller examination of the applicability of theories for different applications in practice. We should note here, as we have also noted in the book, that modifying the actions of a particular theory in practice may be (and often is) appropriate, but once a theory is modified, it is not appropriate to claim that the theory was implemented as specified and intended.

## Prototypes

### *Empowerment Evaluation*<sup>1</sup>

**Theorist:** David Fetterman

**Goal:** “Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster [program] improvement and self-determination [...] by increasing the capacity of program stakeholders to plan, implement, and evaluate their own programs.”

**Rationale:** Empowerment evaluation is important because it helps people improve their program’s performance through facilitating community control [and] a sense of ownership.”

**Context:** “Empowerment evaluation can be used to work with small, medium, or large

groups and communities” and is most commonly used for formative evaluations.

### **Prescriptions (partial):**

- Empowerment processes are ones in which attempts to gain control, obtain needed resources, and critically understand one’s social environment are fundamental.
- The evaluation enhances self-determination and creates a sense of ownership amongst participants.
- Empowerment evaluation “places evaluation in the hands of community and staff members” to “make them more likely to make decisions and take actions based on their evaluation data.”
- “Empowerment evaluation is used to help organizations learn from their experience (building on successes, learning from mistakes, and making mid-course corrections).”

### **Observable Actions (sample):**

- The evaluator assists stakeholders in “creating a theory of action at one stage and testing it against the existing theory of use during a later stage.”
- “Specific principles to instruct practice”:
  - The evaluator “invites involvement, participation, and diversity; contributions come from all levels and walks of life.”
  - The evaluator fosters “participation and decision making [that is] open and fair”
  - The evaluator stresses the need “to address social inequities in society.”
  - The evaluator “respects and values community knowledge “
  - The evaluator brings to bear the knowledge of scholars to assist users in developing “evidence-

<sup>1</sup> From Fetterman, D. “Empowerment Evaluation” in Alkin, M., Christie, C., and Stephen, N. (*forthcoming*). Theory Influencing Practice. In Alkin

M., and Christie, C. (Eds.), *Evaluation Roots* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

- based strategies” for the evaluation.
- The evaluator “provides community members with the opportunity to collect their own data, even though it might initially be faster and easier for the evaluator to collect the same information.”
  - The evaluator “encourages data be used to evaluate new practices, inform decision making, and implement program practices.”
  - The evaluator acts as a critical friend: “1) creating an environment conducive to dialogue and discussion; 2) providing or requesting data to inform decision making; 3) facilitating rather than leading; 4) being inclusive and open to ideas; and 5) willing to learn.”
  - The evaluator cultivates a culture of evidence, asking “for evidence or documentation at every stage, so that it becomes normal and expected to have data to support one’s opinions and views.”
  - The evaluator uses a three-step approach to empowerment evaluation, helping a group: “1) establish their mission; 2) take stock of their current status; and 3) plan for the future.” They may also use a 10-step approach, used to build capacity and cultivate self-determination.
    - The group comes to “a consensus concerning their missions or values.”
    - “The empowerment evaluator helps members of the group generate a list of the most important activities required to accomplish organizational or programmatic goals” and “participants in the group [prioritize and then] rate how well they are doing concerning each of the activities selected, using a 1 (low) to 10 (high) scale.”
    - The empowerment evaluator facilitates a discussion about the ratings, asking for the reason and

evidence for a rating. [The evidence derived from this discussion is used to guide the selection of strategies in the group’s plans for the future.]

- The evaluator fosters discussion that plans for the future, “generating goals, strategies, and credible evidence, (to [be used in determining] if the strategies are being implemented and if they are effective).”
  - “The [evaluator works with the group in getting them to] make a commitment to reviewing the status of these new strategies as a group (and [indicating a willingness] to make mid-course corrections if they are not working).”
  - The evaluator also helps the group compare their baseline ratings with anticipated milestones and future ratings to monitor progress over time.

### Utilization-Focused Evaluation<sup>2</sup>

**Theorist:** Michael Q. Patton

**Goal:** Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) aims to support effective action and informed decision-making based on meaningful evidence, thoughtful interpretation, and engaged deliberation.

**Rationale:** “Evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use,” and “UFE offers an energizing and results-oriented path forward.”

**Context:** “UFE is done for and with specific primary intended users for specific, intended uses [yet] can be used for any evaluation in any context” “where those involved in delivering, making decisions about, and funding programs want to learn, improve, and increase effectiveness.”

<sup>2</sup> From Patton, M. Q. “Utilization-Focused Evaluation” in Alkin, M., Christie, C., and Stephen, N. (*forthcoming*). *Theory Influencing Practice*. In

Alkin M., and Christie, C. (Eds.), *Evaluation Roots* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

**Prescriptions (partial):**

- “*Stay focused on use.*” “The evaluator is training users in use, preparing the groundwork for use, and reinforcing the intended utility of the evaluation every step along the way.” “For every issue that surfaces in evaluation negotiations, for every design decision, for every budget allocation, and for every choice among alternatives, keep asking, ‘How will this affect use in this situation?’”
- Evaluation questions, design, data collection, interpretation, and reporting all follow from intended use by intended users.
- UFE requires “(1) finding and involving those who are, by inclination, information users and (2) training and incentivizing those not so inclined.”

**Observable Actions (sample):**

- The evaluator “develops a working relationship with intended users to help them determine what kind of evaluation they need and will use.”
- The evaluator will “be guided by the personal factor. Customize the evaluation to the participants’ knowledge, interests, motivations, and concerns.”
- The evaluator engages “through options. Deliberating on options and expressing preferences increases participants’ understanding of the implications of making certain choices and increases ownership of the decisions and recommendations that emerge from the process.”
- The evaluator observes, interprets, and adapts. “Monitor group dynamics and progress toward priority purposes to inform pacing, changes in the process, and keeping the group moving toward desired outcomes. Adapt facilitation to what emerges.”

- The evaluator “embed[s] evaluative thinking throughout [the evaluation process].”
- The evaluator brings “before participants new directions, emergent thinking, evolving possibilities, creative opportunities, and inspiring innovations.”

**Learning Centered Evaluation<sup>3</sup>**

**Theorist:** Hallie Preskill

**Goal:** “The goal of Learning Centered Evaluation theory is that evaluation is a means for ongoing learning from evaluation processes and findings, and that ultimately, evaluation contributes to decision making and action.”

**Rationale:** By using Learning Centered Evaluation, evaluations “can be a mechanism for facilitating learning from and about evaluation practice that has the potential for organization and system transformation.”

**Context:** “Learning Centered Evaluation is a generic theory,” not specific to one context, but it is “best suited for developmental and formative evaluations” and “learning in multi-site, complex geographies is likely to be more complex and challenging—but doable.”

**Prescriptions (partial):**

- The evaluator engages with a wide range of stakeholders and encourages evaluation capacity building with them.
- The evaluation is “conducted using collaborative, participatory, learning focused, and systems-oriented approaches that pay particular attention to racial equity and justice.”
- “Evaluations should be conducted only when there is an intention to use the findings. Such uses include instrumental, conceptual-

<sup>3</sup> From Preskill, H. “Learning Centered Evaluation” in Alkin, M., Christie, C., and Stephen, N. (*forthcoming*). Theory Influencing Practice. In Alkin

M., and Christie, C. (Eds.), *Evaluation Roots* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

enlightenment-knowledge, and political-symbolic-persuasive.”

- “Expected uses of evaluation processes and findings should guide an evaluation’s design” towards “questions that matter ... reflecting the strategic information needs of the organization or community and ... [informing] understandings, decision-making, and potential actions.”
- “A learning centered evaluation theory puts equity at the center of this work, as it strives to take an anti-racist learning stance, and [makes] a commitment to ongoing learning about equity—what it means, what it looks like, and how it is achieved, at the individual, group, organization, community, and policy levels.”

#### Observable Actions (sample):

- The evaluator “provides space and time for asking questions; engaging in dialogue; identifying and challenging values, beliefs, and assumptions; and reflection (both public and private).”
- The evaluator pursues “true systems change—defined as *changing the conditions that are holding the problem in place*. ... This means studying what those conditions are—policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connects, power dynamics, and mental models, and how best to evaluate them.”
- The evaluator pursues “understanding the concepts of group dynamics, systems change and complexity theory, trust and power, organizational change and culture, adult learning, self-efficacy, racial justice, equitable evaluation, and culturally aware practices” and “facilitates meetings effectively, provides feedback, listens actively, mediates conflict, and negotiates compromise.”
- The evaluator uses an organization’s “strategy [to] inform what gets evaluated, and evaluation should inform the design, development, and implementation of strategy.

## Goal of Evaluation

The first thing to consider is what each of the authors state as the goal of their theory. The goal of a theory provides the basis for the prescriptions outlined by a theorist. Thus, you must consider what appear to be the values present within the goal. Then, you ought to consider what your goals are as an evaluator. What do you think an evaluation ought to accomplish?

We have provided prototypes for three theorists, all of which are on the use branch of the evaluation theory tree, but the way they perceive the goal and role of evaluation may have slight differences. There is nuance in understanding how these theories that share the same broad categorization each vary in their approach to evaluation. Thus, the purpose of this article is to illustrate how theories differ even when sharing a broad overarching purpose.

Now, let us examine the goal of empowerment evaluation. The goal of empowerment evaluation is centered on *empowerment*. It is described by Fetterman as enhancing “self-determination through increasing the capacity of program stakeholders to plan, implement, and evaluate their own programs.” In this theory, those in the program are provided with a greater sense of ownership through a more active role in engaging, participating, and conducting the evaluation.

The next theory we consider is UFE. The goal that anchors UFE is evaluation use. The theory is grounded in the argument that “evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use” and in supporting effective action and informing decision-making.

Finally, we review the goal of learning centered evaluation. In this approach, Preskill pursues ongoing learning from evaluation processes and findings leading to organizational change. A pithy summary of each is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
Goals of Prototypes

Prototype	Empowerment Evaluation	Utilization-Focused Evaluation	Learning Centered Evaluation
Goal	Fostering program ownership	Promoting user action	Facilitating organizational change

What are your goals as an evaluator? Why do you think that goal is important? What is your program and what goal might be most applicable? What are your beliefs about the purpose of evaluations and the obligations of the evaluator? Now consider the programs you are or may be evaluating. Do you have as a primary concern organizational change? Or are you most intently focused on assuring that evaluation use takes place? Or are you intently concerned with stakeholders primarily conducting a self-evaluation under your guidance as a way of stimulating improvement and empowering individuals in the organization to create change?

### Examination of Context

Once you have determined your goal, it is next important to understand to what extent the approach can be implemented in your particular context. No theory can be applicable to every context. There are many potential ways of describing the context of an evaluation. For example, an evaluation might take place in a small local program or in a large federal program. Moreover, the purposes of different evaluations may vary. The program might be in an early stage and the evaluation purpose be formative—seeking to provide information examining the manner in which the program is being implemented or gathering data for modifying program procedures. Further, the prescriptions of the evaluation theory may not align with the goals of the program. Additionally, stakeholders may not be interested, willing, or have the capacity to participate in the manner prescribed by the theory.

To personalize this, are the stakeholders that you will be working with willing to commit themselves to very frequent engagement in conducting the evaluation in the manner that

would be prescribed by empowerment evaluation? Or, are you willing to commit to intensive concern about the way in which the evaluation and its processes might lead to evaluation use as in UFE? Or, does the context center on the concern for organizational development and necessitate gaining the inclusion and participation of most members of the program staff aligned with learning centered evaluation? Your responses to these questions will inform whether and which of these theories might be most appropriate to a particular evaluation

### Examination of Observable Actions

And now to gain a better understanding of the actualities of engaging in an evaluation using a particular theory we will focus on key observable actions for each of the three theories. This will further illustrate how they are distinguished from one another. There are some common values and principles embedded within each of these three theories. All three: require participation of stakeholders as they help guide the evaluation; seek to develop a working relationship with stakeholders; stress the need to be culturally-responsive; and, in addition show a concern for findings and process use.

In order to create a better understanding of how to distinguish and apply each theory, though, we review 4 dimensions of practice and how each theory addresses these dimensions. We have attempted to base our analysis on the prototypes developed from the chapters of *Evaluation Roots*, 3rd edition, and supplemented unaddressed aspects using extant knowledge and information present in the book.

## **Evaluator Role**

In each theory, the evaluator's role is described as requiring active engagement with stakeholders to facilitate use and program change. However, each offers a different set of procedures for the evaluator to follow. Empowerment evaluation describes the evaluator's role as a well-selected set of activities, often defined as a 3-step procedure. This stages specific activities that a group of participants will engage in leading to understanding their values and the needs of the program; then engages them in developing and implementing methods to determine the current status of the program; and, finally, plans for the future of the program. Empowerment evaluation maintains that the evaluator is best able to do this by acting as a critical friend to stakeholders.

UFE suggests that the evaluator is focused on activities that will enhance the possibility of use. This maintains an exclusive focus on intended primary users. This means that they will be active in helping to determine the primary evaluation questions and that the intended primary users will stay focused on the findings from those questions as a potential stimulus for use. The evaluator monitors progress towards priority purposes and keeps the group moving towards desired outcomes. As a result, the evaluator or primary users may suggest adaptations to the program and the evaluation.

In learning centered evaluation, the role of the evaluator is described as primarily collaborative. The evaluator works with groups to provide them with an understanding of their program and of the appropriate evaluation mechanisms both for evaluating that program and for potential general use in future evaluations. The evaluator seeks to understand the structural and behavioral barriers to organizational change which includes areas within the organization where things are working well.

## **Stakeholder Selection and Participation**

Selection of stakeholders is of greatest concern in UFE. This theory has a basis in the necessity of identifying what are referred to as "intended primary users." While selection is

important, the process of enhancing primary use capabilities in stakeholders is also specified. For empowerment evaluation, the focus is less on the selection of individual primary users; and rather, on an identified group of key stakeholders to engage in empowerment evaluation activities. While learning centered evaluation is less specific in the selection of stakeholders, the theory encourages broad participation by stakeholders in order to encourage organizational learning.

Each of the three theories support strong engagement of stakeholders in the evaluation but in different ways. In empowerment evaluation, the evaluator provides a structured sequence of activities for stakeholders to engage in when conducting the evaluation. Stakeholders, to a large extent, are conducting the evaluation themselves under the guidance of an empowerment evaluator. In UFE, the primary intended users participate in all major activities of the evaluation, especially in the framing of questions and evaluation design and reporting. Each of these activities are focused on use. With the encouragement of the evaluator, stakeholders are constantly considering the way in which the activity or findings might further enhance use. In Learning Centered Evaluation, gaining understanding is the primary priority for stakeholders through involvement in intentional learning activities. The evaluator involves stakeholders in sense-making activities to analyze data to build their evaluation capacity.

## **Framing of Evaluation Questions**

Each theory argues for evaluation questions to be framed based on the primary goal of their theory. In empowerment evaluation, stakeholders engage in describing the important activities to be accomplished by the organization and then rate their performance. In essence, the question appears to us to be implicit: namely, how are we doing on each activity? In UFE, the evaluator takes an active role in working with intended users to frame the evaluation questions. These questions are carefully examined with regard to their feasibility and, especially, potential use. In



Learning Centered Evaluation, the evaluator seeks to select questions that reflect the strategic information needs of the organization or community. The evaluator then uses strengths-based questions in pursuit of organizational learning rather than focusing on program deficits.

### **Evaluator Role in Promoting Use**

While all three theories maintain that the evaluator should play a crucial role in facilitating use and stakeholder engagement because of the importance of this activity in fostering use, each theory specifies the ways in which the evaluator should work to promote use. Empowerment evaluation focuses on building the capacity of stakeholders and program staff to improve their use of the evaluation. Ownership in the evaluation process is essential. Responsibility for evaluative activities is transferred from the evaluator to the stakeholders. This active engagement leads to democratic participation, which increases the use of community knowledge in understanding and using the evaluation findings. The guiding framework of UFE is attaining use. UFE views actual use as the primary measure of evaluation success. The evaluator concentrates their focus on a smaller group, referred to as “primary intended users.” The evaluator views the training of these users in use as a major responsibility. In Learning Centered Evaluation, the evaluation process and the formative and summative evaluation findings are used to help the organizational learning community collaborate with one another. As a result, this increases data supported decisions, and ultimately, improves the culture of the organization.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which practices would vary when implementing three different evaluation theories. We selected three theories that we have classified on the use branch of the evaluation theory tree in the third edition of *Evaluation Roots*. We hope to have explicated the nuances in practice that one might expect to see, based on the specific theory used.

Herewithin, we have provided a discussion of the goals of each of the goals of three theories. This should allow for some initial thoughts on which of the three theories might be most applicable for you and the programs you are evaluating. It is also important to consider your personal views about the purpose of evaluation. Then, we provided a description of the contexts in which theory authors indicated were most relevant for their theory. In what kinds of contexts (formative, summative, specific populations, etc.) do you typically conduct your evaluations? Which theory, then, seems most relevant? Based upon prescriptions and observable actions, we indicated four important dimensions on which theories could be compared: Evaluator Role, Stakeholder Selection and Participation, Framing Evaluation Questions, and Evaluator Role in Promoting Use. Consider the extent to which there is variance between theories on these dimensions.

For those with an interest in other theories that we have not addressed here, we encourage you to read *Evaluation Roots*, 3rd edition and to examine the prototypes in the final chapter of the book. You may then conduct your own assessment of which theory best fits with your own views and values about evaluation and the needs of the particular program you may be evaluating. In this way, we hope to narrow the gap between theory and practice.

### **Authors' Note**

Prototypes provided from *Evaluation Roots*, 3rd edition (forthcoming and copyrighted, Guilford Publications, Inc.).

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