

Why is Evaluation So White?

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Introduction

In this presentation, Vidhya Shanker, PhD, and Carolina De La Rosa Mateo, MPH, explore how the field of evaluation has approached race, the implications of that approach, and the promise of generative networks to amplify the work of evaluators who identify as Indigenous, Black, or People of Color (IBPOC), as illustrated by one such network recently formed in Minnesota. Specifically, the webinar discusses whiteness with respect to the evaluation field's

1. **demographic composition**,
2. **scholarship**, and
3. **practice**, through the eyes of IBPOC practitioners.

Narratives about race in evaluation

Evaluators actively construct race, whether they explicitly discuss it or not. Dr. Shanker's [dissertation](#)¹ research found that evaluation has used the discourses of culture, diversity, and inclusion to signify racialized difference. While these discourses began with an interest in justice, their exponential growth ultimately obscured, rather than illuminated, the centrality of race to societal inequities and to evaluation. As such, they can be characterized as liberal rather than critical discourses. Critical discourses of race, in contrast, draw from ancestral, experiential, and community knowledge derived from centuries of struggle against white supremacy and other systems of oppression. The amplification of liberal discourses mitigated the growth of a theoretically and empirically grounded critical tradition in evaluation that had started and might otherwise have generated greater understanding of racialized difference, disparities, and disproportionalities within evaluation and its surrounding ecosystem.

The way evaluators understand and discuss race has real consequences for real people. Within liberal discourses, discussions of race in evaluation fall into three patterns:

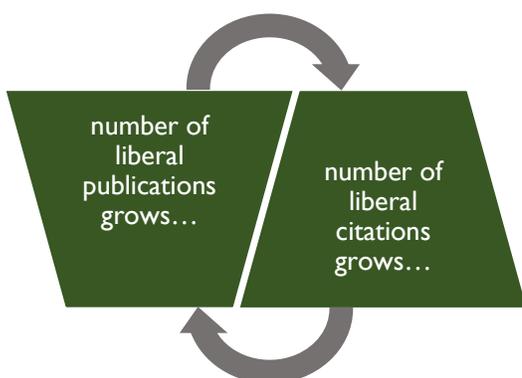
- **The [minoritization](#) of IBPOC and [normalization](#) of whiteness** as the frame of reference without acknowledging it—the extreme manifestation of which is white nationalism.
- **The replacement of race with culture** over the course of evaluation's history, which allows racial disparities and disproportionalities to be explained by cultural deficits and pathology as opposed to racially differentiated policies.
- **The rise of indigeneity and its decoupling with colonization** over the course of evaluation's history, which manifests as the literal genocide and figurative erasure of indigenous peoples on one hand and the growth of more nuanced indigenous scholarship, as explained later, on the other.

Evaluators from racially otherized groups often have ancestral, experiential, and community knowledge about how these patterns play out in programs and in evaluation as well as how they can be disrupted. However, racially stratified, hierarchical organizational structures typically prevent IBPOC evaluators from applying that subjugated knowledge to the understanding of racialized inequities and public programs within evaluation and its surrounding ecosystem. They mitigate its development.

Feedback loops within the ecosystem have actively reproduced evaluation's whiteness

Discourses of race in evaluation—like all knowledge production—are produced *relationally*, despite notions of individual agency and merit associated with the racialized construct of whiteness. As an actor within the evaluation ecosystem, the

Amplifying feedback loop



Mitigating feedback loop



¹ Shanker, V. (2019). Definitional Tension: The Construction of Race In and Through Evaluation. Doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, MN.

American Evaluation Association (AEA) has created connections and **feedback loops** among the ecosystem’s white scholars and practitioners—essentially serving as a **generative network** that continues to amplify liberal discourses of race while mitigating critical discourses, which are overwhelmingly produced by IBPOC. This is evidenced in the disproportionately white Evaluation Theory Tree (Alkin, 2004), which omits numerous evaluators—largely IBPOC—whose scholarship and work on the ground has focused on equal opportunity and racial justice.

As such, the field of evaluation continues to ask, “Why are there so few evaluators of color?” Having effectively rendered existing IBPOC evaluators’ work and critical scholarship invisible, it continues investing—even if anemically—in pipeline programs for IBPOC student interns. The field has correspondingly made a business case for diversity, which commodifies IBPOC evaluators and admonishes firms and agencies to hire IBPOC interns. The business case says that increased access and entrée into marginalized communities that firms and agencies gain through the IBPOC that they hire will provide them with a competitive advantage. Both the deficit-based pipeline approach and business case focus on IBPOC as individuals, disavowing the structural forces operating within the evaluation ecosystem that mitigate their contributions to scholarship and practice.

Asking “Why is evaluation so white?” instead focuses attention on structural dynamics. Nurturing feedback loops among IBPOC evaluators can allow them to channel their communities’ knowledge into evaluation and its surrounding ecosystem while channeling other resources into their communities through entrepreneurship. For example, indigenous evaluators’ establishment of AEA’s Indigenous Peoples in Evaluation Topical Interest Group (IPE TIG) essentially launched a generative network. Dr. Shanker’s dissertation research found that since its establishment, more indigenous evaluators published more nuanced work about indigeneity, colonization, and evaluation. The IPE TIG created feedback loops among indigenous scholars and practitioners, amplifying the quality and quantity of scholarship and practice regarding indigenous peoples. Importantly, its work has remained under its constituents’ leadership rather than being incorporated into a larger “diversity” agenda.

Minnesota IBPOC in Evaluation Community of Praxis

For IBPOC community knowledge to improve evaluated programs, evaluation more generally, and society, we need reciprocal feedback loops that affirm and grow our knowledge—counteracting the exponential growth of liberal discourses—as opposed to racially stratified hierarchies that preserve the status quo. In Minnesota, IBPOC working in evaluation have developed a community of praxis that fosters connections among us, channeling the exchange of our community knowledge and other types of capital. The Community of Praxis developed organically around the following intentions:

- That it connect IBPOC evaluation practitioners who live in the homelands of the Dakota and Ojibwe peoples, much of which the USA now calls Minnesota—one of the most racially segregated and disparate states;
- That it be co-created by, for, and as evaluators that identify as members of IBPOC groups who continue to be harmed by and excluded from U.S. systems through the racialized traumas associated with white supremacy;
- That the interests of its members and their communities drive its agenda, acknowledging that members have differing work contexts, approaches to and experience with evaluation, and understandings of systemic issues;
- That it be action-oriented, beyond cultivating healing around the obstacles that IBPOC evaluators are constantly working to overcome.

Its roughly 80 members—representing diverse roles, institutions, and sectors—developed the following guiding principles:

Respect



Honesty



Balance



Listening



Learning



Application



Generative networks are networks of individuals and organizations that collectively and adaptively generate feedback loops of activities and effects to tackle large-scale, complex, and unpredictable problems. They combine powerful social dynamics—the basic human desire to connect, share, belong, and make a difference—with a nonhierarchical, decentralized structure that enables members to amplify their efforts. They set two social forces into motion: **1**) the generosity with which members treat each other and **2**) the shared sense of identity that they develop (Plastrik, et al., 2015).

Minnesota’s IBPOC in Evaluation Community of Praxis is already serving as a generative network, amplifying critical consciousness, knowledge production, and entrepreneurship among Minnesota’s IBPOC working in evaluation. The Community of Praxis is currently working to establish a nonhierarchical, decentralized structure and processes that will channel members’ generosity and cultivate a sense of collective identity. We call on philanthropy, government agencies, and other actors within evaluation’s ecosystem, all of whom will benefit from the application of IBPOC evaluators’ community knowledge to racialized inequities, to invest in generative networks among IBPOC working in evaluation—within Minnesota, nationally, and internationally.