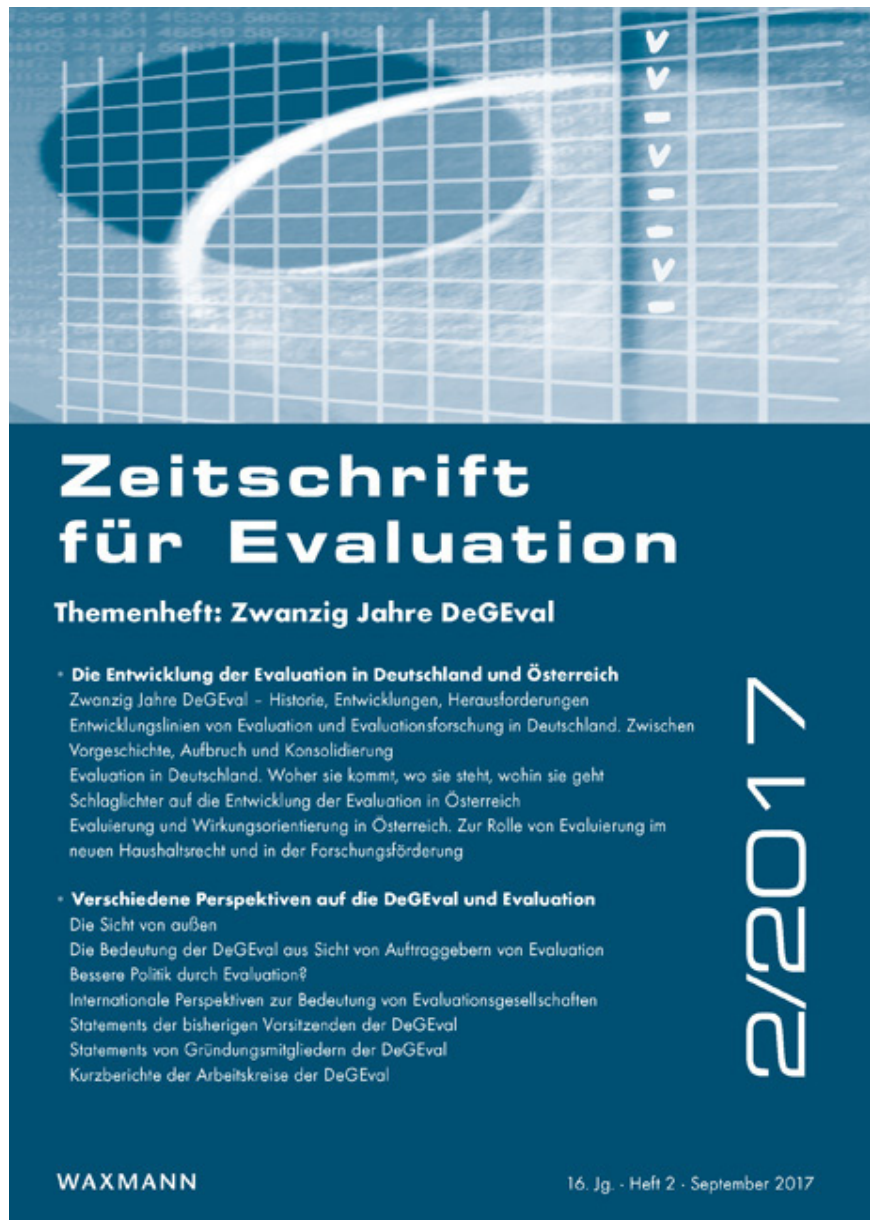


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Themenheft: Zwanzig Jahre DeGEval

• **Die Entwicklung der Evaluation in Deutschland und Österreich**

Zwanzig Jahre DeGEval – Historie, Entwicklungen, Herausforderungen
Entwicklungslinien von Evaluation und Evaluationsforschung in Deutschland. Zwischen
Vorgeschichte, Aufbruch und Konsolidierung
Evaluation in Deutschland. Woher sie kommt, wo sie steht, wohin sie geht
Schlaglichter auf die Entwicklung der Evaluation in Österreich
Evaluierung und Wirkungsorientierung in Österreich. Zur Rolle von Evaluierung im
neuen Haushaltsrecht und in der Forschungsförderung

• **Verschiedene Perspektiven auf die DeGEval und Evaluation**

Die Sicht von außen
Die Bedeutung der DeGEval aus Sicht von Auftraggebern von Evaluation
Bessere Politik durch Evaluation?
Internationale Perspektiven zur Bedeutung von Evaluationsgesellschaften
Statements der bisherigen Vorsitzenden der DeGEval
Statements von Gründungsmitgliedern der DeGEval
Kurzberichte der Arbeitskreise der DeGEval

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Significance of Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPES) for the Dissemination and Professionalization of Evaluation

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1. Introduction

Along with an increased global awareness of evaluation as a key tool for supporting new and improved public policies, there are important concerns around its practice and legitimacy. First, there is a widespread perception that there are too many poor quality evaluations (Brown/Cameron/Wood 2014), a point strongly linked with issues of competencies, that is, ensuring that those who do undertake evaluation work are qualified to do so. Second, there is the displacement of evaluation by quality assurance and performance management systems and the encroachment of other occupational undertakings into evaluation territory (business analysts, data and impact analysts) (Stufflebeam/Coryn 2014). Third, there is a lack of well-established credentials and standards for those who claim to be an evaluator (Picciotto 2011).

These have been some of the key topics that have recurrently giving rise to debates on professionalization. These are understood as a relevant and pertinent pathway towards overcoming these problems by giving evaluation a greater status, recognition and ultimately market share. A different position – an agnostic one – while recognising the seriousness of the above problems, states that there are doubts whether professionalization is the journey which should now be followed as a field.

In this way, the topic of professionalization has emerged as one of the fundamental issues of the evaluation trans-discipline, one of these recurring themes, problems, and issues that periodically resurface in new forms to demand our attention (Smith/Brandon 2008). In this particular case, professionalization is closely linked with the collective of evaluators, that is, the societies, associations and networks of evaluators, which have been more recently identified as VOPES – Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation – (Rugh/Segone 2013). It has been within them (and sometimes between them) that professionalization has been discussed, argued, and constructed. The Global Evaluation Agenda (EvalPartners 2016), an evaluation vision for 2020 validated through an elaborate international consultation process in-

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volving VOPEs and individual evaluators, has also featured professionalization as a priority for the global community.

At the same time, we probably are now at a moment when the discussion around professionalization is being dealt with less effervescence than years ago, making it easier to have a constructive dialogue about it (Altschuld/Engle 2015a). Colleagues that were sceptics in the past about professionalising evaluation as a good direction to go in, are open now to explore this path (Davies/Brümmer 2015: 3), and some important efforts are already being made in order to give a deeper understanding of the theoretical and conceptual issues involved in professionalization (Meyer 2016; Picciotto 2011; Stockmann & Meyer 2015).

This article introduces briefly some of the characteristics of the agenda around the professionalization of evaluation, making explicit some of the concerns that have appeared to be linked to it. The central role played by VOPEs in that process is discussed, introducing their involvement with professionalization at different levels. The final remarks will stress the centrality of transforming the journey towards professionalization into a truly collaborative and bottom up process.

2. Characteristics and Concerns around the Professionalization of Evaluation

While professionalization has been a controversial issue in the evaluation field, the sociology of professions illustrates that this has been the case for all the established professions (Meyer 2016; Picciotto 2011). The process towards professional status has taken several decades (or centuries) for the most established professions, being always a highly contested and negotiated process, played out through a series of complex inter-relationships of multiple stakeholders: practitioners, the state, clients in the market, communities, etc.

Bob Picciotto (2011), building on a framework from the sociology of professions, synthesizes some of the characteristics that should construct an agenda for evaluation professionalization: public recognition that the occupation promotes the public interest (ethical dispositions like services endowed with public good characteristics, collegial behaviour, responsibility for the quality of one's work, etc.); recognized disciplinary expertise (specialized education, continuous exposure to expert practice); professional autonomy (the profession itself controls recruitment, quality of training, approval of professional guidelines, enforcement of ethical standards, etc.); access to practice (the institutionalization of occupational expertise through high quality tertiary education, and the wide range of potential restrictions over access to a professional practice: designation, credentialing, certification, licensing).

The relevance of this framework is that there is not a particular attribute or characteristic that shall be considered sufficient and necessary for the professionalization of an occupation. Instead of that, a critical mass of all of them is needed in close articulation with their particular contexts of development. This is a central point, as many times the discussion of professionalization within the evaluation

community has been mainly focused on the attributes of access to practice, emphasising the different categories of designation that restrict the professional act or the use of the title. That limited focus has implied, then, stressing the necessity of the evaluation field to advance towards schemes of accreditation, credentialing, or designation.

That emphasis on the attributes of access to practice has probably been the trigger to the emergence of different concerns, as reactions to what seem to be tendencies towards exclusivity. This was illustrated by the earliest discussions at the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) around the term VOPEs, initially understood as Voluntary Organizations of “Professional Evaluators”. For many, that understanding was felt as too narrow and excluding, and that it did not acknowledge the broad spectrum of people working on evaluation. The final adoption of the wording *Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation* represented better the agreed understanding that its membership is open not only to those who produce evaluations, but also to commissioners and supervisors of evaluation, academics and students, journalists, parliamentarians and policy makers interested in building policies informed by evaluation, etc. (Rodríguez-Bilella/Lucero 2016). That inclusive philosophy proper of VOPEs, leads to the necessity of finding an inclusive model of professionalization that also brings credibility to the evaluation field.

Along with that, other concerns have been expressed around the issue of the identity of the evaluator, and also who is not one. That has not only been linked with worries about market share (defining who can do evaluations), but also with fears that the professionalization of the field could create barriers to innovation and creativity, conditioning or limiting the topics, areas, or approaches considered legitimate.

Even for those for whom professionalization can be understood as a pertinent and relevant answer to the lack of quality evaluations, significant concerns tend to appear if the pathway for becoming an evaluator and defining its competencies is understood as an outcome that could emerge connected with issues of power in order to enforce particular behaviours of an “external” organization beyond the control of the evaluation community, and without a process of democratic discussion. In the evaluation field, this worry has implied the consideration of VOPEs as the key actors to carry out legitimate and collective processes of discussion of what is implied in a professional evaluation.

3. Initiatives of VOPEs

The topic of professionalization of evaluation can be traced over a 25 year period, with publications in journals and presentations in conferences where the merits of various accreditation systems and approaches to credentialing were discussed (Altschuld/Engle 2015b). This issue has recently gained renewed interest and, while its understanding covers a wide range of meanings (from “improving evaluation prac-

tice” to “establishing a profession”), there are several processes led by VOPEs to promote on-going professionalization around the world.

The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES), usually understood as the pioneer VOPE in the professionalization process² (Love 2015), adopted a competency-based approach, called Professional Designation Program, founded on three pillars: a code of ethics, standards, and competencies (Kuji-Shikatani 2015). This scheme, officially launched in June 2009, awards the Credentialed Evaluator (CE) designation to members who provide convincing evidence of the education and experience required by the CES to be a competent evaluator.

The European Evaluation Society (EES) along with the United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES) are currently piloting a Voluntary Evaluator Peer Review (VEPR) process, which uses self-reflection supported by peers and focuses on practice areas selected by the evaluation practitioner – evaluation provider, manager, commissioner or educator/trainer – undertaking the review (Bustelo 2013). The VEPR is understood as a review process grounded in reflective practice where practitioners apply to their evaluation society to undergo a structured review of their capabilities and self improvement plans.

The American Evaluation Association (AEA), the biggest VOPE, adopted the Guiding Principles for Evaluators that were developed and endorsed in 1994, and reviewed and revised ten years later. Its membership has already endorsed the Joint Committee’s Program Evaluation Standards (2011, 3rd edition), as well as a Cultural Competences Statement in 2011. In 2015, the AEA Board of Directors appointed a Task Force to develop a set of evaluator competencies for the association, including processes for their initial approval by the Board and AEA membership, and for their eventual validation.

Several other VOPEs have also used the Joint Committee Standards for Educational Evaluation for developing their own standard system, as it is the case for the Swiss and German VOPEs, as well as the recently developed Evaluation Standards for Latin American and the Caribbean (ReLAC 2016) presented by the Latin American Network of Evaluation in mid-2016. The ANZEA Evaluator Competencies for Aotearoa New Zealand was finished in 2011, and the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) published in 2013 its *Evaluators’ professional learning competencies*.

While it seems that AfrEA – the African Evaluation Association – has presently no concrete activities in this area, the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) has participated together with the Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Office of the Presidency of South Africa in a study that explores options for the professionalization of evaluation in the South African context.

At the global level, the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) has developed its Code of Ethics as one of its foundational documents, as well as Competencies for Development Evaluation Evaluators, Managers, and Commissioners. Both were developed by multicultural working groups, with a truly global perspective. Efforts on qualification are on-going, with a focus on the capac-

2 Along with the CES, the Japan Evaluation Society (JES) is another VOPE that has been using competencies for credentialing evaluators (Schwandt 2013: 129).

ity to be a good evaluator in a developing country context, identifying a minimum set of competencies.

A review of these efforts by the VOPEs shows that most of the drivers for professionalization have been mostly internal to the field, expressed by the aspirations of the practitioners themselves (the supply side of evaluation). While a consensus among the VOPEs on how to proceed on the professionalization of evaluators has not been reached, there is a clearer agreement on the necessity to strengthen evaluators and evaluation in order to expand the pool of competent evaluators.

4. The Journey towards Professionalization

A key question around the debates and practices on professionalization has been if professionalization is the path that the evaluation community, and VOPEs in particular, should follow. At the same time, this could be an outdated question, if we understand that we are already embarked on that journey towards professionalization. Although there will continue to be arguments about the end point of this process, the process of professionalization itself is a reality, constituted by at least the following milestones:

- a) a commitment to the definition of the trade, that involves building and maintaining a specialized and unique body of knowledge. This has been expressed as evaluation-specific logic or evaluative thinking (value scales and rubrics, etc.) (Scriven 2007, 2013; Davidson 2007), with its closeness and distinction to social research (Mathison 2005);
- b) a commitment to ongoing professional development, that implies the need to continually upgrade the requisite skills, knowledge and expertise required to practice (Tarsilla 2014). This is usually fulfilled by postgraduate courses, workshops, on-site training, e-learning, participating in conferences, engaging with readings in the field, etc.;
- c) the build-up of principles, code of ethics, competencies and standards, reflected in the values of the field (responsibility, maturity, respect for people, etc.). These are key in order to ensure quality and safety of those working in the field, as well as the general public;
- d) the development of particular types of professional recognition (Altschuld, 2005), like credentialing, accreditation and certifying.

The achievement of some of these purposes, with their logic and variable results depending on context, have been at the core of the efforts of most of the VOPEs, and they are key milestones towards evaluation professionalization. Davies and Brümmer (2015: 6) sustain that, based on the historical trajectory of evaluation practice globally, professionalization of evaluation can be conceptualised as a continuum consisting of three key and sequential building blocks: evaluation standards, evaluator competencies and processes to verify competencies. Unfortunately, the discussion has many times been stuck when the focus has been only on issues of professional recognition, without understanding them as subsets of a much more complex

journey. Equating them to professionalization reinforces the trend of rendering of evaluation practice as "... the province of the technician who principally relies on following procedures or scripts and correctly applying methods" (Schwandt 2015a: 144). In order to avoid this, the discussion and agreement on standards and competencies, should precede and be the basis for the efforts of professional recognition. Otherwise, the appeal of the end result of professionalization could take precedence over the quality of the process to get there.

Understanding the professionalization process characterized by the above landmarks, facilitates sidestepping (some of) the controversies that surround the proposals for particular types of professional recognition: the prospect of cost of that system; the limitation or restriction for entry to evaluation practice to only those who are able to demonstrate the requisite knowledge, skills and expertise; the removing of unqualified practitioners, etc. Those milestones are indeed at the core of every effort interested in making evaluation (more) professional, with independence of stressing, or not, the components of evaluation professionalization.

The journey towards professionalization is a process of developing evaluation into a mature profession (Kuzmin 2011), expressed in the long process of engagement that several VOPEs have been doing in their own countries and regions by pushing towards the professionalization *of evaluation*, which is not the same as producing a profession of evaluation alone. Making evaluation professional points to the integration and use of evaluation in order to improve policy and program performance in a professional way, with the expectation that this will end in a mature system or institutional context that could be easily articulated with the evaluation profession. Without proper enabling policies at the national/regional level, the professional role of evaluators will remain incomplete.

An important point here is that both the process towards the professionalization of evaluators and the professionalization of evaluation have to follow the same pathway, at least in most of their initial milestones. That could be understood as a quite similar process – with a different endpoint – that needs to put into operation certain systems and procedures, while having the human resources trained with the necessary competencies in evaluation, capable of conducting evaluations of high quality, and to strengthen and deepen the national evaluation agenda. If the professionalization discussion stresses the component of developing evaluation in a more professional and mature endeavour, it also facilitates to widen the focus beyond evaluators themselves. VOPEs, then, can do a lot in order to strengthen the supply of high quality evaluation learning and training for the several actors involved in the field of evaluation: commissioners, donors, practitioners and evaluators themselves.

Surely the development of evaluation competencies and standards carried out by several VOPEs has stimulated discussion and debate within the evaluation field about professional identity and practice. At the same time, we are uncertain if it had influenced (or has the chance to influence) evaluation practice itself, as well as the perceptions of evaluation legitimacy by funders and commissioners. This implies that there is some work to be done before advancing to recommend a particular form of credentialing, certification or some other form of recognition of evalua-

tion expertise, skills, knowledge and experience. A fruitful path could be to advance in the process of making evaluation more professional.

5. Final Remarks

One relevant threat for VOPEs in walking this path towards professionalization is to relegate evaluation to a mere set of accountability, control and “knowledge management” techniques, forgetting that the strength of evaluation draws on far more than just evaluation’s technical and methodological resources. In that sense, Thomas Schwandt (2015b: 465) sustains that the evaluation community needs to shift attention from technical professionalism towards a model of democratic professionalism, one that invokes evaluation itself as a political act. That implies that evaluation has to be understood as an intervention with inevitable and inescapable effects on, and changes to, relations of power amongst stakeholders – programme managers, intended beneficiaries, evaluators, evaluation commissioners, etc. Being a *professional practice* implies then that evaluation is not simply a technical undertaking, but one in which – as Ian Davies sustains – its *fountainhead are values, open-mindedness and emotional intelligence, and it is only by making these explicit and necessary foundations of professional identity, that professionalization may be positive* (Davies & Brümmer 2015: 3).

Surely VOPEs can do more than embark in this journey alone. The historical effort made by CES (analysed in the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation 29: 3) and the evaluation of that process (Fierro/Galport/Hunt/Codd/Donaldson 2016) is a good starting point. Rochow (2016) has sustained that DACUM (**D**eveloping **A** **C**urriculum) could be a useful approach to evaluation capacity building using competencies. More recently, the ongoing work of EES & UKES in the VERPS has built a concept or Charter of Principles that could facilitate a strategic convergence among VOPEs with respect to professionalization, encouraging them to adopt processes adapted to their context and based on a set of principles consistent with good evaluation practices, guidelines and frameworks.

While the international development evaluation profession is quite different from many other endeavours as it reaches across borders, the professionalization dynamic cannot be the same everywhere, as evaluation shows a notable heterogeneous degree of maturation as a discipline in many countries. The IOCE, as the international umbrella of VOPEs, should continue fostering the exchange and practice of national and regional VOPEs around professionalization. As it is implied in its name, the role of the IOCE should be to cooperate on efforts at the regional and national level, instead of merely unifying them. This is not the time to advance in a worldwide fashion, stating an internationally homogeneous definition of the discipline, a unified code of ethics, or an international set of fixed standards and competencies. There could be some agreement on general standards principles, but their level of concreteness needs to be widely discussed (see a preliminary discussion in King/Stevahn 2015). In that sense, the IOCE could play a role in being the platform

for sharing the different initiatives going on by various VOPEs at national and regional level, with an explicit recognition that such efforts might best be customized according to their relevant contexts.

While it is not desirable to state an international path to professionalization, *making evaluation a mature profession* is a good and appropriate shareable vision for VOPEs around the world that have different priorities and could be developing (or not at all) different strategies towards professionalization. The centrality of transforming the journey towards professionalization into a truly collaborative and bottom-up process has more gains than risks, and the endpoint – a professional practice of evaluation – is a really valuable one.

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