

# Developing the Wisdom of a Mindfulness Competency

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...our knowledge can be only finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite.

—Karl Popper

I am grateful that Sanjeev, April, and Rachael brought this special issue topic to our venue. It was rather early in my tenure as executive editor of *JMDE* when Sanjeev approached me with this idea. Starting from those first moments, our conversations took us down long, winding, and exciting roads, including toward the idea of developing *JMDE* into a venue for South–South–North conversations—meaning a site hosted by a Global North institution where those in the Global South converse with each other. This special issue is our first time bringing this idea to fruition, and I hope you enjoy it.

Now that it has all come together (thanks to the authors' and guest editors' many months of efforts), I sit in the enviable position of being able to make a few comments as a sort of afterword. I want to comment on the topic under the microscope, evaluator competencies, and also to use those reflections to articulate my thoughts on the process. My own skills as an evaluator and administrator have been developed through the very process of providing a venue for others to talk about evaluator competencies.

It may be true that we are living in an unprecedented time. I am old enough to remember when a person could stick their head in the sand and say, "Well, I don't know about that," and it was generally accepted that they didn't know, and therefore maybe they couldn't be held responsible for their lack of knowledge and the ramifications of

that ignorance. That is no longer true; knowledge is now at the fingertips of almost every human being. Certainly, there are many who still don't have access to the Internet for one reason or another, but the general population has access to information about almost any topic they would like to learn about. So, far from being excused for ignorance, we instead face the serious conundrum of choosing *which* voices to listen to and which information to trust. It can be daunting.

When I think about what competencies are needed for evaluators, I often find myself in a similar quandary. The authors in this special issue bring so many important thoughts to the conversation, I am struck with those familiar questions: What framework do I build my curriculum around? What skills will make me and my students most successful? Which constellation to I train my sextant on? There is so much going on in every part of the world (so much that is so contextually bound), I ever more strongly sense the hubris of trying to sit in one place and tell the world of evaluators what competencies they need in order to master their environment. I feel ill-equipped to fully specify the variety of skills an evaluator will need to work across, between, or embedded in so many different contexts. It's impossible to upskill on every possible angle of being and operating in the world. And yet, that is what we are expected to do, is it not? Add in a splash of paradigm-shifting pandemic, a dash of polycrisis, and a burgeoning AI subculture, and you've got a major mind-bending task for those providing "guidance" to the discipline.

This brings me to my own perspective on two skills that I think are universal and

foundational—skills that all evaluators need in their toolbox: evaluation logic and mindfulness.

Evaluation's core valuing logic was first articulated by Michael Scriven more than 40 years ago (Scriven, 1980). It centers on the idea that to make a good judgment, one must first articulate the judgment's basis (i.e., identify criteria, set standards, observe, and then judge). Evaluation is the systematic *process* of forming a sound judgment. Of course, evaluation encompasses so much more than just that kernel; it's a universe of work and effort. Still, for me, evaluation must at some point be at least working towards a judgment, small or large, against some criteria of merit.

All the capacity building and all the empowerment and all the appreciative inquiry and all the participatory efforts can and do take place in the universe of evaluation. And if the general logic is somewhere at the core of it, then I think we are doing evaluation. So I think evaluators need to be comfortable in understanding this logic, because it is oriented to the key component of evaluation: the values of the people we're serving while doing evaluation. Valuing is at the center of evaluation, and using the general logic of evaluation helps evaluators make valuing more explicit.

The second and perhaps even more fundamental competency that I think underlies all the work of being human—and therefore, by extension, of practicing evaluation—is mindfulness. There are many definitions of mindfulness (see Pann et al., 2022, for a good primer on the topic for evaluators). Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, calls it “an awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (2012, p. 1).

The last part of that definition might seem in contradiction to the description above of evaluators' judging role. One might ask, “How can I be in the present moment, non-judgmentally, while still developing judgments?” Russon and Russon (2009), in describing the Insight Evaluation approach, articulate some possible answers: They say that judgments should be forestalled as long as possible to allow us to “enter into a conscious alignment with the higher order” (p. 208) and that if judgments are necessary, they should be made with discriminating wisdom. I interpret “discriminating wisdom” to mean an informed, refined, and mindful intellect applying the general logic of evaluation to the judgment.

Lyssa Becho, Kelly Robertson, and I developed a tool that asks evaluators to identify their own values, state them out loud, and then write them down and create a values manifesto, where they are

explicit and clear about who they are and what they value. When later they get in situations that might challenge their own value systems, they can be more mindful of the contextual complexities, more clear about what is theirs and what belongs to others, and as a result, more discerning about which of their own values they may need to set aside.

Understanding ourselves also allows us to be clear about whose story we are telling when we're doing an evaluation. Are we bringing all our baggage to the table? Or are we mindfully making room for others' baggage, without judging their baggage? While, as evaluators, we may not always be positioned as the neutral party, when neutrality is critical, we should be competent in holding that ground. For instance, as new developers come into Maui after the devastating fires, the locals are vulnerable to being taken advantage of; in that context, an evaluator must have a sense of themselves and the situation—enough to hear and see the different positionalities represented in the situation so that they can do their best to affect more equity.

The idea of mindfulness—in particular, mindfulness of the limits of my own access to knowledge and truth—has been so valuable in my position as editor of this journal. My work on the recent special issue on decolonizing evaluation required me to question, interrogate, and think deeply about my own biases as a white, male, educated person in a position of power. In producing such an issue—in which the writers critiqued the very foundations of the world upon which my professional identity is built—it could have been very easy for me to exert my power and make it difficult for those special editors to do the work that they came to the table to do. Despite being challenged at some moments in that process, my mindful attention to my own positionality helped me to detach my ego from the situation and give power over to those editors and authors. For example, we had to make some critical decisions on copyright issues with figures and graphs in a few of the articles, and rather than hold to a rather colonized view of ownership, I chose to recognize the authors' ownership of that content in a way that respected their work, their heritage, and their communities' values. I chose to bring an epistemological and ontological fluidity to my role, understanding that I didn't have all the answers and that I wanted to make the journal an opportunity for others to create a space for their realities.

We work in complex, situational, and values- and politics-laden environments. As evaluators, I

believe 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. This requires us to be clear about our biases so we can be driven by the mission and not by our own demons. From that place of clarity, we can take a nonjudgmental point of view as early and as often possible, and mindfulness can help us forestall judgments until they are needed.

When I think about the competencies needed to bring order to chaos and complexity and to inform decisions about merit, worth, and significance, I think it is important that we learn how to be competent, mindful, nonjudgmental *humans* first. This requires an ongoing attention to improving our skills of mindful valuing. The more we sit with ourselves, creating moments where we quiet the voices of the world and the voices in our heads so that we can get to the innermost quiet of our souls, the more opportunity arises to know a deeper truth: There are no judgments or epistemological debates between souls.

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