
Rethinking Evaluator Competencies in an Age of Discontinuity – Implications of Inequities, Sustainability, and the Pandemic for Training Evaluators: An Introduction to a Special Volume

Sanjeev Sridharan
University of Hawaii at Mānoa

Rachael Gibson
University of Toronto

April Nakaima
University of Toronto

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These are not ordinary times. The aftermath of the still-ongoing pandemic, the urgent calls for rethinking our actions and paradigms for addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the need to rethink how we achieve sustainable development all suggest that this is not a time for business as usual (Patton, 2021). Consider the following excerpt from a recent UN report suggestively titled “Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet” (UN, 2023):

The world has been rocked by a series of interlinked crises exposing fundamental shortcomings in business-as-usual approaches to sustainability including the vulnerability and fragility of progress, reinforcing inequalities, life-long impacts of adverse events, increasing threats of irreversible change, risks of ignoring interlinkages, and the geographically imbalanced distribution of global assets for achieving sustainable development. Tepid responses will not do for the millions living in poverty and hunger, the women and girls with unequal opportunities, the communities facing climate disaster or the families fleeing conflict. (p. 42)

The UN’s call to move away from tepid responses resonates with our interests in facilitating this volume of papers: How could evaluation as a field have contributed more to avert the worst impacts of COVID-19 (Barrados et al., 2023; Rist, 2023)? How do we, as evaluators, help ensure that the responses to contemporary problems are not tepid? And which core evaluator competencies will help ensure that we move beyond tepid responses?

A further call to action for the field of evaluation can be seen in the above report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In recalling the SDGs’ promise to “leave no one behind,” the report highlights the fact that “halfway to 2030, that promise is in peril. The Sustainable Development Goals are disappearing in the rear-view mirror—and with them the hope and rights of current and future generations. A fundamental shift [is] needed—in commitment, solidarity, financing and action—to put the world on a better path. And it is needed now” (UN, 2023, p. 2). Given both the challenges and the remarkable opportunities we face as a society today, in this special issue we are particularly interested in how evaluators can contribute to such a fundamental shift. In what ways is the field of evaluation contributing to the search for an architecture of a “post-normal”

(Schwandt, 2019) COVID-19 world that responds to recent calls for a fundamental shift? How can a dialogue around evaluator competencies contribute to such a shift?

Post-Normal Evaluations

Given our interest in challenging the so-called normal or business-as-usual approaches, some of the ideas presented in this special issue have been influenced by, or aim to build on, Schwandt’s (2019) far-reaching work on “post-normal evaluation.” In Schwandt’s words:

Post-normal evaluation can be seen, on the one hand, as a result of the failure of normal evaluation to rationalize the world and, on the other hand, as the amplification of the inevitability of and capacity for constant change which can only be managed. We will gauge the success of the future practice of evaluation in terms of whether it is resilient enough to adapt to the ontological realities of complexity, uncertainty, and contradiction in ways other than being methodologically innovative. That resilience is largely an ethical matter, of evaluators taking full responsibility for the choices they make in framing and bounding the evaluations they conduct with the public. (p. 327)

Schwandt’s call to build resilience to respond to complexity, uncertainty, and contradictions is a challenging one. COVID served to amplify the implications and urgency to act on this call. Our interest in this volume is to raise questions on what this means for evaluator competencies. How do we build evaluator competencies to respond to complexity, uncertainty, and contradictions?

Responding to COVID-19: Competencies to Help the “Clunky Dance” and “Muddling Towards Authenticity”

COVID-19 has highlighted the ubiquity of uncertainties (Koffman et al., 2020; Fiske et al., 2022). During the COVID shutdowns, we were working on a number of evaluations of complex interventions, including improving maternal, newborn, and child health in a state in northern India, and mitigating homelessness in Toronto, Canada. Adaptations became a critical necessity, and considering how evaluations / evaluative thinking could help interventions and systems adapt and respond to the crisis became imperative.

A blog post written by one of us a few months into the pandemic (Sridharan, 2020) surfaced many of the themes that inform this volume:

The pandemic provides an opportunity for us to ask ourselves how evaluations can be adapted to be helpful at a time of crisis.... Despite the severity of the crisis, the creativity of many organizations in adapting to the pandemic has been striking. One program implementer refers to her organization's adaptiveness as a "clunky dance." Another individual refers to "muddling towards an authentic response." (para. 1–2)

In this light, the questions facing this volume can be simply summarized as: *How do we rethink evaluator competencies given the need for evaluations to help with the "clunky dances"? How can evaluations help with the "muddling towards an authentic response"?*

We often have found our own skill sets lacking as we've navigated evaluations of complex problems such as homelessness during the heart of the pandemic. Working on challenges like homelessness and maternal health can require evaluations to serve as an interface between interventions and systems. This is because improving maternal health or homelessness requires not only that interventions be well designed, but also that the capacities of the broader systems—for example, health care systems—be strengthened. In our experience, evaluation training has generally focused more on studying project/program-level interventions. We have found that our own capacities to explore system-level changes and connections to systems have usually fallen short, especially during the pandemic. We felt that it was time for honest introspection and reflection.

The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions (TECCHI), in partnership with the Asia Pacific Evaluation Association (APEA), had organized webinars at the heart of the pandemic to discuss the implications of the above issues for evaluator competencies (see Sridharan et al., this issue). Many of the themes from the webinars informed the questions we framed to the authors,

but the authors were of course free to choose questions that interested them.

This Issue

This volume includes 12 papers that raise uncomfortable questions that we hope will sharpen our thinking about evaluator competencies. The papers discuss the authors' reflections on competency-related issues as they navigated the pandemic. Very broadly, the authors chose topics related to the discontinuities caused by the pandemic and expressed growing awareness of the need to rethink how interventions address problems of inequities and sustainability. While the topics vary, each of the papers reflects on the competencies that evaluators need to address such challenges and be relevant in the future.

The first 10 papers focus on specific themes (see Figure 1). The last 2 papers discuss synthesis across multiple themes. Without exception, each of the 12 papers helped generate questions that we believe will be critical in invigorating dialogues on rethinking evaluator competencies.

Papers in This Volume

Many of the concerns raised by this issue's authors resonate with the themes in the webinars mentioned earlier. In addition, many themes that were less discussed in the webinars emerge, including the need to build the competencies of users and other non-evaluators who are critical in making a difference in local and national systems. Other papers recognized the demand for innovative evaluations that focus on issues of sustainability and inequity. In some cases, the papers surface important ideas without a clear sense of how to bring them to fruition. For example, how does one shift power from states and other powerful agencies toward local ownership? How does one build competencies that can facilitate such shifts in power?

Figure 1. Questions Raised by the Theme-Focused Papers in Volume

| Name of paper/author(s) | Theme | Questions Raised/Addressed |
|---|--|--|
| "Evaluator Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Centrality of Developing Evaluators' Interpersonal Competencies" - Jean A. King | Interpersonal Skills | In what ways has our understanding of interpersonal skills evolved as a result of the pandemic? How can such skills be demonstrated? |
| "Competencies for Evaluation as a Civic Science" - Thomas Schwandt | Civic Science | What does evaluation as a civic science mean? How can evaluators facilitate civic agency in their evaluation practice? |
| "Glocal Evaluation Competencies for Learning as We Go" - Keiko Kuji-Shikatani, Charmagne Campbell-Patton, and Wendy Rowe | Learning As We Go | What are the competencies of evaluators who can work simultaneously at the global and local levels? How does one build competencies to be nimble to learn as one goes? |
| "Evaluation Capture, Evaluator Resilience and the Need for Competencies of Evaluators" - Frans L. Leeuw and Lyn E. Pleger | Mechanistic Evaluations Resilient Evaluators | How can evaluators' resilience to stand up to evaluation machines be developed? |
| "Reorienting Evaluator Competencies: Learnings from Evaluation Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic" - Rajib Nandi and Aparajita De | Strategic Thinking, Emotional Intelligence Empathy | How can evaluators' competencies to truly listen to community needs with empathy be developed? |
| "Reflections on Required Competencies for Health Systems Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in India" - Neethi Rao and Devaki Nambiar | Health Systems | How can the competencies of evaluators to strengthen systems, specifically health systems, be enhanced? |
| "In Plain Sight or Just Plain Obscured?: A Review of Professional Evaluation Associations' Frameworks for Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)" - Jane Whynt | Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) | How can the competencies of evaluators be developed to be more responsive to EDI? |
| "Evaluation Competencies and Evaluation Use: Some Reflections" - Soma De Silva | Evaluation Use | How can the competencies of the users of evaluations be enhanced? |
| "Fostering Values-Driven Sustainability Through an Ex-post Capacities Lens" - Jindra Cekan/ova | Sustainability | How can values-driven competencies be developed to ensure evaluators focus on issues of sustainability, including sustainable impacts and emerging impacts? |
| "Sustainability, Evaluation and Credentials" - Andy Rowe and Juha Uitto | Sustainability, Natural Systems | How can evaluators be more aware and acknowledge the importance of natural systems in interacting with human systems in any change process? |

The issue's first paper is from Jean A. King. At the core of King's paper, "Evaluator Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Centrality of Developing Evaluators' Interpersonal Competencies," is the argument that interpersonal competencies should be viewed as vital in educating evaluators in today's complex and uncertain world, especially post-COVID-19. King offers a rich discussion around the need for multiple interpersonal competencies as well as the need for such interpersonal competencies to be contextually relevant. Her call to move toward evaluators demonstrating interpersonal skills resonates strongly with our interests in this volume: "Actually requiring evaluators to demonstrate multiple interpersonal skills—an interesting thought experiment given the field's current lack of licensure—would most likely necessitate a restructuring of evaluator training and education." The paper questions whether universities are the most suitable venue for the instruction of interpersonal skills and suggests, instead, that "learning from the experiences of other professions that require effective interpersonal interactions" may be a good place to start. An urgent action item is to implement collaborative dialogues and processes to learn about interpersonal competencies that can be developed and demonstrated in a diversity of different contexts:

It strikes me that an appropriate next step in the continuing evolution of these skills would be to come together as a global community of evaluators and evaluator educators to begin a long-term conversation about how to proceed with developing these competencies and a routine process to adapt and use them in specific contexts.

In "Competencies for Evaluation as a Civic Science," Thomas Schwandt points out that the mainstream understanding of evaluation and its purposes comes primarily from the applied social sciences, in the context of social problem definition and social problem solving. He implores readers to also consider a democratic purpose of evaluation for the public good. Schwandt reminds readers that "the identification of competencies for professional evaluation work depends on a clear understanding of the purpose of that professional work." He situates evaluation as "a type of civic study wherein the practice itself and the knowledge it generates are resources for civic engagement, democratic action, and political change." Further, he notes that "the focus of civic studies is the idea of public work," which rests on the concept of civic agency, both collective and individual (and not exclusive to

experts). He goes on to explain that "citizens must simultaneously engage in explicit and deliberative reasoning about the trifold relationship of *facts, values, and strategies*"—all of which fall within the practice and theoretical purview of evaluation. Schwandt describes a number of competencies needed for such a practice—for example, evaluators being more "critically reflective, asking questions, and facilitating deliberation" rather than focusing on providing answers; acting as "facilitator[s] of citizen learning, public engagement, and cocreation"; and taking the role of "system steward[s] of well-being." This focus on evaluation as a civic science also moves us away from a narrow preoccupation with projects/programs and toward a focus on what it would take to enhance civic agency and democracy.

Keiko Kuji-Shikatani, Charmagne Campbell-Patton, and Wendy Rowe argue for a "learning as we go" approach to address the urgency across local, systems, and global levels to address negative effects on those individuals/groups whose lives are most impacted by inequitable and unsustainable global systems. The paper provides examples of how to apply the competencies associated with such an approach and examines how glocal ("glocal" refers to the connections between global and local) evaluators can facilitate learning as we go. The focus is on ultimate beneficiary individuals (UBIs):

At any level, when the lives and circumstances of UBIs are not improved, that is a failure. The evaluator's role is to surface issues that affect the efforts—whether local, systems-level or global—to serve the UBIs and be part of the collaborative learning to find innovative solutions that will contribute to getting the UBIs where they want to be.

Addressing what has been termed "evaluation capture" (tendencies, some undesirable, that come about when evaluation gets mechanized), Frans L. Leeuw and Lyn E. Pleger's paper, "Evaluation Capture, Evaluator Resilience, and the Need for Competencies of Evaluators," offers a cautionary spotlight and proposes an antidote for the "wrong incentives" associated with evaluation capture. The antidote "lies in the presence of evaluator resilience." Combatting evaluation capture requires not only identification or awareness but also personal traits in evaluators—which the authors argue can be "fostered or hindered by institutional arrangements" (including codes of ethics, training, and professionalism) that affect evaluator resilience. The authors argue for competencies by which resilient evaluators have the willpower to

speak up against mechanical and mechanistic evaluations. Their critique of what they term “evaluation machines” is especially important as we think of evaluator competencies that can be responsive to beneficiaries in diverse contexts.

Rajib Nandi and Aparajita De’s paper, “Reorienting Evaluator Competencies: Learnings from Evaluation Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” describes lessons learned from firsthand experiences conducting evaluations in India during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons are illustrated through a discussion of three case studies, which offer important clues as to what may be key evaluator competencies in a post-pandemic world. The authors’ experiences practicing evaluation during the pandemic stress the need for evaluators to first ground their work in an understanding of community perspectives—a theme known to many evaluators but expressed in this paper as a growing and urgent imperative. The paper underscores the need to strengthen the following two competencies: first, strategic thinking, which “allows evaluators to identify connections, synergies, and collaborations among interventions and align their efforts with overarching development goals” and second, “emotional intelligence and resilience, both of which are vital in navigating unforeseen challenges and engaging sensitively and empathetically with diverse communities.” This paper highlights the critical importance of evaluators basing their evaluation questions on a deep understanding of local communities. When some evaluation guidance can be mechanistic, how does one build the competencies to truly understand local communities? How does one train evaluators to be empathetic to individuals and their contexts?

Based on their experiences providing monitoring, evaluation, and learning for a complex developmental health systems evaluation in India, Neethi Rao and Devaki Nambiar’s paper, “Reflections on Required Competencies for Health Systems Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in India,” reflects deeply on the types of evaluator competencies that may be needed to meaningfully engage in adaptive system-level evaluations, particularly in the Global South. The paper highlights three types of competencies: (1) deriving evidence in data-poor contexts, (2) convening across stakeholders, and (3) operational adaptiveness. While these competencies are covered by the existing competencies frameworks of professional evaluation associations such as the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES), the authors’ specific experience illustrates how these

competencies operate interdependently in real-world scenarios, suggesting that some evaluator competencies may be better thought of as “fluid domains rather than specific elements.” The authors find that “building competencies isn’t simply about capacity-building but rather requires a recognition of the diversity of skills and worldviews that need to be encompassed within our MERL [monitoring, evaluation, research and learning] functions for today’s complex, discontinuous health systems.” Further, their focus is not just on evaluators but also on local practitioners and other stakeholders who can contribute to building local health systems. This paper raises the important question: How does one build the competencies of multiple stakeholders (including evaluators) to ensure that their work is aligned toward strengthening systems?

The contribution by Jane Whynot, titled “In Plain Sight or Just Plain Obscured?: A Review of Professional Evaluation Associations’ Frameworks for Evaluation Practice Supporting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI),” comparatively examines the competencies related to EDI of six professional evaluation associations—the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), the American Evaluation Association (AEA), the Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (ANZEA), the Australian Evaluation Society (AES), the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES), and the European Evaluation Society (EES). Whynot argues that training opportunities, tools, and supports for evaluators and evaluation students are not well aligned with the EDI-related content in the competencies framed by the evaluation associations. The paper offers ideas for safe EDI training both in academic settings and through learning by doing, with increased responsibility by seasoned evaluators to nurture such learning experiences with junior colleagues and emerging and student evaluators. This paper is especially important because it identifies in what ways the incorporation of EDI in evaluation practice and training (as well as in a number of competency frameworks) falls short of an explicit focus on EDI. There is a recognition that developing competencies to address EDI requires deep understanding of context and also an awareness that the context itself will evolve.

Soma De Silva’s paper, “Evaluation Competencies and Evaluation Use: Some Reflections,” focuses specifically on the issue of evaluation use and the competencies needed to support it. Through a review of professional evaluation competency frameworks, the paper points to a general underlying focus on evaluation

use across all frameworks, but suggests that competencies with an explicit focus on evaluation use are only evident in more recent frameworks. De Silva proposes a theory of change for evaluation use, outlining the role of competencies of evaluators and critical users. She also calls for greater emphasis on specifically use-related competencies—such as “considering use in planning, communication, and dissemination”; “promoting a culture of use of evaluations”; and “reporting findings to be useful to stakeholders”—and argues for extending such competencies beyond evaluators to the users themselves. How does one build the competencies of evaluation users? We find her arguments important because she is not just targeting evaluators to promote useful evaluations, but is also reflecting on building the competencies of *users* of evaluations.

In her paper, “Fostering Values-Driven Sustainability Through an Ex-Post Capacities Lens,” Jindra Cekan/ova encourages evaluators to focus on the sustainability of interventions through ex-post learning and ex-post evaluation, making critical connections to the need for—and, indeed, “ethical accountability” of—local ownership and locally-led development. The author identifies six evaluator competencies that may help support sustainability practice—namely, systems thinking, collaboration, anticipatory thinking, reflective practice, technical practice, and situational thinking. Together with technical checklists and evaluative thinking about sustainability, the paper suggests that these six competencies can help shift programming toward locally led and sustainable development. This paper’s focus on building competencies for a values-driven accountability for sustainability is important. We think an important focus of the field will be on how to build such competencies, and how competent evaluators can help enhance conditions for sustainability.

In “Sustainability, Evaluation, and Credentials,” Andy Rowe and Juha Uitto make a compelling plea to evaluators to incorporate a systematic focus on natural systems outcomes into all evaluations. Through a sobering review of evaluation’s current level of understanding of “sustainability-readiness,” the authors argue that the field’s preoccupation with human systems has severely undermined its current and future relevance. There is a need to shift from an exclusive focus on human to include natural systems in order to address the global environmental crisis, and this shift requires adaptation on multiple fronts, including in the area of evaluator competencies. With regards to evaluator training and capacity

building, the authors question the value of a focus on credentials and certification, given the time it takes to acquire them and the pressing nature of the global crisis. In light of the urgency for sustainability-ready evaluators and evaluations, the paper highlights other options and approaches, including building “evaluation teams that have the necessary competencies, either through engaging natural scientists as members or by using boundary-spanning concepts for smaller and less well-resourced evaluations to access the needed knowledge and capacities.” This paper is far-reaching because of its call to ensure that sustainability is considered by all evaluations, not just evaluations that have specific natural systems foci. Incorporating considerations of natural systems even in interventions that are based in social systems will have implications for theories of change, design, measurement, and analysis. This paper also calls into question how one can respond to the demand for sustainability evaluations that consider *both* natural and human systems.

The last two papers are synthesis papers (not included in Figure 1). In the first of these, we three issue editors, along with Claudeth White, Asela Kalugampitiya, Randika De Mel, Madhuka Liyanagamage, and Ian MacDougall, discuss lessons from the aforementioned webinars organized by TECCHI and APEA during the pandemic. As noted earlier, these webinars helped inform the development of this volume. In the paper, we identify eight themes that we believe are important for evaluator competencies to promote going forward: (i) planning for sustainability; (ii) raising questions around evaluation criteria; (iii) Being more aware of the various types of uncertainties that impact program implementation and evaluation, (iv) better understanding heterogenous needs and mechanisms, (v) becoming more rigorous in incorporating contexts into our frameworks, (vi) promoting understanding of both human and natural systems in our evaluation frameworks, (vii) more deeply understanding vulnerabilities and inequities in evaluation frameworks, and (viii) better understanding systems and dynamics of systems in evaluation frameworks.

The issue’s final paper, titled “Developing the Wisdom of a Mindfulness Competency” is by Michael Harnar. Over the past year, as this volume was being developed, the editorial team met on a near-weekly basis to discuss both the themes that inspired this volume and how the various papers highlight the need for additional dialogue on competencies. As executive editor of *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation (JMDE)*, Michael has been an integral part of these meetings and had

a clear vision to ensure that this volume provides space for a diversity of views that can lead to action. Michael's call is to pay greater attention to an evaluator's positionality and to develop mindfulness as a competency: "We work in complex, situational, and values- and politics-laden environments.... we are at our best when we can come to those arenas with a strong sense of independence of thought and judgment as our regulative ideal."

Michael poses an important question that highlights many of the challenges we found in doing evaluations on maternal health and homelessness at the heart of the COVID shutdowns: "Whose story you are telling when you're doing an evaluation?" Asking the question serves as a fitting reminder that evaluation requires us to move beyond our own contexts and become more aware that the evaluation story we tell is limited by our positionality.

The COVID crisis was a time in which small, seemingly insignificant actions made profound differences. A central question during that time was: What makes the ordinary extraordinary? At the heart of the COVID shutdowns, Dobkin (2021), in a beautiful essay titled "Common Decency," argued:

A quote from Dr. Rieux in Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* says, "There is no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency." When asked by his colleague what that means, he replies, "I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case, I know that it consists of doing my job." (pp. 3–4)

Michael's call for mindfulness as an evaluator competency serves as a reminder that the challenge may not be to implement heroic or innovative methods, but rather to—mindfully and with thoughtful "common decency"—pay attention to the extraordinary features of the ordinary.

Looking Ahead

We reiterate that the last few years have been an extraordinary time in the history of the world. Now, perhaps more than before, is a time to envision and question how evaluators can help in building a better world. We have to trust that the community of evaluators and our partners—evaluation users—will help realize this vision through dialogue and other collaborative processes. We work in multiple settings, and we continue to be gratified to see how many people are asking fundamental questions about how evaluations can be more

helpful in creating and enacting a transformative vision. This of course means asking and answering questions over time about how best to strengthen and demonstrate the importance of existing competencies and also highlight the need for new sets of competencies.

Our concerns resonate with Uitto's (2021) call for meaningful evaluations that can help contribute to a common future:

We are mostly concerned with technical questions about addressing symptoms of the global problems through projects, checking whether these projects achieved their internal goals irrespective of what goes on around them. We tend to be engaged in accounting exercises instead of critical learning that constructively contributes to our common future. (Uitto, 2021, p. 97)

How can we rethink evaluator competencies that can contribute to learning for a common future?

It is important that we build visions and scenarios for our common future, that we closely engage with our community of users, who will be critical in defining new roles for evaluators and who will continue to ask of us tough questions on transformation and beyond. While the contributions of our work to transformation on the ground in many specific contexts may not always be obvious, it will be important to realize that changes and improvements under complexity and uncertainty with multiple actors is often a "clunky dance" and there is a need to "muddle towards authenticity."

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