



Visible Values: Striving for truth, beauty and justice in evaluation



Presentation for:

anzea Auckland branch

Auckland, NZ, December 2, 2010

E. Jane Davidson, Ph.D.

<http://RealEvaluation.com>



Truth, beauty & justice



- ▣ Ernie House (1980) *Evaluating with validity*
 Key chapters available online in AEA e-library at
<http://comm.eval.org/EVAL/model/Resources/ViewDocument/Default.aspx?DocumentKey=46918b72-88dd-473a-873f-635d0f78b01e>

Truth

- Have we got the conclusions right?
- Right questions
- Defensible evidence
- Appropriate analyses
- Valid conclusions



Beauty

- Have we presented/argued it right for the relevant audiences?
- Coherence
- Credibility
- A compelling & persuasive argument
- Influence of language & metaphor
- Communication



Justice

- Have we got the values, the ethics, the conception of justice right?
- Evaluation as a political activity
- Conceptions of justice
 - Utilitarian ethics
 - Intuitionist/pluralist ethics
 - Justice-as-fairness



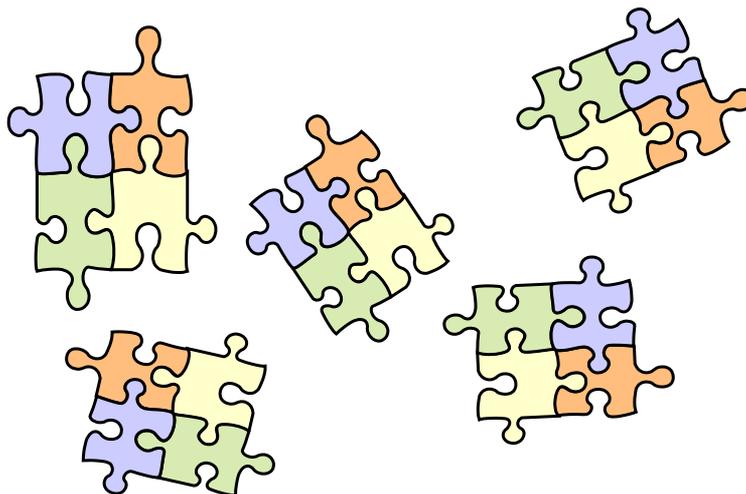
Getting the right conception of justice

- Utilitarian ethics
 - Maximising the average 'good' across all individuals
 - One person's loss is balanced by another's gain
- Intuitionist/pluralist ethics
 - Fundamental principles or criteria are weighed and balanced by whoever is engaged in doing the evaluation
- Justice-as-fairness
 - Same basic rights for all, including self-respect
 - Social & economic inequities allowable only if they benefit the least advantaged in society

Some more about 'beauty'

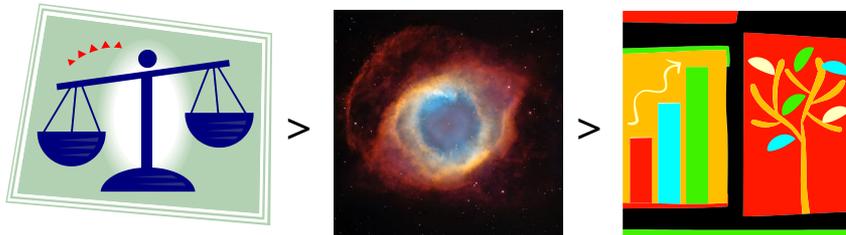
- ▣ Coherent, persuasive argument
- ▣ "Evaluations tell a *story* in which the evidence, inferences and interpretations are integrated into a whole"
- ▣ They should, but do they?

Fragmented evaluations are still a major problem!



Beauty as the poor relation?

- House says:
 - Truth trumps beauty
 - Justice trumps all



Beauty is also elegance

- House:
 - "Elegant solutions are compact, simple, swift."
- Peterson & Park:
 - "... the evidence of history is clear that the research studies with the greatest impact in psychology are **breathtakingly simple** in terms of the questions posed, the methods and designs used, the statistics brought to bear on the data, and the take-home messages.



Simple does not mean simplistic

- Peterson & Park:
 - “Simple does not mean simplistic. Nor does it mean easy or quick. Rather, simple means elegant, clear and accessible, not just to other researchers but to the general public. No one’s eyes glaze over when hearing about a high-impact study. No one feels stupid. No one asks, ‘And your point is?’”



When we pass on simplicity ...

- House:
 - “The more technical and quantitative the evaluation the less a naive audience will be able to challenge it”



Invisible Values

- ▣ Unclear values, assumptions and evaluative reasoning → difficult for any audience to challenge and criticise ... Deliberate?
- ▣ Whose/which values are really being applied?
- ▣ Deliberate undiscussability?



Visible values are key!

- ▣ Visible values → easier to criticise
- ▣ Criticism → scary! BUT ...
 - fairness, more voices at the table, clarity/discussion about justice principles & values applied



Values and qualitative data

- House:
 - in virtually all evaluations that use qualitative evidence, “the ultimate criteria of what is good and right are individual feelings or apprehensions”

- Jane:
 - No, that would just be the sloppy work!
 - Just because it’s qualitative doesn’t mean it’s merely opinion-based



Visible values: What does it mean?

- Clear, transparent set of evaluative criteria, i.e.
“**What do we look at** in order to determine quality, value, effectiveness?”

- Transparent guidelines/explanations for determining “how good is good” i.e.
“**How do we interpret** the evidence?”



How visible values help

- greater consistency of judgements across similar programmes
- a better way of bringing new evaluators and clients up to speed on how sound judgements are made
- easier for programmes to understand what constitutes excellence – and to achieve that
- easier to critique and therefore improve on the evaluation methodology



Beauty and coherent

- Coherent writing, speaking, presentation means coherent thinking!
- Quality of evaluation is not just quality of methods and tools; it's quality of mind
- BUT – there are evaluation tools that can help sharpen the quality and clarity of evaluative thinking



Beauty as the path to truth & justice

- ▣ Beauty = truly accessible, assumption-unearthing, value-explicit evaluation (“visible values”)
- ▣ Visible values → getting the justice part right
- ▣ Right notion of justice, right values → better identification of criteria, more valid interpretation → better “truth”