# A Tree: Planted and Growing

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**Background:** Evaluation theory classification systems have been developed since the field's early stages of theory development. Many have been published with the goal of promoting further understanding of the ways in which theoretical ideas relate both philosophically and in practice. This article intends to promote a better understanding of the development and evolution of one of the classification systems, the evaluation theory tree, first developed by Alkin and Christie in the late 1990s and published in its most recent version in 2023.

**Purpose:** This paper shares the primary purpose for developing the evaluation theory tree, our analytic process

for developing the categorization system presented as a tree, and how and why the tree has evolved over the years since its first publication.

**Setting:** Not applicable.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

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

**Findings:** Not applicable.

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I began my doctoral studies at UCLA in 1997 under the mentorship of Marvin Alkin. At that time, the doctoral program in social research methodology (SRM) consisted of two core courses in evaluation, —one focused on practice and one on theory. Two of us were studying evaluation in a five-person doctoral cohort. To provide us with a more expansive and in-depth understanding of evaluation theory and the connections between theory and practice, Marv initiated weekly meetings to discuss readings, which were heavily theoretical. This intensive engagement with the literature helped us to develop a robust understanding of the field and its literature. This small mentoring group eventually evolved into what Marv later called the evaluation discussion group (EDG; Christie & Rose, 2003; Vo, 2016).

I enrolled in the SRM program interested in studying the connection between evaluation practice and theory. After completing my master's training, I took a position as a coordinator for a study conducted by a behavioral scientist at Columbia University examining the outcomes of a small-group cognitive behavioral intervention designed to reduce high-risk behaviors in adolescents infected with HIV. What I did not understand at the time was that I was engaged in an evaluation study—it was a more traditional evaluation study, meaning that we were studying the outcomes of the program using social science research methods, but indeed it was an evaluation study (you know, a "methods branch" study).

Working on this study introduced me to a homeless and runaway youth center, which I next went to work for as an internal evaluator. I had no idea what this work would entail, but it didn't take long to realize that quasi-experiential outcome-focused study designs wouldn't meet the needs of those running the center. I moved quickly to find resources to do something different, and I came across an early (pre-1997) edition of Michael Patton's utilization-focused evaluation text. Patton's utilization-focused evaluation certainly made sense as a guide for my work at the center. It is not an exaggeration to say that finding Patton's book changed my life. It introduced me to writings on evaluation theory, including Marv's writings. I became very curious about why these theories didn't seem to inform the work of the evaluators I had met in my short time working post–masters degree. This interest persists today; it was the focus of my dissertation study and has been a theme in my work throughout my career.

## Analytic Process

One day, Marv shared with me a draft of a "family tree" that depicted the academic lineage of Benjamin Bloom in a flowchart format. I have searched for this diagram and cannot find it, so I suspect it may not have been published. Nevertheless, this prompted a discussion about whether it might be possible to create such a family tree for evaluation, which we quickly decided wouldn't be easy to do given that evaluation is a practical field. Not surprisingly, most people who study with those in the academy who make theoretical contributions go on to work outside of academia.

Instead, what we thought we might be able to do is show how ideas in the field were influenced by others—not in the same way that ideas of students might be influenced by mentors and advisors, yet not unlike it. In Marv's chapters on evaluation theory development (1972, 1991), he observes the ways in which evaluation theory is developed. He points to interactions in academic publications, conference papers, and related discussions as critical for idea development, analysis, and maturation. This process is well documented in other fields, too. Thus, the idea that the work of others can advance one's own seemed reasonably acceptable (bibliometric analyses can demonstrate this; for example, Heberger, Christie, & Alkin, 2010).

If we were going to map out the ways in which writings on evaluation models and theory influenced others, we would need an organizing framework. In our small group discussions, I first read two articles Marv coauthored with Fred Ellett (1979, 1985), a philosopher of education. Both articles focused on evaluation theory, and one took up the importance of categorization systems. We also read other writings that described categorization systems in evaluation, such as Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) and Worthen and Sanders (1973). These readings were of particular interest to me as they helped clarify the circumstances under which a particular theory might be used in practice to advance a particular goal for an evaluation, as well as how this landscape of theoretical writings I had been reading fit together.
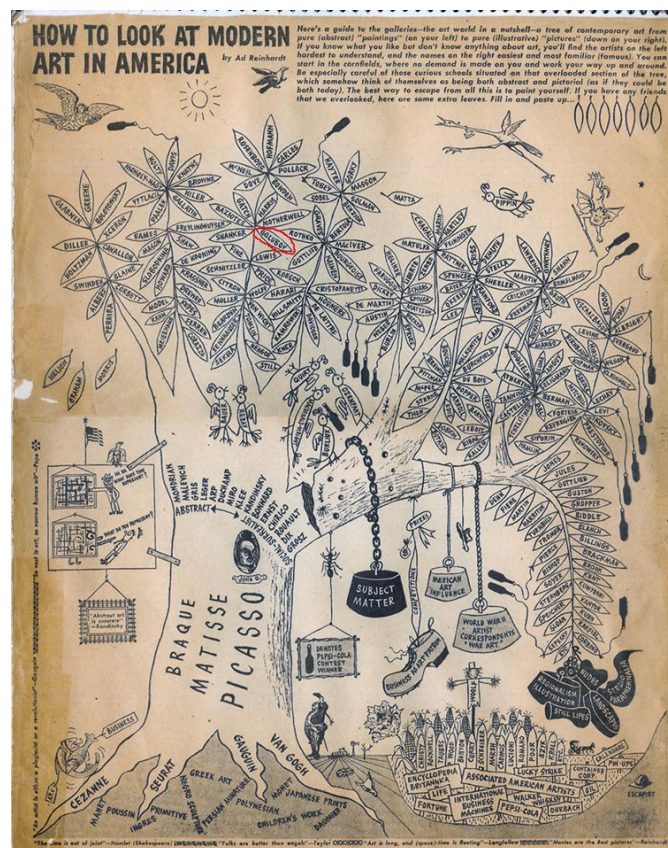
As a first order of business in developing our "idea influence" exercise, we needed to commit to the dimensions of the categorization framework. For my dissertation study, I had already worked through a content analysis process for grouping eight theorists' work into three categories—methods, values, and use—informed

by Alkin and Ellett (1985) and Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991). If we were going to attempt to categorize evaluation theory writings more expansively, we would need to test the hypothesis further: Was it the case that evaluation theorists, to some degree, attended to the three dimensions of evaluation that had been postulated by Alkin and Ellet (1985)? So, we started reading seminal pieces and studying their reference lists. We identified additional readings by each piece's author and by others whom they cited. We selected readings from those active in the American Evaluation Association's evaluation theory TIG (topical interest group). We would read three to six a week. I suspect that we read over 50 articles and chapters in an effort to validate the proposition posited related to methods, values, and use. Once we were well convinced that the dimensions were indeed grounding tenets of an evaluation theory, we asked others in Marv's advising group, colleagues on the UCLA faculty, and others in the field to do some reading, too, to help triangulate and confirm and, importantly, look also to *disconfirm* our analysis. This took us several months. Ultimately, we felt comfortable moving forward with the three categories: methods, values, and use.

At the same time, we were playing around with how to illustrate the dimensions and their relationship to one another. We started with tables. We moved to figures. And then... Marv's administrative assistant suggested using an illustration of an actual tree. She was studying art history at UCLA and thought we might be inspired by the well-known 1946 drawing seen in Figure 1, Ad Reinhardt's *How to Look at Modern Art in America*.

Figure 1. *How to Look at Modern Art in America*, by Ad Reinhardt



*Note.* From Smithsonian, Archives of American Art.
https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/portion-pm-newspaper-containing-ad-reinhardts-cartoon-how-to-look-modern-art-america-16504

As you can see, Reinhardt's tree offers a historical grounding for modern art and a sense of the context for art at that time—note, for example, the weight of "subject matter." The corner text explains the categorization of artists and invites readers to "fill in and paste up" new leaves.

It was then easy to find Figure 2, *The Tree of Modern Art,* by Miguel Covarrubias (1940). This tree was originally published in *Vanity Fair* seven years before Reinhardt, and as the field evolved, so did the tree—(into Reinhardt's tree).

Figure 2. *The Tree of Modern Art* by Miguel Covarrubias



*Note.* From "Miguel Covarrubias: The Tree of modern Art – Planted 60 Years Ago,
Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: A Tree Chart of Contemporary American Art,
Ad Reinhardt: How to Look at Modern Art in America" https://georgemaciunas.com/exhibitions/fluxus-happening-"mapping-maciunas"-and-"exercise"/"mapping-maciunas"/charts/miguel-covarrubias-the-tree-of-modern-art-planted-60-years-ago-nathaniel-pousette-dart-a-tree-chart-of-contemporary-american-art-ad-reinhardt-how-to-look-at-modern-art-in-america/

Now we were no longer bound by the flowchart family tree, as the artists' trees inspired our thinking about what could be done with an "evaluation theory tree."

The work progressed with the categories established and the general visual framework decided upon. For the next year, we continued to read almost everything published on evaluation theory up until that point in the field's relatively short history. We also read writings from other fields cited by the evaluation theorists in their papers. For example, we read Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) as it influenced Ernie House's theoretical writings. Our process was iterative and deeply analytic and involved taking and comparing extensive notes, triangulation, and further contemplation.

Important too, our goal was not to publish an all-inclusive, decisive taxonomy. From the outset, we had always viewed our work as iterative. Just as Reinhardt invited readers to "fill in and paste up" new leaves, we too understood that from the moment we published our work, it would be open to critique and suggestion for further "growth." In this spirit, in the first edition of the *Roots* book, we presented the initial version of the tree —the one shared with theorists before they wrote their own chapters—in Chapter 2. Later in the book (see Chapter 26), we presented an updated version of the tree revised in response to the chapter authors' writings. I believe this very important point has been lost over the years in the discussions and critiques of the theory tree. It was always intended to be an evolving framework and never intended to be an authority on what is or is not theory or who is or is not a theorist. That is understood in the chapters preceding the presentation of the tree in each of the three *Roots* books, but I suspect these chapters are not read as often or as carefully.

Working on the first version of the theory tree was a nice excuse for Marv and me to work together and offered us an opportunity to be in an ongoing discussion with others in the field who also spent a lot of time thinking about evaluation theory and were equally excited about the topic. It would be impossible to accurately compile the list of all who we engaged in our process, as it was over 25 years ago that we began our work and there was much that was spontaneous in our interactions with others that we just no longer recall. Nonetheless, I will share that we would sometimes pick up the phone and call a colleague impromptu for clarity on a point or to help further inform our differing perspectives on an issue we'd been debating. Other discussions were more formal; we would read someone's writings, assign their piece to Marv's evaluation discussion group, and then invite the author(s) to talk with the EDG, sitting around an oval table in his office with a speaker phone in the center asking questions and engaging in what was, most often, lively conversation. Marv and I would take detailed notes on the discussion, which we would then integrate into our thinking about different tree elements. Additionally, we engaged countless times over email with folks in the field and those outside of the field whose work was related to what we had been reading. We also formally interviewed evaluation writers. People who pushed our thinking include (but, of course, are not limited to), Michael Patton, Brad Cousins, Huey Chen, Bob Stake, Michael Scriven, Ernie House, Hallie Preskill, Jean King, Mel Mark, George Julnes, Will Shadish, Peter Rossi, Donna Mertens, Rodney Hopson, Stafford Hood, Sharon Rallis, Jennifer Greene, Robin Miller, Mike Rose, Mike Seltzer Noreen Webb, Arif Amlani, and so many others. I recall Will Shadish being especially helpful, as he had co-authored one of the most important analytic works on evaluation theory published. We also presented draft iterations of the tree in our doctoral classes at UCLA and at several American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference meetings. These were opportunities for invited input and critique, which we also incorporated into our thinking. We organized AEA panel sessions for two consecutive years before publishing the initial theory tree in Chapter 2 of the first edition of *Roots*. Most memorable was Michael Patton's suggestion in our first public (AEA session) discussion of this new categorization system that a river metaphor would better represent theorists' work, an idea that others have picked up on and articulated (see Azzam & Donaldson, this volume). Patton remains dissatisfied with the tree, as he sees it as a theory analysis that is too constrained. It was also in one of our AEA sessions that David Fetterman argued for representation on all branches of the tree, contesting the classification of his contributions to just one category (which, of course, is a primary purpose of a taxonomy), maintaining that his work relates substantively to each of the three branches. I suspect he was not alone in this complaint!

## The Tree Categorization System

The most recent version of an evaluation theory tree is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Evaluation Theory Tree 2023
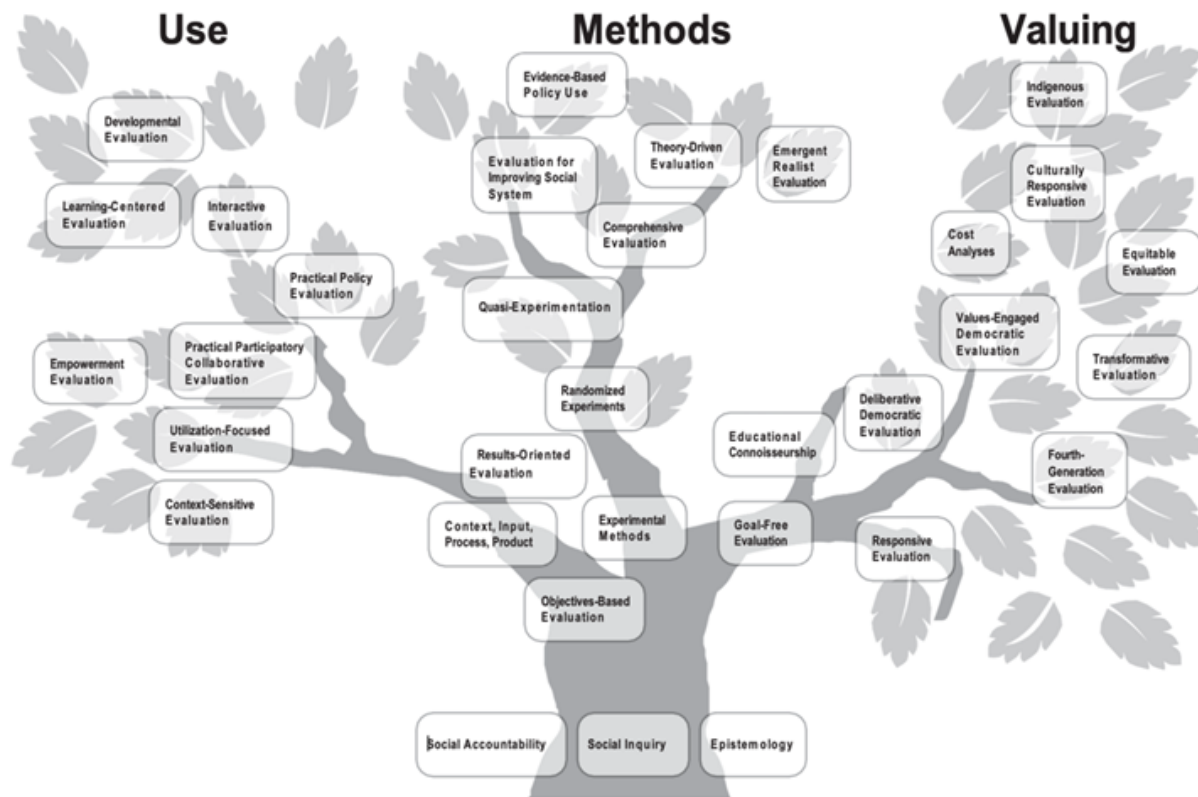


*Note*: From Alkin and Christie, 2023.

The tree as it lives today has three tree roots and three branches. In very early unpublished draft versions, the tree was rooted in evaluation theory writings—, the early writings of authors whom we later relocated onto the branches. We decided that because roots anchor a tree's main branches, we would move to examine writings from which early thinking on evaluation grew. This required studying writings on the philosophies of science and justice, as well as other early writings that provided motivations, justifications, and reasoning for developing the field as both a practice and a discipline of study. Some of these writings stretched before the Great Society legislation era, and we worked our way forward. We identified accountability and control as a principal purpose for and social inquiry as a philosophical grounding of the tree. We later revised the tree roots, as we thought it would be important to ground each branch in its own root to help further distinguish the general differences and distinct lines of thought that inform each category (i.e., branch). The roots of the utilization branch were revised from "accountability" to "social accountability" as a motivation for conducting evaluations that have as

their primary purpose to provide information for decision-making. The social inquiry root was shifted to anchor only the methods branch (which, in a later version of the tree, we argue would have been better labeled as "methodology"), as those theories included in this category aim to produce evaluation studies in support of "knowledge construction" (2012). The additional third root, epistemology, grounds the valuing category, as it shows how theories most concerned with the role of values and valuing in evaluation are grounded in principles of philosophies that take up the "nature and validity (or limitations) of knowledge." We argue, "Key evaluation concerns that are based in epistemology arguments include the legitimacy of value claims, the nature of universal claims, and the view that truth (or fact) is what we make it to be" (2012, p. 13). The roots have not been revised; however, the text explaining each root has been elaborated upon to clarify the general principles that inform each category.

The descriptions of the methods and use branches haven't changed much over the years. I share what we have written to describe these two categories.

In the beginning, there was research. Post-positivist research methodologies dominated the study. While most evaluation theorists have methodological concerns and view applied research as the genesis of program evaluation, one group of theorists has been steadfast in clinging to that orientation. In the social sciences and psychology, this emphasis on applied research depends on well-designed experimental studies and other controls. Fundamental to these theories is the early work of Donald Campbell (1957) and, in particular, the more well-known Campbell and Stanley volume (1966), which defines the conditions for appropriate experimental and quasi-experimental designs. (Alkin, 2012, p. 18)

We explain the use branch this way:

The use branch began its growth with what is often referred to as "decision-oriented theories." Decision-oriented theorists felt it was critical to conduct evaluations designed specifically to assist key program stakeholders in program decision-making. Such stakeholders are most often those who commission the evaluation. Based on empirical knowledge about the conditions under which evaluation occurs, utilization theorists built on the notions in decision-oriented theories. This class of theories is concerned with designing evaluations intended to inform decision-making and ensure that evaluation results impact decision-making, organizational change, capacity building to use and do an evaluation, and conceptual understanding of the program. This work focuses primarily on the program. (Alkin, 2023, p. 37)

The valuing branch is the category we have struggled with and revised most significantly. As we explain in the book's second edition (2012), theories in the valuing category primarily focus on whether and how and why, with what evidence, and by whom we place value on the evaluand. At the branch's base are goal-free evaluation (Scriven) and responsive evaluation (Stake). This was the case even in the earliest versions of the tree. But, given how different these theories are in their foundational arguments for the purpose and the procedures for conducting evaluation, it just didn't seem precise enough. So, we spent quite a bit of time talking with both Michael Scriven and Robert Stake, separately and even twice together (thank goodness for AEA annual conference meetings), which led us to split the branch in two in the 2012

version of the book, with objectivist on the left and subjectivist on the right. Stake insisted on the exact placement we show in the 2012 version, with Scriven slightly below him and to the left, to reflect the influence Stake indicated Scriven had on his thinking about evaluation. The split of the branch served to differentiate the two general lines of thought that inform the valuing processes in evaluation, on the left (closest to the methods branch, as it is more closely aligned with post-positive thought that informs that branch)—being that value judgments should be based on "publicly observable" facts. And, on the "subjective" right, we say "human action is governed by subjective factors—and that a unique characteristic of human behavior is its 'subjective meaningfulness' and any science that 'ignores meaning and purpose is not social science'" (Diesing, 1966 p. 124, as cited in Alkin, 2012). We categorized the few theories that align philosophically with the objective stance of goal-free evaluation on the left. Most theories in this category are on the right, with evidence of influence from the writings on or developed from responsive evaluation.

### Placement

Much thought and analysis determined where a theory is placed on the tree. Placement reflects the primary and the secondary emphases of a theory. When teaching using the tree, I like to say—we know that every evaluation theory is concerned with these three dimensions of evaluation. However, where would it be placed if you only had one chip? That is how we determined the branch on which a theory is categorized. Then, we situate the theory in relation to its evolution and influence on other theoretical ideas on the branch. This placement sometimes approximates historical developments, but only as it reflects the development of ideas over time. We did not set out to offer a historical analysis, but in some cases, placements provide a historical representation of how ideas developed over time. An example is the theories developed years after the initial publication of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, such as practical participatory evaluation. This is a case where an accurate historical advancement is depicted as ideas were developed over time. In other instances, the interplay of thinking and interactions that transpired in published work and conference proceedings pushed the development of new ideas over a more compressed period. This was the case with goal-free and responsive evaluation.

To recognize the importance of secondary placements of theories on each branch, it must be

understood that the tree is meant to be viewed as a three-dimensional object. Theories placed toward the right side of the methods branch reflect the secondary importance of objective valuing. Those on the left side of the methods branch show secondary attention to use. Following this same logic, those placed on the left side of the use branch indicate a secondary focus on subjective valuing. For example, empowerment evaluation is placed on the left side of the use branch to reflect the importance of valuing—specifically, discussions about whose values inform value judgments about a program—as a secondary concern of this approach. Those on the right side of the use branch have a secondary interest in methods. Again, using the same reasoning, those on the objectivist (left) side of the valuing branch have a secondary concern for methods, and those on the right for use. Those theories placed centrally on a branch reflect that we found less evidence of a secondary focus in the writings published on that particular theory.

And lastly, a note about the "who"—who was included in earlier versions of the tree (before we shifted from theorists to theories in the latest version of the book). This has been a major point of criticism. As explained in the *Roots* books (first and second editions), we determined who to include by choosing those authors who initially offered the most comprehensive description of a particular theory (as confirmed by extensive reviews of the literature and citation analyses). This limited the "who" to a set of privileged authors with access to and opportunity in academia and other related spaces that others from historically and systemically oppressed groups do not have, especially during the years the field was emerging. We recognize this as a serious limitation and have moved away from a classification system focused on who to a focus on "what" and how the what translates into practice. Theory as a guide for practice.

## To Conclude

We know that our organizing of theories in discrete categories has been critiqued as offering a limited view of evaluation theory. However, this critique often misses the nuance of placement explained here. That is not to say that the critique is not valid; indeed, to a certain extent we agree with it. As we understand, the purpose of categorization systems is to suggest analytic groupings intended to show comparisons and relationships of ideas on a common set of dimensions. This is at once the strength and the limitation of a categorization system. The theory tree is also not intended to

provide an exhaustive description of the field of evaluation or even of evaluation theory. Rather, we intend for it to show how a set of theories has influenced the ideas presented in other theories and the connections and distinctions amongst ideas. We are glad that it has stimulated debate and hope it has advanced thinking about evaluation theory and practice further in ways that might not have emerged had it not been published in its various versions over the past 25 years.

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