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The practice of evaluative reasoning in the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that sound evaluative reasoning, defined as "the systematic means for arriving at evaluative conclusions . . . the principles that support inferences drawn by evaluators" (Fournier, 1995, p.1), is an essential element of evaluation quality. As such, evaluative reasoning is a lens through which to consider how to improve the quality of evaluations undertaken or commissioned by the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector. The argument is grounded in the theory of evaluation derived from western philosophy, specifically, informal logic. This theory underpins the conceptualisation and design of this study examining how evaluative reasoning is understood and practised by professionals who undertake public sector evaluation in Aotearoa New Zealand. A multiple method research design is used to generate diverse understandings of the topic and offer opportunities for abductive thinking. The methods used are Q methodology, meta-evaluation, and key informant interviews with local and international evaluation experts.

The findings from this study point to three ways in which evaluative reasoning has an impact on the quality of evaluation. It increases the robustness of the reasoning chain from value claim to evaluative conclusion/judgment; underpins the professional competencies required of evaluation practitioners; and reinforces the ethical dimensions of evaluation practice in a public sector context. Lastly, two abductively-derived conjectures point evaluators toward diverse ways of knowing in their reasoning from evaluative claim to evaluative conclusion/judgment. Amplifying the work of previous theorists, it is suggested that expert intuition and abductive inference provide further paths of evaluative knowing in addition to inductive logic and probative inference.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother Barbara, who like many of her generation growing up in England in the war years did not have the opportunity for education beyond 14 years of age.

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GLOSSARY

Aroha	Love, affection, sympathy, charity, compassion.
Evaluand	A generic term for whatever is being evaluated.
Fono	Councils or meetings. Applies to national assemblies and legislatures, as well as local village councils or any type of meeting between people.
Haka	To dance, perform the haka - vigorous dances with actions and rhythmically shouted words.
Hīkoi	Step, march, hike.
Iwi	Extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people, nationality, race.
Kanohi ki kanohi	Face to face, in person.
Karakia	Prayer, grace, blessing.
Kaumātua	Elders, man or woman, who are held in high esteem.
Kaupapa Māori	Customary practice, principles incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society.
Kāwanatanga	Government, dominion, rule, authority, governorship.
Koha	Gift, offering, donation, contribution.
Mana	Prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma.
Manaakitanga	Hospitality, kindness, generosity, support. The showing of respect, generosity and care for others.
Māori	The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.
Marae	The open area in front of the wharenui (the main building of a marae) where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to refer to the complex of buildings around the marae.
Mātauranga	Knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skill.
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent.
Palagi	A person of European descent.

Pasifika	Pasifika does not refer to a single ethnicity, nationality, gender or culture. The term is one of convenience used to encompass a diverse range of peoples from the South Pacific region now living in Aotearoa New Zealand who have family and cultural connections to their South Pacific countries of origin.
Pōwhiri	Welcome ceremony on a marae.
Rangatira	Chief.
Tangata whenua	Local people, hosts, indigenous people - people born of the whenua (land).
Taonga	Treasure, anything prized. Applied to anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomenon, ideas and techniques.
Tapu	That which is sacred, prohibited, restricted, set apart.
Te Ao Māori	Māori world.
Te Puni Kōkiri	Ministry of Māori Development.
Te Reo	Māori language.
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitangi.
Tikanga	The customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context.
Tino Rangatiratanga	Self-determination.
Tūrangawaewae	Place where one has the right to stand. Place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa.
Va	Va is a Samoan concept relating to the space between, which is not empty or void but is relational and sacred.
Wairuatanga	Spirituality.
Whakapapa	Genealogy, lineage, descent.
Whānau	Extended family, family group.
Whānaungatanga	A relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging.

ABBREVIATIONS

AEA	American Evaluation Association
AES	Australasian Evaluation Society
ANZEA	Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association
APA	American Psychological Association
CBA	Cost benefit analysis
CEA	Cost effectiveness analysis
EES	European Evaluation Society
EVALTALK	The email discussion group of the American Evaluation Association
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HIA	Health impact assessment
ISO	International Organisation for Standardization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Q	Q methodology
SSC	State Services Commission
SPEaR	Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
USA	United States
VFM	Value for money
WEG	Wellington Evaluation Group

INTRODUCING THE STUDY

This study explores how evaluative reasoning is understood and practised in the context of public sector evaluation in Aotearoa New Zealand. My argument is that evaluative reasoning is a lens through which to consider how to improve the quality of evaluations being conducted or commissioned by Aotearoa New Zealand public sector agencies. The objectives of the study are to (i) present a theoretical account of evaluative reasoning from western philosophy and evaluation literatures; (ii) examine the practice of evaluative reasoning in the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector (the public sector); (iii) identify contextual factors that influence how evaluative reasoning is being practised in the public sector; (iv) generate insights into how evaluative reasoning practice can be improved.

The research questions are: (i) How is evaluative reasoning understood and practised by professionals working in or commissioned by the public sector? (ii) How do contextual factors influence how evaluative reasoning is practised in the public sector? and (iii) How can evaluative reasoning practice be strengthened in the public sector context?

This study is presented in four parts: Part A (chapters 1, 2 and 3) situates the thesis and describes the research methodology, Part B (chapters 4 and 5) provides a theoretical foundation for the study, Part C (chapters 6, 7 and 8) offers three perspectives on evaluative reasoning in the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector, and Part D (chapters 9 and 10) integrate and interpret the findings from these three perspectives.