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The ethics of independence

What does ‘independent evaluation’ mean in 2026?

Australian Evaluation Society Conference, Larrakia Country

September 2026

Acknowledgment of Country

I acknowledge the Larrakia people as the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which I am speaking today. I honour and respect their continuing culture and connection to the land, waters and sky.

I also acknowledge the many ways in which Aboriginal people contribute to the body of evaluation knowledge, their ways of being and knowing in reciprocity with their communities.



Are you an independent evaluator?

UN Evaluation Group Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016) – Norm 4

Behavioural independence

Evaluating without undue influence

- Freely express their evaluative assessment
- Have free access to information about the evaluand
- Without negative effects on career development

Organisational independence

Structures that support independent practice

- Positioned independently from program management
- Carries the evaluation agenda
- Is adequately resourced
- Evaluation managers have full discretion to submit reports to decision-makers
- Evaluators can directly commission, produce, publish and disseminate evaluation reports in the public domain without undue influence by any party

Evaluation in practice presents strong challenges to this way of understanding evaluation.

Evaluations are typically delivered in a few ways:

- Commissioned external evaluations operating under market conditions
- Internal evaluations operating within organisational constraints
- Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and learning which can blend the two.



Commissioners and program areas hold power
Sometimes exert pressure on behavioural independence



Restrictions on data flow
Often legitimate reasons that data can't be shared with evaluators



Implicit power over contracts and career development
Tension sometimes leads to compromises



Growth in embedded evaluation roles
Not organisationally independent from program area



Evaluations are not always shared publicly
Evaluators (internal/external) often don't own the findings



Diversity of methodologies
Including those that explicitly position evaluators differently



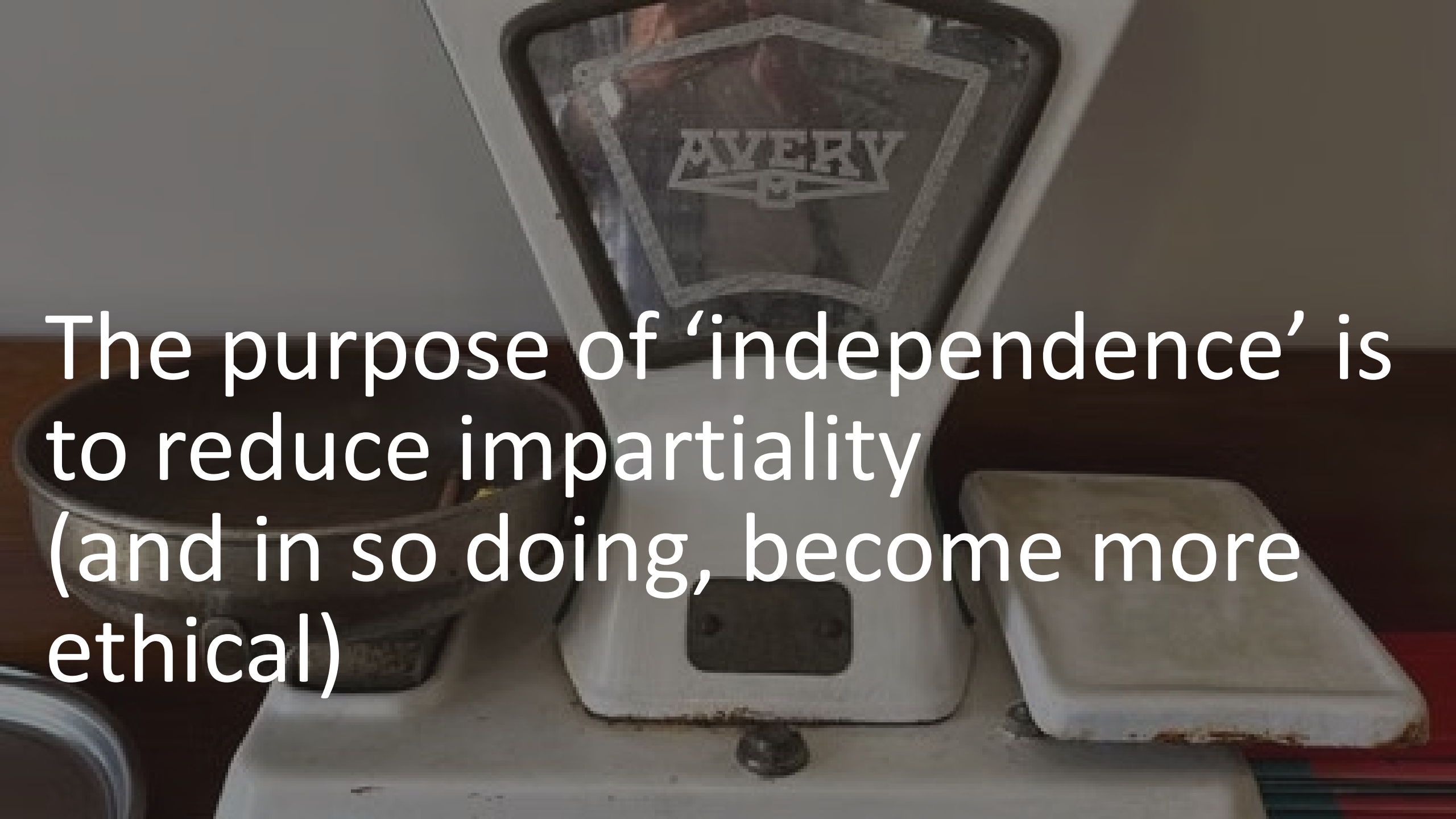
Growth in lived experience evaluation
Evaluators are of the community they are evaluating



Fiscal constraints
External evaluators are sometimes out of reach for organisations' budgets

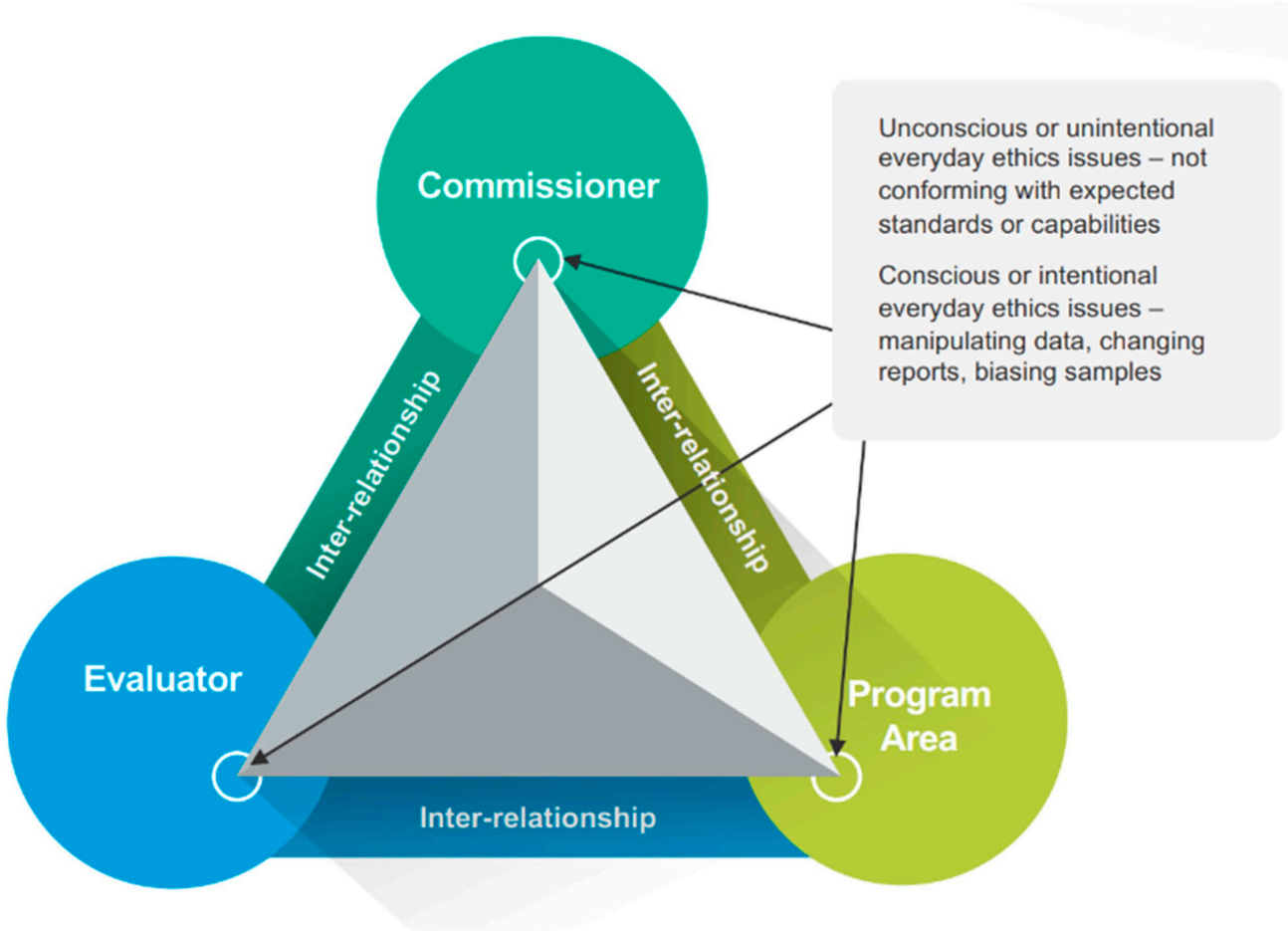


Evaluation as advocacy
In a tight budget environment, organisations need their evaluation to show results



The purpose of ‘independence’ is to reduce impartiality (and in so doing, become more ethical)

This risks missing the evaluation is inherently relational…



Source: Hornby, K., Main, S., Drew, S.-A., van Twest Farmer, J., Williams, E., & Williams, E. (2026). Navigating Everyday Ethical Challenges in Evaluation: A Framework for Reflection and Action. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X261483279

political…

"In general, evaluation work is heavily influenced by politics and values outside the professional community. Evaluators are inextricably imbued with value commitments, constrained by the context of the study, the politics of the setting, and the politics of the government. Evaluators are fully 'situated' in the deepest sense: valued-imbued, value-laden, and value-based…

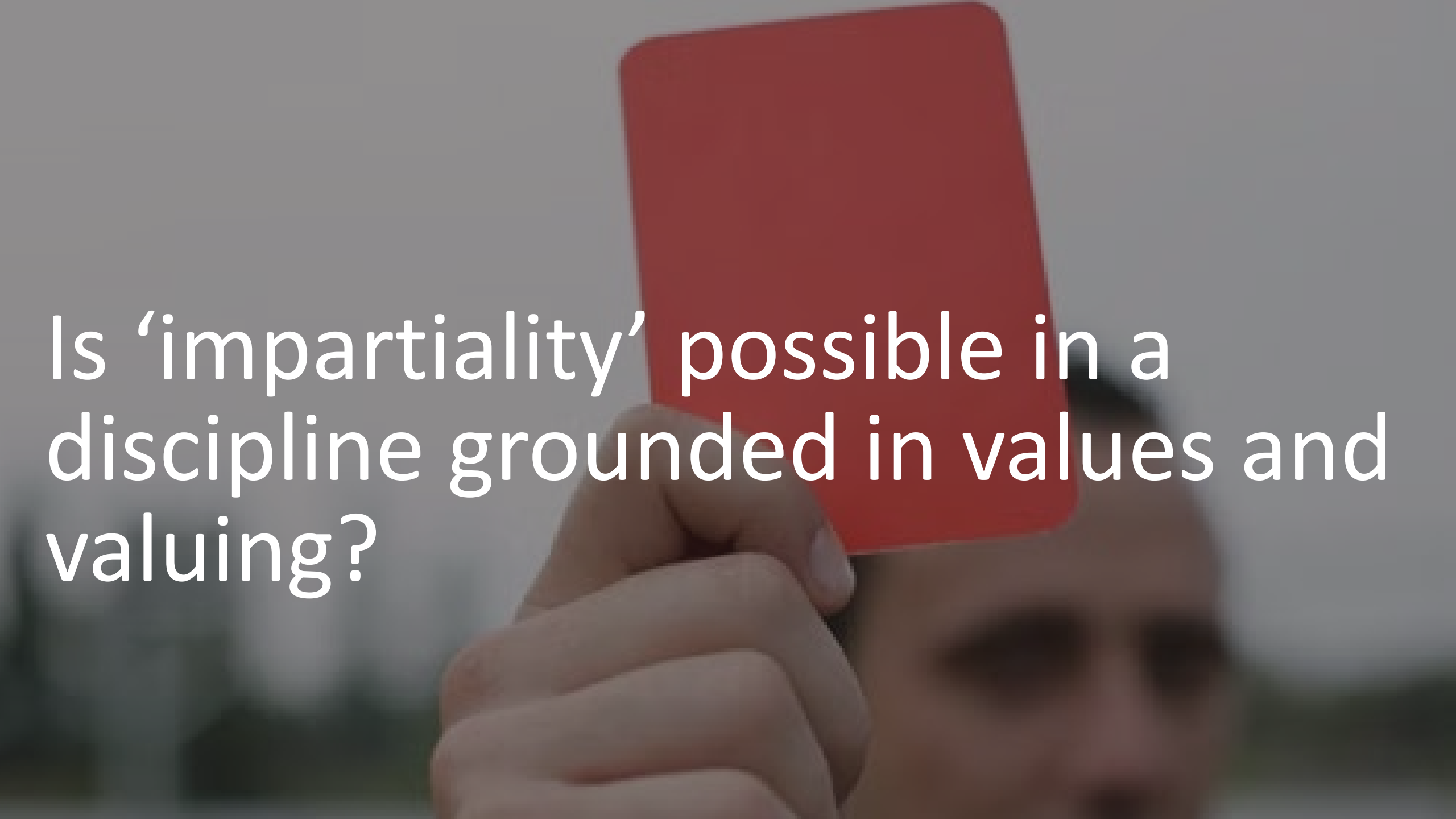
Evaluators ask, when will the politics go away so I can attend solely to my evaluation? The answer is, never."

Ernest R House (Democracy and Evaluation, paper presented to the European Evaluation Society, 2004)

and situated within a community context.

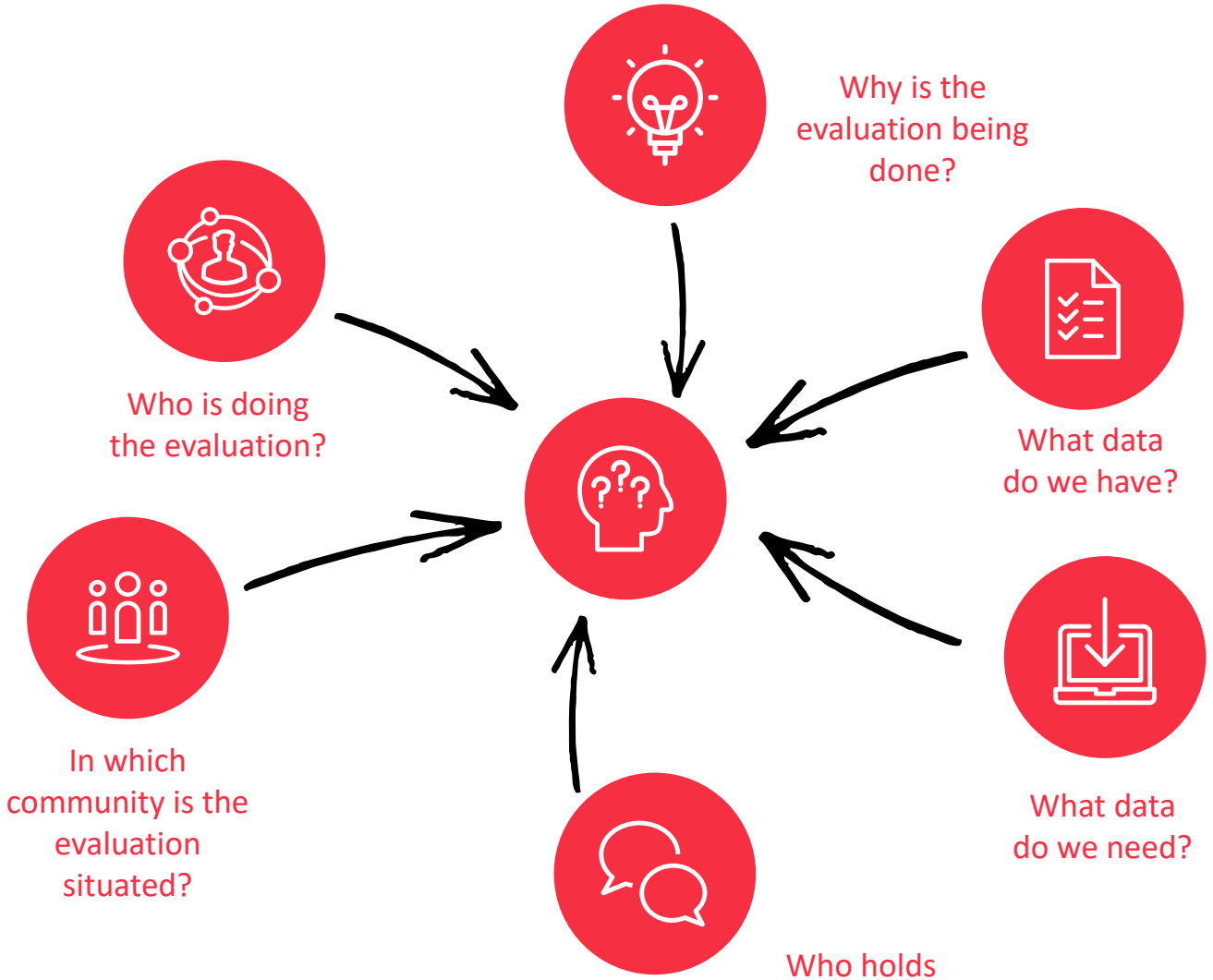


Source: Gollan, S. & Stacey, K. (2021). *Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework*, Australian Evaluation Society, Melbourne.



Is ‘impartiality’ possible in a discipline grounded in values and valuing?

What influences the ‘independence’ of an evaluation?



So what dimensions of independence might there be?

Intellectual

The extent to which you are independent of thought and decisions within an evaluation.

Behavioural

The extent to which your actions are free from outside influence and pressure.

Organisational

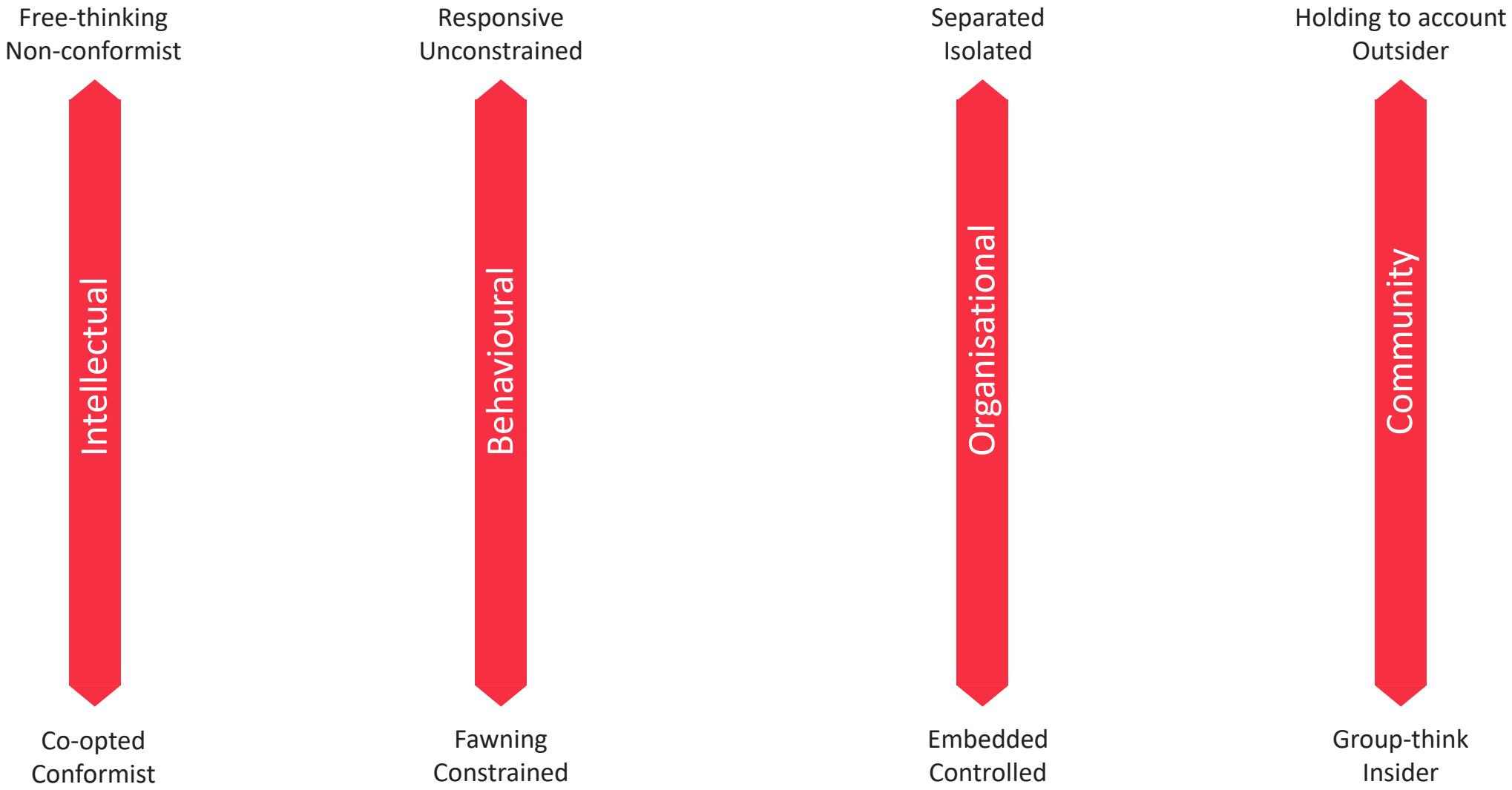
The extent to which you are structurally independent of program delivery.

Community

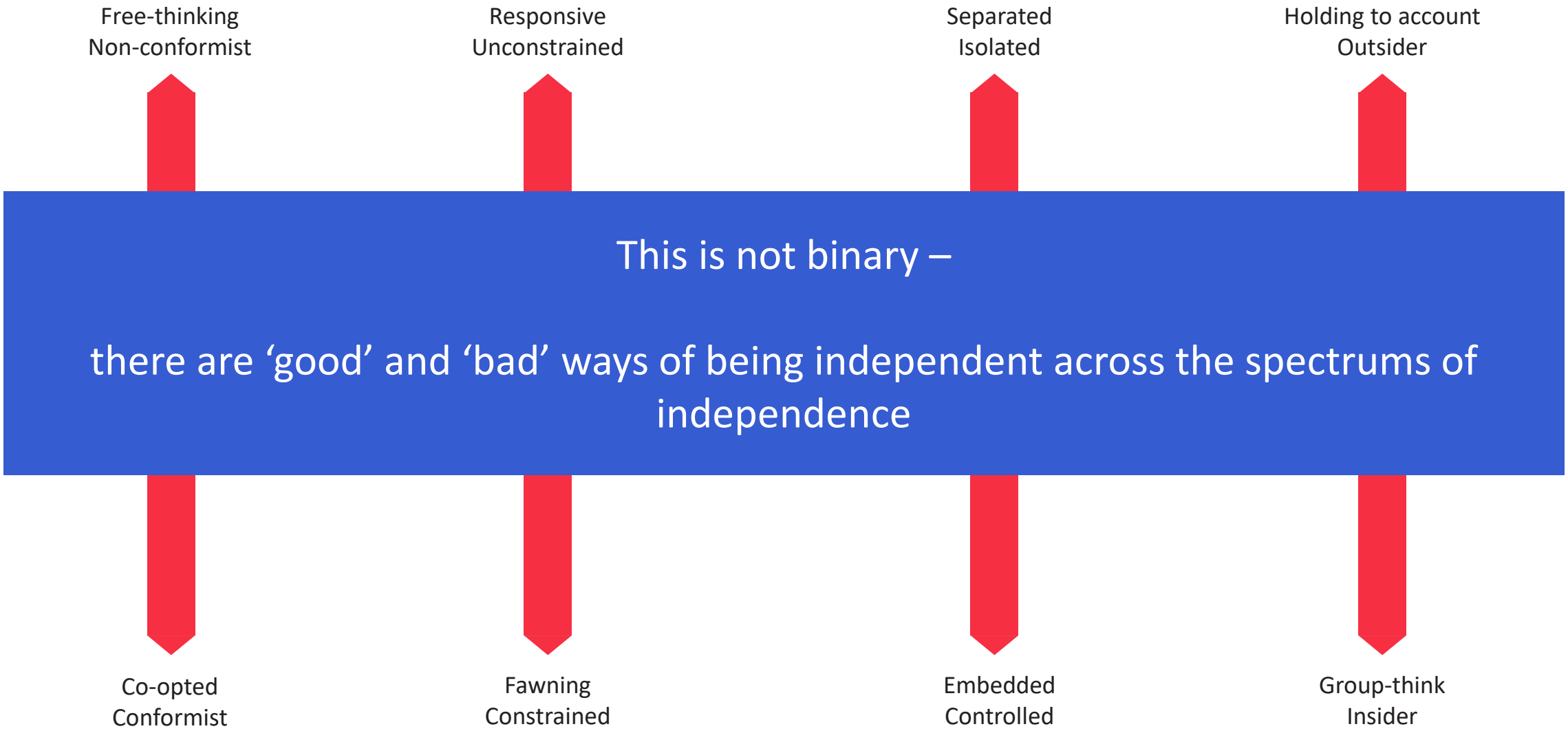
The extent to which you are free of relationships within the community the evaluation occurs in.

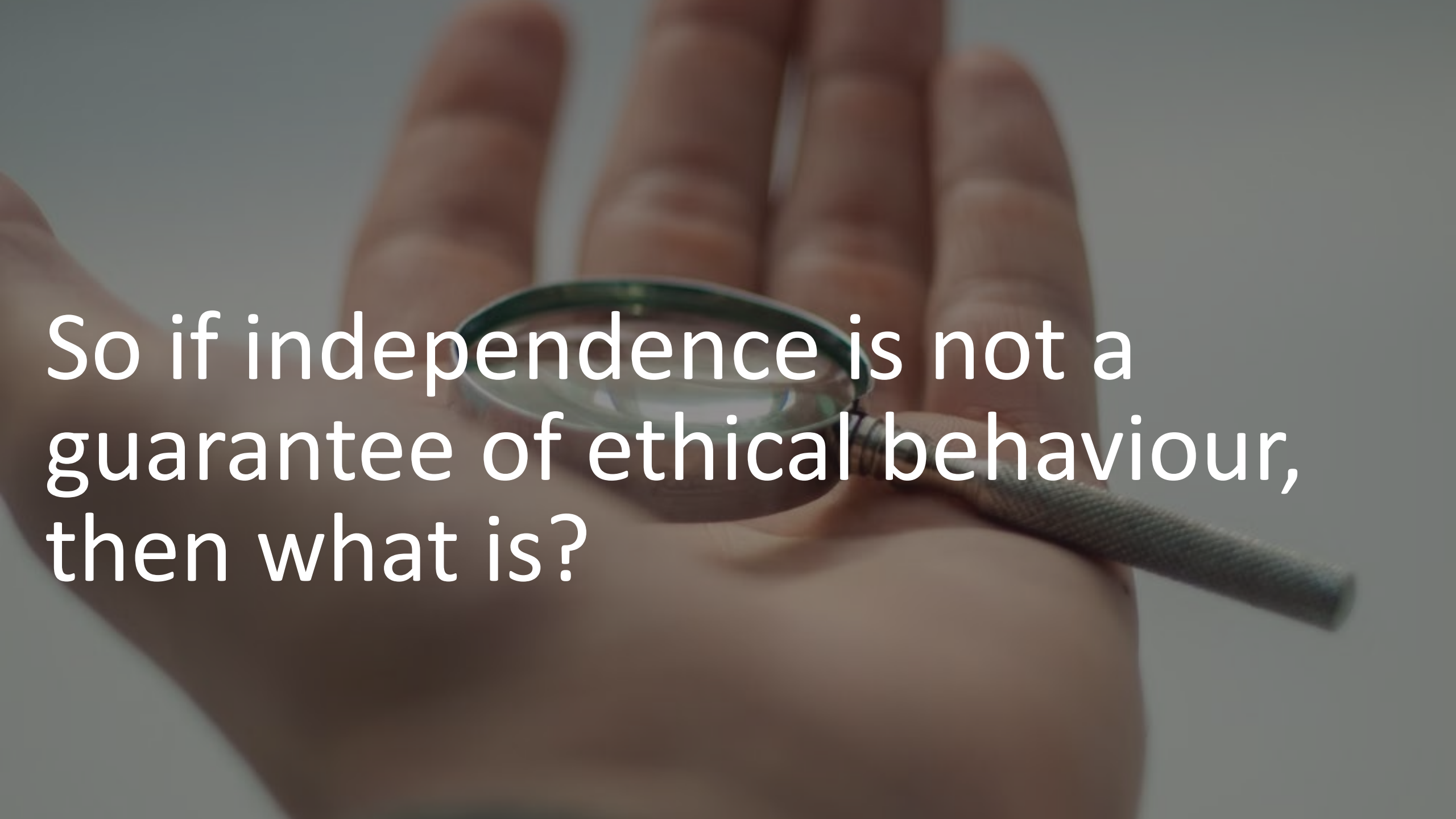
… and possibly more

Where do you sit on spectrums of ‘independence’?



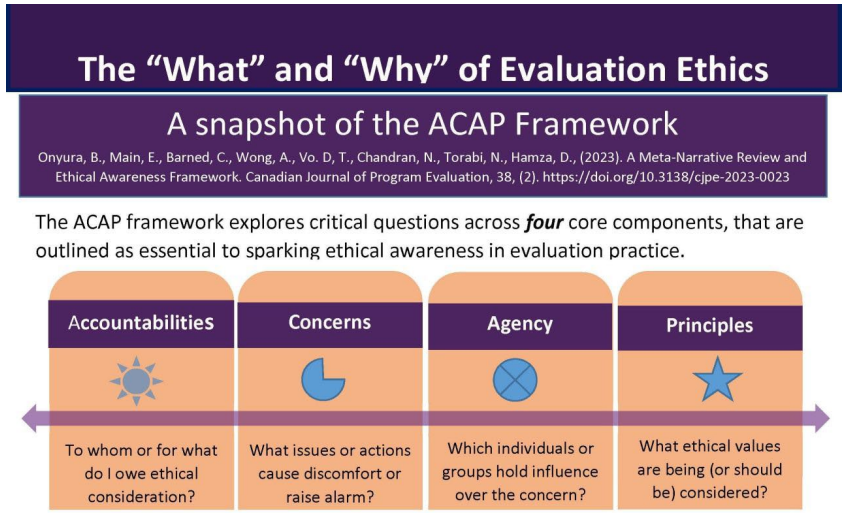
Where do you sit on spectrums of independence?

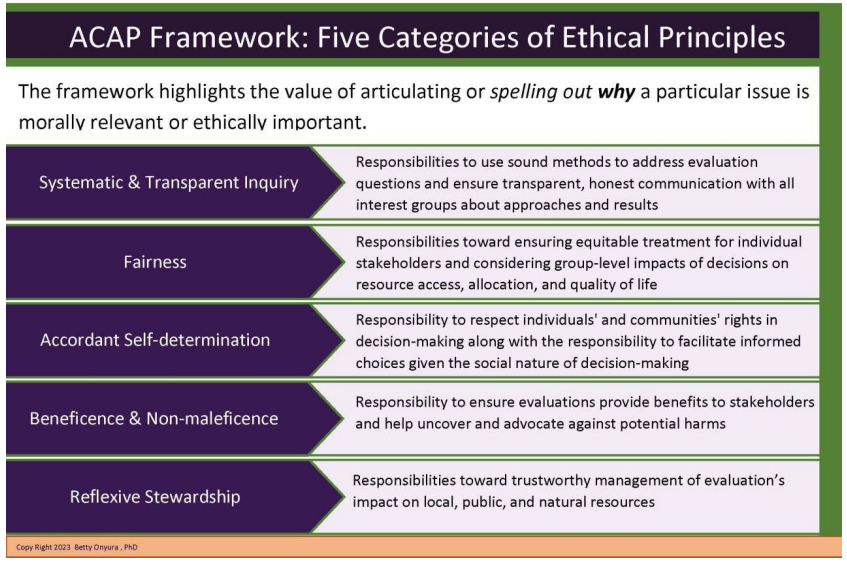




So if independence is not a guarantee of ethical behaviour, then what is?

Perhaps instead what matters is accountability…

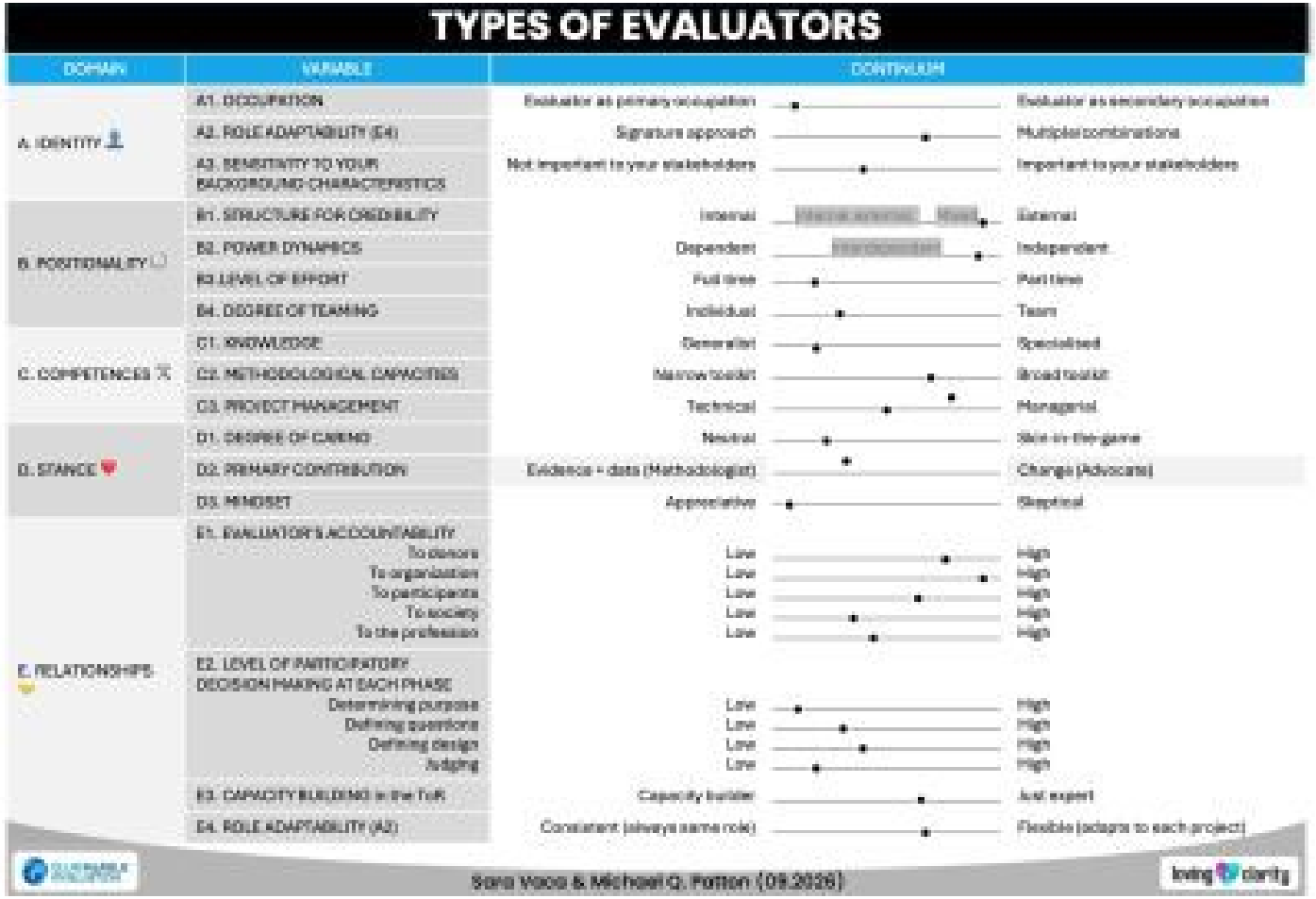




What accountabilities do I owe to the many interests involved in an evaluation?

Source: Onyura, B., Main, E., Wong, A., Vo, T.D., Chandran, N., Torabi, N., & Hamza, D.M. (2023). The "What" and "Why" of (Un)Ethical Evaluation Practice: A Meta-Narrative Review and Ethical Awareness Framework. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 38(*2). https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe-2023-0023

positionality…



What is my role and position
as the evaluator?

Source: Patton, M. and Vaca, S. (2026). *Evaluator Roles Framework.* https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:share:7503451147043532800/

… and transparency.

Intellectual independence

What are my values?

How have I formed them?

What is my knowledge about the program?

How have I gathered that knowledge?

Behavioural independence

What influences how I think about approaches to evaluation?

What constraints – or not – are there on my actions?

What methods, tools and data do I have access to?

Organisational independence

Where am I situated in my organisation?

How does that relate to the evaluation?

What impact does money have on this evaluation?

What impact does the audience for the evaluation have?

Community independence

What relationships do I hold?

How do those relationships influence my values?

What is my knowledge and experience of this context?

What are the impacts of my actions within and beyond my community?

Who am I responsible to and for?

What perspectives and values do those within the evaluation hold and need to surface?

What are the leverage points throughout the evaluation?

Want to chat more?

Get in touch!

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