

## Mind the Gap: Bridging Program Evaluation in the Energy Efficiency and Social Services Sectors

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Many of us working as evaluators in the field of energy efficiency come to the field of evaluation with training in economics or engineering. Without formal training as evaluators, we draw from our own professional expertise and the norms set by other practitioners in the energy efficiency evaluation field to develop our approach to answering our clients' research questions. The process of developing our evaluation approach is often unconscious – over the course of our evaluation careers, we develop our approach by asking ourselves questions: “What do we want the stakeholders of in this evaluation to do with our findings?” “What methods would be most appropriate for answering our stakeholders' questions?” “What do we want the stakeholders to get out of the evaluation process?”

To supplement our process of professional development and self-reflection as evaluators, prescriptive “theories” of evaluation practice can aid us in developing our individual and collective evaluation approaches. A prescriptive theory or model of evaluation is “a set of rules, prescriptions, prohibitions and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be done; such models serve as exemplars” (Alkin, 2004, p. 5). Evaluations have real-world impacts, and these prescriptive models can improve the quality of our evaluations by increasing our awareness of how the decisions we make at various points in an evaluation may affect the nature and scope of these impacts.

Few documents in the field of energy efficiency evaluation make explicit reference to the evaluation theories or approaches adopted by practitioners in the energy efficiency evaluation field. At present, the reach of evaluation theory has been mostly limited to what might be considered the evaluation mainland, where evaluations are conducted by social scientists or public health researchers who draw from the work of academic researchers working to study and improve evaluation practice. In this conception of the world of evaluation, evaluators working in energy efficiency live on an island off the coast of the evaluation mainland. While our distance from the mainland has allowed many unique species of evaluation methods to flourish, many of the writings of evaluators outside of the energy efficiency field, including writings related to evaluation theory, have yet to reach our shores.

To facilitate self-reflection in our field and to help us consider our place within the larger world of the evaluation discipline, this poster attempts to identify features of the “implicit theory of energy efficiency evaluation.” This conceptual presentation draws upon documents that are widely used to guide evaluation practice within the field of energy efficiency. The implicit evaluation approach extracted from these documents is considered in terms of its placement on the Evaluation Theory Tree (Alkin & Christie, 2004), a widely-referenced system for categorizing evaluation theories. From this starting point, the poster presents key points in a typical evaluation where an evaluator's theory of evaluation might impact their decision-making – when they are determining how to engage with stakeholders, which methods to use, how to present results, and so on. Within this framework, the energy efficiency evaluation approach is compared with alternative approaches. Finally, the poster presents potential implications of this theory and alternatives to this theory for the future of energy efficiency evaluation.

## Evaluation Theory

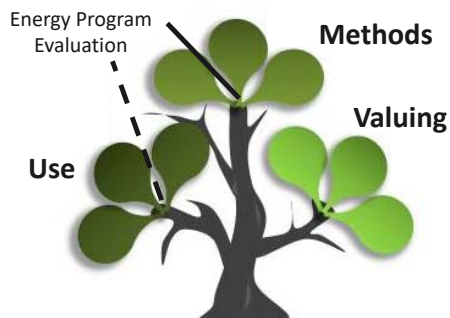
A prescriptive theory of evaluation is “a set of rules, prescriptions, and prohibitions and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be done; such models serve as exemplars”<sup>1</sup>

The picture below depicts the evaluation theory tree, used by evaluation scholars as a categorization scheme for evaluation approaches.

Use theories strive to maximize evaluation’s use in decision-making. Theories on this branch argue that methods and values are meaningless if the evaluation is not used.

Methods theories consider evaluators as researchers, and focus on developing methods that are systematic, rigorous, and minimize bias.

Valuing theories focus on issues of social justice and being deliberate about whose values are prioritized in the evaluation. They consider generating value judgments as the purpose of evaluation.



## Energy Evaluation’s Branch

A qualitative analysis of the California Protocols<sup>2</sup> suggests that the “typical energy evaluation” approach falls primarily on the Methods branch of the theory tree, with some elements of the approach drawn from the Use branch.

## Comparing Evaluation Approaches

The typical energy evaluation approach focuses on optimizing methodological rigor and minimizing bias. This is understandable given the goals of most energy evaluations. Energy evaluators can consider how alternative approaches, focused more on use or valuing considerations, might enhance their practice.

The following considerations are drawn from a qualitative analysis of evaluation literature written by scholars and practitioners outside the energy sector. The considerations contrast with the theoretical perspectives implied in the California Protocols.

Evaluation Task	Use Considerations	Valuing Considerations
Assess Evaluability	Will the evaluation timing facilitate use? Are stakeholders committed to using the evaluation?	What are the power dynamics at play in the evaluation request? Can value conflicts among stakeholder groups be negotiated?
Engage Stakeholders	Who are the primary intended users? What is the primary intended use of the evaluation?	Does the evaluation include all relevant interests? How might the pool of stakeholders sustain or challenge power dynamics?
Develop Evaluation Questions	How will answers to these questions be used by primary intended users to inform decisions?	What are stakeholders’ explicit and implicit interests? Are these interests represented fairly? Who decides which questions are high priority?
Develop Evaluation Methods	Do primary intended users consider these methods credible? Will the results be easy to interpret?	Which methods will facilitate making value judgments? Will all relevant perspectives be captured with these methods?
Collect Data	How can the process of data collection contribute to the organization’s evaluation capacity?	How should the questions and methods be adapted for emergent findings? Should stakeholders participate?
Analyze Data	Do the primary intended users understand the results and their implications? Are the findings actionable?	What is the merit, worth, and significance of the program or program components? Do alternate interpretations exist?
Report Findings	Will the report be available in time to act on the findings? Will primary intended users understand the results?	How might the reports reinforce or disrupt stakeholders’ power dynamics and values? How can evaluators facilitate deep understanding?

## Discussion

As the business models for utilities change to adapt to new market conditions, there may be increasing demand for evaluations that facilitate the development and re-development of organizational strategies. Expanding our toolkit to incorporate considerations from other branches of the evaluation theory tree may help energy evaluators to nimbly respond to changing client needs.

As energy evaluation expands beyond its primary role today – accountability and control – entirely new approaches to evaluation may be developed. Most evaluation theorists to date have training in the social sciences and work with programs that operate very differently than most energy efficiency programs. Energy evaluators have a unique perspective, and can offer a fresh voice to this discussion.

## Future Directions

With these considerations in mind, there are several opportunities for energy evaluators in the future:

- Considerations of use and valuing can be incorporated into the development of energy evaluator certification criteria and training.
- Individual evaluators and evaluation firms can consider targeting new audiences for their evaluations. Higher-level audiences, such as Vice-Presidents and upper management, may be able to champion the use of evaluation results in ways that the typical energy evaluation audiences cannot. Actively disseminating easily interpretable results to relevant stakeholder groups outside utilities may also facilitate engagement with utility efforts to improve.
- Evaluators can consider engaging with groups outside of the typical energy evaluation stakeholders (e.g., contractors, end-user segments) to prioritize evaluation questions, and possibly even collect evaluation data.

## Contact Information

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## References

1. Adapted from Alkin, M. C. (2012). *Evaluation roots* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
2. Selected because of its status as an exemplar document for guiding the work of energy evaluators.

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