A Discourse Perspective on Evaluation[1]

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Abstract. *This paper explores issues and implications of evaluation considered from a discourse perspective. Five topics are discussed: questions, description, authority, criteria, and positioning. In each case, issues are identified that tend to be overlooked, ignored, or not visible from an evaluation-as-methods perspective. The paper concludes with an appeal for increased openness and diversity in our understandings and practices of evaluation.*

Keywords: *evaluation, discourse, social work, social construction, research.*

Raktažodžiai: *vertinimas, diskursas, socialinis darbas, socialinis konstravimas, tyrimas.*

Evaluation is about language. Whatever we might call our approach to evaluation – realist, interpretivist or constructionist – we all rely on written and spoken language to understand, analyze, and communicate our activities. However, despite the inevitability and salience of language in evaluations, relatively little attention has been given to its use and influence, in particular, its potential for changing the way we understand, conduct and assess evaluations. This paper is a modest attempt to address this situation.

How do I Know what I Think until I See what I Say?

Evaluations are generally considered to be an activity that is applied to pre-existing entities such as an organization, program, or policy. The results of such activity are judgments about how well the entity is performing in relation to particular goals (and often recommendations for improvement). While evaluators differ in their choice of approaches, methods and goals, there is a common assumption that their data or information will reflect the program as it

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is currently operating. What is often overlooked or not considered is how the evaluation itself interacts with what is being evaluated. A different position – taken in this paper – is that the process of evaluation is reflexively related to the environments that are evaluated. That is, the objects of evaluation are rendered visible and inscribed through the actions of evaluators (similar to how what we think is related to our verbal and written expression, as stated by the oft-cited quote of the English author E. M. Forster in the above heading).

Another way to express this idea is to say that evaluations enact the environments they evaluate. The concept of enactment was developed by Karl Weick in his theorizing and research on sensemaking in organizations (Weick 1969, 1979, 1995). In brief, enactment refers to processes through which actors interact with and generate their environments. This occurs in numerous ways such as through talking, administering measures, creating contexts, and influencing others. The process of carrying out evaluations generates an intelligible picture of its objects, e.g., an organization or program; or as Weick has written, "How enactment is done is what an organization will know" (Weick 2001, 187). The "how" and "what" are not independent. In the process of acting some things are noticed or positioned in the foreground, while others become less perceptible and part of the background.

Enactment also contributes to sensemaking. Through processes such as bracketing and selection, enactment reduces equivocality and imposes orderliness on situations (Weick and Sutcliffe 2005). Similarly, evaluations function as sensemaking activities that make particular understandings more definitive. In sum, evaluations and their environments may be thought of as being constitutively entangled (Orlikowski 2007) in a way that one cannot be separated from the other.

Enactment occurs recursively through social interactions. Actors interpret, articulate, and negotiate the environment and the constructed environment responds to and shapes their construals. These enacted environments become the context for further interactions. Language, in this context, does not simply describe a pre-existing reality, but acts as a constitutive force that generates it. From this perspective, the different possibilities for representation become important. The various representations (or lack thereof) of women, people of color, people with disabilities and other marginalized groups underscore the potency of language to generate different realities.

Evaluation as Discourse

Whether or not we believe in an independent or language-dependent reality, I concur with Gergen (1994) that "once we attempt to articulate 'what is there,' . . . we enter the world of discourse." . . . [which is] inextricably woven into processes of social interchange and into history and culture" (p. 72). If we take

this idea seriously, it opens up potentially useful ways to think about and practice evaluation. Discourse, however, is not a straightforward concept. Rather, it has various meanings depending on the speaker/author, context, purpose and so on. Below are some examples that capture the senses in which I am using the term:

> Discourses are systems of statements that construct an object produced and reproduced in conversation and written text (Newman and Holzman 1997, 54).

> [Discourses are] "systems of meaning which offer positions of power to some categories of people and disempower others" (Parker 1992, 10).

> [Discourses are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (Foucault 1972, 49).

> Discourses are structures of knowledge, claims, and practices through which we understand, explain, and decide things. In constituting agents, they also define obligations and determine the distribution of responsibilities and authorities for different categories of people, such as parents, children, social workers, doctors, lawyers, and so on (Chambon 1999, 57).

Some characteristics of these definitions that I wish to highlight include:

Discourses are ways of understanding the world. As Foucault and others have stressed, discourses are more than "mere words." Rather they are basic to the thought structures that we use to make sense of things. What we think of as family or science or sex are embedded in and constituted through the dominant discourses of our cultures.

Discourses are expressed through language. Although discourses may be manifested in ways other than language (for example, in the structure of an organization), their linguistic expression serves to reproduce, disrupt, or regulate social life. Additionally, some properties of language, namely, its historical and cultural embeddedness and its ability to be shaped by various social and political forces are particularly important for evaluation.

Discourses are practices. We "do" discourses. They are not passive but are "activated" and manifested by speaking, writing, and other forms of action such as administering questionnaires or interviewing.

Discourses construct objects. Discourses generate their own realities. "Events in the world do not exist for people independently of the representations people use to make sense of them. Instead, objects are defined through elaborate enactments of cultural conventions which lead to the establishment of such well documented 'institutional facts' (Searle 1969) such as 'touchdowns,' 'marriages,' 'insults,' 'banishments,' 'property rights,' (D'Andrade 1984), and, . . . 'learning disabilities' . . . " (Mehan 1996, 273). Despite this constitutive quality, discourses do not exist apart from the objects they construct nor are those objects external to discourse. Instead, discourses and their objects exist in a

reflexive relationship, constituting and being constituted by each other (cf. Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

Discourses define categories of people, their responsibilities and authorities. This characteristic is a slight revision of Chambon's definition since, I would argue, categories do not exist independent of discourses but are created and sustained by them. For example, whether some collection of people is categorized as a family will likely vary depending on whether one is operating from the discourse of fundamentalist Christianity in the U.S., certain Asian religious traditions, or radical feminism. Once categorized, their "responsibilities and authorities" can be explicated as a function of the discourse. This has obvious implications for evaluation as it creates the agents and objects of evaluation (such as evaluators, stakeholders, and outcomes) and guides their interaction.

Discourses involve power relations. The existence of multiple discourses and the lack of uniform criteria for applying them (which is inevitable since such criteria also are part of discourses) means that discourses compete with one another for dominance. Which understandings will prevail in a particular setting or which objects will be constituted depends on relations of power involving factors such as authority, resource control, and sanctions. These relations are associated not only with the people in a setting, but to institutional and organizational structures – themselves the products of discourses (e.g., the hierarchical organization of a hospital).

Foucault, perhaps more than anyone, highlighted the relationship between discourse and power and its institutional dimensions. He used the concept of "discursive fields" to identify "competing ways of giving meanings to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes" (Weedon 1997, 34). Competing discourses will not be equal in power nor in their political stances; that is, their support of or challenge to the status quo. For example, Weedon (1997) discusses the conservative discourse in which "family" is considered a natural unit of the social order with the primary responsibility to rear children. In this family, there is a gendered division of labor with the male in a position of authority. The dominance of this discourse is reflected in "the organization of society in family units [which] guarantees the reproduction of social values and skills in class and gender terms" (p. 37), and in its institutions such as the legal system and the welfare system. Weedon contrasts this dominant discourse with radical and socialist family discourses in which the family is an instrument of oppression of women. However, because the dominant discourse is inscribed in societal institutions, giving it enormous material advantages, these alternative discourses remains marginalized.

These characteristics of discourse pack a lot of meaning into one word, maybe too much. However, if we accept even some of them, the implications for evaluation are substantial. I discuss some of these in the following sections.

Questions

When evaluation is considered a type of discourse, the questions asked both in and about evaluations change. For instance, instead of the typical focus on methodological rigor or the proper application of technique, questions turn to characteristics and implications of the discourse.

Questions invite others to participate in a discourse. Since questions themselves arise within particular discourses, their invitations are similarly located.[2] In this sense all questions are leading questions. For example, asking a question about the characteristics of a particular psychiatric disorder is to enact a particular discourse in which the disorder exists, where psychiatric disease exists, where psychiatrists have particular authority, where health and illness have particular meanings and so on. Similarly, to ask whether a particular drug is effective in reducing smoking is to invite participants into the discourse of science in which efficient causality, determinism, subjectivity, physicians and patients are constituted. Thus, unless the question or questioner is rejected, the discursive field will be somewhat constricted by the question.

Because of their discourse enacting qualities, questions orient and guide evaluations and can have a considerable influence on their eventual findings. For example, Gubrium and Holstein (1997) discuss how the "what" questions of traditional ethnographers and the "how" questions of ethnomethodologists lead them to constitute different realities. Additionally, evaluations can be assessed by asking questions of their questions, not only of their content, but also of how they function discursively. Below are some examples of questions that might be asked when preparing or analyzing evaluations:

• How do questions function in this evaluation (for example, as hypotheses, as regulators of what can be said, as incentives to consider new perspectives)?

• What is the range of permissible (or intelligible) responses to the questions asked? What responses are invited or discouraged?

• How were evaluation questions identified and formulated; that is, whose questions are these?

• Who gets to ask evaluation questions and who answers them?

• What is the relationship among questioners, respondents, and organization? Given the nature of that relationship, can the question or questioner be challenged?

• In whose language are questions formulated and expressed?

• What values, interests, and commitments do the questions express? (See Witkin 1999 for further discussion of questions).

Asking these questions about an evaluation – or using them to guide the

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[2]   Of course, one may decline an invitation or respond in an unexpected way thereby challenging the hegemony of the discourse. However, in many social work settings respondents (that is, clients) may not be free to challenge the discourse that is implied by a question.

development of an evaluation – orients us towards relational and value issues that become infused with (and therefore often invisible within) evaluations. They can help reveal the discourse that is operating and how the language of that discourse structures and generates its "findings."

Description

In a discussion of how "the events of discourse" are described, Foucault posed a question that provides another example of the disruptive or alternate discourse generating potential of questions. He asked: "How is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" The realist or empiricist response to this question might be that the statements chosen most accurately reflect the state of affairs under investigation. When evaluation is seen as discourse, however, the criterion of descriptive accuracy becomes suspect.[3] Any description is considered as one way among many ways of construing a situation. The particular description chosen is not demanded by the brute facts of reality, but will vary in relation to social factors.[4] Gubrium and Holstein (1997) put it this way, "Descriptions must make sense; they must convince socially defined, culturally competent listeners that the objects, actions, or events in question warrant the attributions and characterizations that are bestowed upon them" (p. 132). Thus, one's skills with language and rhetoric may be the most critical factors in the plausibility and acceptance of description. The great American writer John Steinbeck illustrated this eloquently in his description of ichthyologic research in his book, *Log From The Sea of Cortez* (1941):

> The Mexican Sierra (a fish) has 17 plus 15 plus 9 spines in the dorsal fin. These can be easily counted. But if the Sierra strikes hard on the line so that your hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being – an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman. The only way to count the spines of the Sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff colorless fish from the formalin solution, count the spines and write the truth . . . There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed – probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself.

[3] Accuracy is itself seen as the discursive expression of the belief that linguistic representations of reality can be separated from an extralinguistic reality. Of course, this position also is part of a discourse. Thus, it is not the discursive nature of these beliefs that are troublesome, but rather the implications of accepting or denying such a view.

[4] Clearly, one is not free to say anything; however, the restrictions on what may be said are socially influenced, for example, language conventions, power relations, and social context.

It is good to know what you are doing. The man with his pickled fish has set down one truth and has recorded in this experience many lies. The fish is not that color, that texture, that dead, nor does he smell that way (p. 2-3).

Another dramatic (and somewhat amusing) example of this can be found in a little book by Queneau (1981) in which he provides 195 descriptions of the same event – someone getting on to a bus.

Describing social interactions, particularly in the contexts within which social work evaluations typically occur, requires complex judgments. For example, calling a parent's response to a child a "rebuke," a "lesson," a "personal attack," a "back-handed compliment," or "praise" may involve consideration of multiple factors such as the context of the interaction, knowledge of and past experience with the family, and favored theories.[5] Typically, whatever word or words are used to "describe" what happened will support certain values, that is, there will be an implication that the action was good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, for example, that the rebuke or praise was or was not appropriate. Similarly, using descriptive adjectives such as "domineering," "passive," "dependent," "assertive," "friendly," "uncooperative," "cooperative," "distant," "detached," "depressed" and so on – almost always imply a value stance in which the adjective used is one side of a dichotomous relation. Therefore, if descriptions involve choice, and if that choice is communicated in language, such choices invariably will imply values.

Sometimes the values contained in descriptions are implicit or indirect as when a statement is made as if it were obviously true or taken-for-granted. For example, in a popular text on human behavior, the authors state: "Children must begin the long process of moving in the direction of independence and separation from parental figures" (Berger, McBreen and Rifkin 1996, 141). One way to read this sentence is that independence and separation from parental figures are necessary for healthy development. Alternatively, but not necessarily exclusively, independence and separation and their implied relationship to health could be interpreted as value positions of the authors, or suggesting a male-oriented developmental perspective.

Accepting values as an inevitable part of descriptions implies that descriptions may function as prescriptions. This possibility is troublesome to empiricists who use various research designs to try to eliminate values from descriptions (or at least minimize their impact). For the discursive-oriented evaluator, however, the inevitability of values does not pose the same problem. Becoming aware that descriptions involve choice suggests that they – and the values they imply – can be otherwise. Thus the task becomes not to eliminate values, but to employ them in our inquiries in ways that are consistent with

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[5] Even the description "response" is a judgment that imposes a temporal sequence on the interaction.

the values and mission of social work (or our visions of the good life)[6] and to be explicit about how we do so.

Authority, Rhetoric and Representation

If descriptions cannot derive their authority by claiming to be accurate depictions of "what is," then from where does their authority come? From a discursive perspective, textual authority is attributed on the basis of social factors such as the perceived expertise of authors/speakers and from institutional jurisdiction – themselves products of discourse – over particular knowledge areas. Authority also can be constructed by how a discourse is structured.

Authority also can be produced by a text structure and the use of tropes and other literary devices. The format of articles in professional journals and the use of particular writing styles such as that of the American Psychological Association create an authoritative text. The latter does this by reproducing the discourse of science generating what Billig (1988) calls "depopulated texts," that is, texts without people.

Dorothy E. Smith has described how various literary devices may be used to authorize a text. She identified "practices of objectification" that create the impression that a description is factual rather than mere opinion. One way this is done, according to Smith (1997), is by "suspending the presence of the subject" by converting verbs expressing subjects' actions into nouns (called nominalization). Thus, instead of describing how someone "does" depression or hurts family members, we discuss depression and family violence. A related strategy is to convert subjective states of persons (e.g., attitudes or opinions) into entities "that can interact with other entities" (p. 59). Thus, an evaluation report might discuss the relationship of attitudes to beliefs. In a related literary practice termed "reattributing agency from subject to social phenomena," Smith notes that "Once nominalized social phenomena are constructed, agency can be attributed to them rather than to people" (p. 59); for example, attitudes, beliefs, and the like may be attributed causal properties.

When people are constructed as categories, it is common to treat those categories as real entities and to assign (via research) characteristics or attributes to them (Smith calls this "reconstructing subjects as figments of discourse," p. 61). This is a common practice in social and psychological discourse. Most formal psychological measurement is based on the "existence" of such entities whose characteristics are then measured. In contrast, the discourse-oriented evaluator, rather than seeking referents or characteristics of a particular term, such as "borderline personality," might (following Foucault) analyze the term

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[6]   This position does not mean that one can say anything. Our utterances still will be judged by various criteria depending on the language community to which one is aiming. Also, it seems reasonable to presume that professionals are guided by a sense of ethics such as honesty that certainly are not suspended in this case.

as a discursive phenomenon, "as a thing brought into speech by the workings of power" (Shapiro 1987, 369).

In scientific discourse, authority is related to facticity and objectivity. A common way of constructing objectivity in inquiry is through the use of "distancing devices" which separate the objects of study from the ways they are constituted in our representations of them. For example, the use "exemplary extracts of informants' comments or conversations" in ethnographies separates the author's commentary from the lives that are her/his subject matter (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 91; see also Atkinson 1990). Statistics in the empiricist tradition may function similarly – turning readers attention away from the possibility that the research text constitutes its subject matter.

In a similar vein, Gergen (1994) discusses "distention devices," ways of using language that create a separation between subjective experience and its linguistic referents. Distention language can be as simple as using words like "the" and "that" instead of "my" or by using "distending metaphors" such as using words like "found," "detected," and "discovered" to imply that learning about the world is like searching for "buried treasure." Gergen demonstrates the rhetorical impact of such metaphors by contrasting their use with more personalized language; for example, "Smith discovered the fact" versus "Smith labeled his impression" or "Jones found that . . ." versus "Jones selected new terms for his experience" (p. 174-175).

These rhetorical devices – and I have only scratched the surface of this topic – not only authorize texts (such as evaluation reports), but help maintain the very characteristics of authority such as objectivity that the discourse creates. By implication, they also support the metatheory of subject-object dualism. Critical, literary readings can interrupt these self-authorizations and increase potential interpretations of a text.

Concern with issues of representation has led to exploration of different literary styles and presentation formats. Although a discussion of these efforts is beyond the scope of this paper, some examples have included writing forms such as personal essay, memoir, autoethnography, dialogue, and poetry. Conjoint or distributed representations in texts (that is, multi-voiced texts) in which researchers and participants or other relevant voices co-construct a text have begun to appear (Gergen and Gergen 2000). In addition, performance texts in which participants literally "act out" their study within a dramaturgical context have been reported (for example, Ellis and Bochner 1992).

A compelling concern of those for whom representation issues are salient is its political aspect. Social scientists and evaluators inevitably wind up speaking for (and creating) others. What has become increasingly clear over the past several years is that those representations are often not how those being represented would choose to portray themselves.

The Problem of Criteria

The issue of representation also relates to the criteria used to judge knowledge claims. How an evaluation is described and reported will be influenced by the criteria believed most relevant to such claims. Demonstrating how an evaluation meets those criteria will increase its authority. Whether we subscribe to validity or verisimilitude, we will construct our reports in ways in which important evaluative criteria are salient.

Although by undermining the notion of a final, external authority, a discursive standpoint complicates the issue of criteria, we cannot eliminate the need to make judgments. Few of us (I hope) are willing to embrace an "anything goes" or "nothing goes" strategy that would leave "what goes" to those with the most power. However, viewing evaluation as discourse raises new challenges for how to adjudicate among knowledge claims or even how to assess such claims. Undergirding this challenge is the shift in perception of evaluation as a truth-bearing or truth-discovering enterprise to an activity that primarily is moral and political in nature[7] (Smith and Deemer 2000). This shift has led to the identification of criteria that are sensitive to the social and practical aspects of evaluation. For example, Chambers (2000) contends that criteria of utility are at least as important as more traditional ones such as validity. He identifies five such criteria: accessibility, relevance, responsiveness "to different claims on the *significance* of a course of action," credibility, and the extent to which a study addresses "matters of *prospect* and judgment" (p. 863).[8] It is important to note that all of these criteria are applied in reference to stakeholders and client groups.

In recent years the increasingly vocal demands and "counterstories" by groups who have felt unrepresented or misrepresented by traditional research and evaluation have highlighted the moral dimension of evaluative criteria. One alternative has been the development of "standpoint epistemologies" in which the starting point of inquiry or interpretation is located in the gendered, racial, sexual or ethnic experience of the researcher, critic, subject, or author. These inquiries have generated new understandings of marginalized groups that stand in contrast to "Eurocentric, masculinist" representations of their lives (see Denzin 1997).

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[7]   I hasten to add that nothing in this conceptualization compels me to give up having standards by which to judge a program or the evaluation of that program. What changes is the way I do this as was illustrated previously in my discussion of questions.

[8]   Although Chambers' concern is applied ethnography, I believe his criteria apply to evaluation studies of various persuasions.

Positioning

One issue generated by these concerns is who contributes to evaluations and the credibility given to their understandings. Evaluations inevitably involve interactions among evaluators and people associated with the evaluand. There interactions are characterized by positionings that enable the interactants to say and do particular things. For example, in the position of evaluator a person has a right to ask certain kinds of questions about the operation of a program or what someone thinks about how well an organization is carrying out its mission, that would be seen as inappropriate for another person. These positions not only help to explain the communication between evaluators and others, but between various stakeholders. Thus, it provides information about evaluators' relationships and program relationships.

The notion of "subject position" and the study of positioning was developed by Rom Harré and his associates to provide a more flexible, dynamic replacement for the concept of "role" (e.g., Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and Lagnehove 1999). Their theory also links the idea of position with the rights and duties associated with social acts, particularly linguistic acts. Also, considered is what Harré calls the "illocutionary force" of language, that is, its social significance, and the story lines or narratives associated with different interactional episodes.

If an evaluation is viewed as a story of an organization, program, or policy, a positioning analysis can increase awareness of how the story gets constructed (and by implication, what other stories might have been told). It invites questions such as whose interpretations count? Who is considered an authority? Who does not have standing to offer an interpretation? How are different views about what happened or is happening adjudicated? Using positioning analysis, evaluators can study how people are positioned in their attempts to participate in the narrative as well as their own positioning efforts. It can help illuminate the communication between evaluators and stakeholders and among stakeholders themselves and how collectively these interactions contribute to the overall evaluation.

Conclusion

I have attempted to identify some issues and implications related to a shift from evaluation as constituted by methods to evaluation as discourse. Despite my brief treatment of these issues, I hope it will generate consideration of how this perspective might enhance the practice and interpretation of evaluation.

Although the shift to discourse can feel like a slide into nihilism, intellectual anarchy, or immobilization, it need not be so. In fact, we can look at this change as a way of enhancing our evaluation activities. Viewing language not

"as a neutral carrier of meanings or a mere transparent medium of facts . . . [but as] . . . the constitutive method and material of the world that it projects . . . [means that] . . . the way that we talk about the world [is] as important as the objects of the worlds that, in talking about them, become available as objects of our experience" (Brown 1990, 72). Thus, consideration of linguistic and textual practices and their relationship to evaluation can, in my opinion, enrich the conversation around evaluation, broaden our understanding, increase our sensitivity to topics and people that may have been invisible or silent, and align our practices more closely with our values and commitments. It can also expand the range of practices available to evaluators.

If evaluation is a moral activity, then evaluators have an obligation to be self-conscious about their representational practices given their privileged position as assessors and decision makers. Drawing on Foucault, Gubrium and Holstein (1997) argue that, "Because we speak and write a discourse of scientific 'truth' and there are substantial institutional arrangements that lend credence to what we say, self-consciousness obligates us to reflexively deconstruct our own 'truths' and consider the power that resides in producing and owning knowledge" (p. 111). Such consciousness can "encourage social scientists to undertake forms of analysis that avoid the uncritical valorization of the realities created by the dominant, 'official' modes of discourse" (Shapiro 1987, 366). We can address this issue of self-consciousness by being open to and experimenting with diverse forms of inquiry and representation, and by expanding our evaluative lexicon and modes of expression. Increasing the diversity of intellectual resources available to evaluators can help us to work more sensitively and collaboratively with others. If we can do this, our evaluations, our services, and ultimately our clients, will benefit.

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Vertinimas diskurso perspektyvoje

Santrauka

Straipsnis analizuoja problemas ir implikacijas, susijusias su vertinimu, į kurį žvelgiama iš diskurso perspektyvos. Straipsnyje paliečiamos penkios temos: klausimai, aprašymas, autoritetas, kriterijai ir pozicionavimas. Kiekvienu atveju autorius identifikuoja temas, kurios dažnai ignoruojamos, praleidžiamos pro akis ir nematomos tiriant vertinimą iš metodologinės perspektyvos. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad būtina taikyti įvairesnes ir atviresnes perspektyvas vertinimo sampratose ir praktikose.