

The emergence of evaluation as a global enterprise: Keynote at the 2015 Conference of the Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association

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Whakapapa

My mountain is Monte Gargano.¹ Situated in the Southern Apennines, it slopes eastward into the Adriatic Sea, forming the spur on the boot of Italy. My last name, Gargani, might be translated to mean “the people of the mountain”, although my ancestral connection, if any, to this place is lost to time. Nonetheless, the family debate continues over whether we were named after the mountain, the Garganica goats that scramble over it, or they after us. Perhaps I should mention that my family has never found a topic it has not been eager to debate. We like to say, “Argument is love.” Nothing shows respect more than one’s willingness to take the other side of an issue and thoroughly thrash it out. Over and over. Now that I think of it, our family name may not refer to the mountain but the spur.

¹ In Aotearoa, it is customary for professional presentations and meetings to start with a whakapapa in which speakers “layer” their tribal and personal history into stories that reveal their standing in the community and what they stand for as a person.

That would be more appropriate.

My mother's parents came from tiny farming villages outside the city of Benevento. It is an area famous for witches and magical trees, which made it unpopular in ancient times. I am reliably informed that to increase trade and settlement in the area, the Romans invented marketing. They changed the name of region's commercial center from Maleventum, which roughly translated means the place where bad things happen, to Beneventum, the place where good things happen. It worked. The ancient marketplace grew into the modern city of Benevento, but the villages surrounding it have retained much of their ancient character. My grandmother's village has one *piazza* (town square), one church, and very few people, just as she left it over 90 years ago. Much as it might have been 900 years before.

My father's father came from a tiny village in Abruzzo famous for barbers, and his mother from a town in Sicily famous for fishermen. The typical names of these typical places failed to inspire ancient marketing campaigns, yet they were places of desperation, too. Throughout rural Italy, large families, small farms, and antiquated inheritance laws meant that sons were bequeathed fractions of a field, often so tiny they had no economic value, and daughters inherited nothing. My grandparents, like so many others, had no land, no property, and no prospects for making a living, so they emigrated to the United States in the early part of the 20th century. They were not, by nature, adventurous people. Poverty is a strong motivator.

They settled in and around Philadelphia, restricted to Italian enclaves that were swelling with new arrivals. Italians were not welcome; the economy was reeling from the Great Depression and jobs were hard to find. Opportunity, they hoped, required a long-term view, so they made the best of it and waited. With time they achieved a measure of success. Negative views towards Italians softened, the economy improved, and my grandfathers, one a steelworker and the

other a policeman, found places, limited as they were, in the larger community. My uncles followed suit, working in factories and steel mills until the smokestacks surrounding the city belched out their last toxins in the 1970s.

My father took a different path. He was drafted into the navy, and because he had worked for a short time as a surveyor he was assigned to the engineering corps. He hated the navy, but loved engineering. When he completed his service, he returned to Philadelphia where his father found him a job. It was a typical July day, hot and humid, when he arrived at the carpet factory where my grandfather had an inside connection. He was greeted by dust, heat, noise, fumes, machines, and men, an army of men, who had spent their lives in places just like this. Men like my grandfathers and uncles. My father walked out. This wasn't his idea of opportunity.

He wanted to go to college on the GI Bill, a government program that provided full-tuition scholarships to all veterans. With high hopes he took the entrance exam at Drexel University. He failed. Growing up in South Philly, he had attended some of the worst public schools in the country, and he had not been a stellar student. The whole idea of going to college was farfetched. Then, unexpectedly, an admissions officer called—the university would make an exception. Drexel had empty seats and my father had the GI Bill. He would probably flunk out in his first semester, he was warned, and there was no chance he would graduate, but the university was happy to take his scholarship money.

That was exactly the right thing to tell my father. He is a stubborn man. Being told he would not succeed made him determined to prove he could. He studied day and night, his dedication perhaps best described as “argument by other means”. Four years later, he graduated third in his class with a degree in electrical engineering. He won the argument. Then he went on to earn a master's degree,

program some of the first computers, obtain several patents for circuits he invented, and eventually start his own business. Sometimes opportunity does require a long-term view. And, as my father points out, people willing to make an exception and the stubbornness of an ass also help.

I was born in Philadelphia, and my earliest memories are of the city and the Schuylkill River, my river, which cuts through the heart of it. To pronounce the river's name like a local, say *skookle* while simultaneously swallowing and exhaling. It's an impossible sound, a shibboleth that I can no longer manage after so many years away from my place of birth. Perhaps that was predictable. Inevitable separation from home and the loss one must bear as a result were constant themes while growing up, a legacy of immigrants. My mother's mother, separated from the Italy of her childhood by time, distance, and culture, worked tirelessly to keep the old world alive in her house. My mother's first language was neither English nor Italian, but the ancient dialect of farmers around Benevento. I find it indescribably pleasing that my mother, who has never been to Italy, is able to speak a dialect so old that most modern Italians would find it incomprehensible. Imagine running into someone who lived her whole life in Portugal and spoke English like Chaucer as her first language. It's a wonderfully impossible thing.

The separation my grandparents felt was complicated. They had cut their ties not solely with a village, but a larger system of relationships. Italians use the same word, *paese*, for nation, region, town, village, and the land upon which one lives and makes a living. I suppose this is understandable given that Italy has existed as a unified country for only 150 years. When my grandparents came to the United States, unification was less than 50 years old. Before that, Italy endured as an unstable patchwork of city-states in which the hierarchical relationships of people, towns, regions, and nations were

of critical importance. They justified wars, marriages, murders, and mercy. For *contadini* like my grandparents, peasant farmers from the south, their *paese* described a world with family at the center and concentric rings of allegiance protecting it.

In the new world, old allegiances mattered little. New relationships needed to be formed with people from nations, regions, towns, and lands that were unfamiliar. Their surroundings, with names like Conshohocken, Schuylkill, and Valley Forge, spoke of the area's rich history with Native Americans, early Dutch settlers, and the Revolutionary War. None of which meant anything to them. It must have been difficult to build relationships in a context they did not fully understand, but they managed. That is why I have them to thank for my good fortune. In fact, my very existence. My parents would never have met had they been born in Italy. Their lands would have been too far apart, their sphere of travel too small, and their allegiances at odds. In America, those boundaries and barriers melted away, and their *paese* grew more expansive.

I was restless as a younger man, curious about the world around me, and eager to explore it. I suppose I was something of a vagabond, spending considerable time in Italy, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. I tried my hand at many jobs. None were particularly satisfying. Then I decided to go to business school, earn an MBA, settle down, and have a real career. The idea was farfetched. I didn't have the resume for business school, but someone in the admissions office at Wharton must have made an exception. At that time, diversity of experience was important to the school, and my experience traveling the world led someone to imagine I would add something interesting to the mix. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't, but I was certainly different. My classmates focused on finance, consulting or, like the Romans, marketing. I became interested in the social impact of business, and how organizations could build a better world and be profitable. It has

become a popular topic, but at the time I believe I was the only one excited by it.

My introduction to evaluation was accidental, as it was with most evaluators of my vintage. After I graduated, I received a call from a friend of a friend. “I need to do an evaluation,” he announced. “What exactly is an evaluation? And can you do one?” I responded that I knew what it was and could do it. In retrospect, that was somewhat hyperbolic. In any event, I found myself evaluating a long-term, comprehensive youth development program implemented in about a dozen cities across the country. I loved it, worked hard, and quickly realized that I had learned just enough in business school to be dangerous. I needed to learn more. Fast. So I embedded myself in a site that was based in a New York City public housing project. I worked as a volunteer tutor, spent time with the families that the program supported, and built a strong bond with staff. It was my first exposure to the wonderful challenge of connecting the human with the analytical, and decision makers with those affected by their decisions. It was a formative experience.

Other organisations approached me to conduct evaluations and my practice grew. At the same time, I knew I still needed to learn more. Or did I just *want* to learn more? I’ve always been more curious than clever. In any event, I continued to grow my practice while earning an MS in statistics from New York University and a PhD from UC Berkeley, where I focused on measurement and evaluation. After all that, I still believe I need to learn more, and I still want to. Evaluation is one of the most difficult and important tasks a professional can undertake. You can spend a lifetime trying to master it, and it would be a life well spent.

My *paese* is something my grandparents would never have imagined. I live on the Oakland–Berkeley border, across the bay from San Francisco, in a culture of tolerance they never experienced. My wife

of Irish descent works for a solar power company. My three children speak fluent French, even though my wife and I speak no French at all. My daughter attends a high school that is diverse on every dimension imaginable, reflecting the area and its culture. My employees live near (down the street) and far (Canada). I travel the world and work at a job my grandparents would not understand. Well, no one other than an evaluator seems to understand it. And that is what I want to talk to you about.

Living in the land of the invisible brand

I bet this has happened to you. You are at a dinner party, neighborhood get together, or some other social event, and someone asks you the most dangerous question, “So, what do you do for a living?” If you answer honestly, “I’m an evaluator,” you will spend at least 30 minutes explaining what that means and how it is different from what your new acquaintance thinks it does (not social auditor, not compliance officer, not academic researcher, not program officer, not management consultant, not accountant, and not a made-up career). In that time, your food will have gotten cold, the ice cubes in your drink will have melted, or the rugby match will have ended. The problem is not you, nor is it your social circle. The problem is that evaluation has no brand.

Whether or not you care for Starbucks, Google, or Uber, you know their brand. What I mean by that is you know what they promise to do for you (make a good cup of coffee, find anything on the web, or get you home safely at a good price) and you are able to judge whether they keep their promise (the coffee is good or dreck, you find what you want or don’t, or you get home safely at a good price or not). A brand is what you believe about the promises others make. As a profession, we have not made a collective promise that is public, consistent, and worthy of consideration. We have no brand

and the public doesn't understand what we do, or that we even exist.

This is troubling. I believe that a good case can be made for evaluation being the largest profession. An even better case can be made for evaluation being the largest profession *no one has ever heard of*. It's as if we are invisible. By my reckoning, at least one-fifth of the United States GDP depends on program evaluation (Gargani, 2013), and there is an invisible army of evaluators getting the job done. Collectively, they influence the allocation of over \$3 trillion in the public and private sectors. If I were Michael Scriven, I might argue that evaluation, writ large, is a transdiscipline and therefore influences the allocation of every dollar—100 percent of GDP (see Scriven, 2003). Perhaps that is true, but my more humble back-of-the-envelope calculation is sufficient to raise two important questions: “Why isn't evaluation well known?” and “What are we going to do about it?”

The answers to these questions become more elusive when you consider the explosive growth in the number of VOPEs (voluntary organisations for professional evaluation) around the world that include mostly local, regional, national, and international associations.² In 1986, there were two—the American Evaluation Association and the Canadian Evaluation Society—with a combined membership of about 2,000.³ Now, 30 years later, there are 206 VOPEs with a combined membership estimated at 50,000. Over three decades, the number of VOPES has grown at roughly 17 percent per year and their combined membership at roughly 11 percent. Clearly, there is tremendous interest in evaluation around the world, yet we remain invisible. We truly are the largest profession no one has ever heard of.

2 The number and location of VOPES around the world is being tracked by the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation at <http://www.ioce.net/vopes>

3 There is some debate over when the first VOPE formed and whether it was formed in Canada or the United States.

Open space, closed communities

Evaluation is widely needed yet relatively unknown. This paradox has opened up space for other disciplines, industries, and organisations “to reinvent evaluation in their own image”, as Scriven (2015) playfully put it, each christening evaluation with a new name reflecting its professional, cultural, and intellectual provenance. We now have social-impact analysis, impact measurement, social and behavioral science, data science, and social accounting, to name a few of the activities that we would otherwise place within the diverse domain of evaluation. I discussed this once with Peter Dahler-Larsen, a Danish evaluation thinker and researcher. He responded that he didn’t care who did evaluation or what it was called, as long as its purposes were well met by society. He argued that we should not put our professional interests in front of larger social interests by protecting a label or community of practice.

I agree with him in principle, but the knowledge base and values stance of evaluation are, I believe, unique and profound. When I read about evaluation, I find authors pointing to earlier writers who influenced their thinking. When I turn my attention to those prior works, I am directed to even earlier writers. Following this thread, one quickly realises that evaluation, at least as it developed in the United States, has a continuous history that spans more than 100 years. We can find examples of evaluative inquiry that are systematic and empirical as early as the 1890s, and uses of the term *evaluation* as we understand it today as far back as the 1930s. Society benefits when these long-developed ideas and their underlying values are applied broadly and well. This should be the central objective of VOPEs around the world, and one of the many ways of supporting it is by engaging with other communities in which new forms of evaluation are emerging.

For example, Ralph Tyler wrote in the 1930s that “evaluations” should “present evidence, reasonably objective and accurate” which throws light on “the value” of programs (Tyler, 1935, p.11). Later, he explained that he intentionally chose the word *evaluation* rather than *measurement*, *testing*, or *examination* “because the term ‘evaluation’ implies a process by which the values of an enterprise are ascertained” (Smith, Tyler, & the Evaluation Staff, 1942, p. 5). He worked in education, and the values that concerned him were not solely those of school administrators and funders, but also those of teachers, parents, students, and people in the community. He believed that evaluation was a systematic approach to understanding the *value* of a program for promoting the *values* of those affected by it. That was over 80 years ago, and it is precisely what we strive to accomplish today.

That is our values stance, and it has taken on new importance. We live in a world where growing wealth disparity, political gridlock, and international instability have made it possible for a very few to affect almost everyone. Perhaps those who can act and those who are affected will always be separated by culture. Perhaps not. The exercise of power, however, should always be premised on understanding who is affected by it, how they are affected, and how that improves, or fails to improve their lives *from their perspective*. That is what evaluators do. We sit in the messy space between complex constituencies, helping each to understand the other in a systematic, empirical, culturally responsive manner.

This is the unique role of evaluation. It would be a shame if it were lost and its legacy of inclusion, empowerment, and participation forgotten. There is some evidence, however, that the legacy of evaluation is being forgotten as it is being reinvented. In 2014, the European Union published new guidelines for measuring the impact of a number of its major programs (GECES Sub-group on Impact

Measurement, 2014). When I read them, I was struck by how familiar the new process it outlined seemed. Then I compared it to one that Tyler described in the 1930s—it was a match. It was such a clear example of the reinvention of evaluation, albeit probably unintentionally, that I posted a blog comparing the two processes. As a field, we do not hold a monopoly on understanding how to evaluate. Internally, we frequently disagree on the details, but we have been wrestling with the many challenges of evaluation long enough that a systematic process for understanding value, values, and stakeholders should not be considered new. Rather, it would seem to be a problem of selecting from among many previously developed processes, frameworks, theories, and approaches, and possibly modifying or combining them.

Business schools are another setting in which evaluation is being reinvented, in this case triggered by a shift in professional values. Increasingly, businesses of every type are putting their social and environmental impacts—positive and negative—on a more equal footing with financial returns. Sometimes this is referred to as a commitment to double or triple bottom lines; maximising social value, blended value, or social benefits; or the pursuit of market-based solutions. In general, it entails the intentional efforts of businesses to maximise the good they do while minimising the harm.

Business schools now offer courses on social entrepreneurship, impact investing, corporate social responsibility, social accounting, and social finance. Demand for them has been strong (Milway & Goulay, 2013). Since 1995, the number of students at Harvard Business School who enrolled in social enterprise courses or independent projects grew 745 percent. Between 2003 and 2009, the top eight business schools more than doubled the number of courses that included social benefit content. Through the professionals they train, business schools are now poised to have unprecedented impact on the

social and natural world. Yet, as far as I can tell, none provide courses on evaluation.

Sometimes when I talk to other evaluators about the need to integrate the businesses community with ours, I get pushback. We shouldn't engage with business, I am told, because of our values. Evaluation is predicated on values that sometimes may be at odds with those of commerce. In many cases, the problems that our clients and employers work so hard to address were caused or exacerbated by business. Pollution, smoking, deforestation, and obesity come to mind. It is us versus them, I am told. To take this stance, I believe, is to betray our values. Evaluation stands for diversity and inclusion. We should never say to another, "you are different from us, so we won't include you". Our values demand that we engage constructively, respectfully, and compassionately with all stakeholders, especially when it is challenging. The business community presents us with another opportunity to live up to our ideals.

Having said that, it is important that our engagement with this and other communities not be one way. There is a great deal we can learn from each other. Evaluations typically focus on how programs affect participants and sometimes the immediate community around them. This is the systems lens of social science, the one most of us were trained to use. Those with business and economics backgrounds often bring a different systems lens that includes concepts that may be unfamiliar to evaluators. An example is displacement.

My father prevented no one else from going to Drexel because the university had fewer applicants than seats. Make a similar exception today, when the university has about 50,000 applicants for 3,000 seats, and it would displace a more qualified applicant from attending. To complicate matters further, displacement from one university does not necessarily prevent someone from attending another. So making an exception may cause some harm to one by doing some

good for another. How much harm? How much good? How do we include a comparison of the two in our evaluation? How should that comparison affect evaluative judgements? Our colleagues from business and economics may be able to shed some light on these questions. We should let them.

Evaluation training

We have suspected for some time that a large determinant of practice is training; evaluators tend to do what they know how to do (Christie, Quinones, & Fierro, 2013). Training is therefore critical to any effort, local or global, to improve the quality of our work. According to recent research by John LaVelle (2014), there is good news and bad about evaluation training programs. The good news is that in the United States, the number of programs grew from 27 in 2006 to 89 in 2014. The bad news is that an evaluation training program in this study was defined quite liberally as any university or college program that requires at least two evaluation courses. For instance, a public health master's program that requires two evaluation courses would count, even though it is not an evaluation training program, per se, and may not adequately prepare professionals to practice evaluation. Virtually all the growth in the United States came from certificate programs (from 6 in 2010 to 37 in 2014) and master's programs (from 37 in 2010 to 58 in 2014). Outside the United States, there has been no growth and few training programs for at least a decade. Globally, we lack an adequate number of training programs at sufficient depth to meet the growing demand for evaluators.

This is the impetus behind a growing number of initiatives around the world to train, standardise, designate, certify, accredit, license, assure, or in some other way professionalise evaluators. Canada has had its Credentialed Evaluator designation in place for some time. The American Evaluation Association is currently developing a

framework of competencies for evaluators. The European Evaluation Association has embarked on a Voluntary Evaluator Peer Review process. EvalPartners and the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation have been facilitating international discussions on training and professionalisation. It is a hot topic.

Evaluation is not alone in this. Accounting is developing standards for reporting the social and environmental impacts of business through the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board. The Global Impact Investors Network, GIIN, has the Impact Reporting and Investment Standards, IRIS, that provides a standardized structure for organising, measuring, and reporting the social and environmental impacts of investments. Social Value International has an assurance process for social return on investment, SROI, reports. The European Union has proposed a standard for impact measurement. The Social Impact Investment Taskforce, established under the United Kingdom's presidency of the G8, has developed similar guidelines for impact investors globally.

All these efforts lead me to two conclusions. First, there are multiple worlds—separated by discipline, social networks, values, and market forces—tackling the same problems. As far as I can tell, the worlds mix very little. None of the efforts to professionalise evaluation include the accounting profession, GIIN, representatives from the G8, data scientists, economists, or anyone else from outside our traditional world populated by nonprofit, government, academic, and evaluation organisations. The same can be said the other way round. Second, if evaluation does not professionalise itself, others will professionalise something else that replaces evaluation.

Where to from here?

The theme of the 2015 conference is Navigating Evaluation: Making Waves in Aotearoa and Across the Pacific. Metaphors of water and

travel have been woven into our many discussions. My metaphors have been about land. When traveling among islands, water dominates the journey, but land defines its beginning and end; it gives the journey purpose. It is our home, our center, and our *paese* radiates from it.

Like my grandparents, evaluators find themselves in a new world where the relationships of the past, the ones that afforded us protection and strength, are vanishing. National, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries have melted away. Evaluators, evaluation associations, and the concept of evaluation itself are no longer constrained as they once were. We need to forge new relationships while maintaining our center. How can that be done?

I may not be able to offer a satisfactory answer, but I can share the image I hold in my mind. I imagine our various communities—evaluation associations, communities of practice, disciplines, institutions—as trees. Each is rooted in its own soil, nurtured by its own land and responsive to its local conditions. The branches of the trees, however, are woven together into a single canopy. At this level, individual distinctions are gone. We are one global community, supported by our local communities, sharing and growing together. That is how I imagine our *paese*, and I look forward to cultivating it with you as the 2016 President of the American Evaluation Association.

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