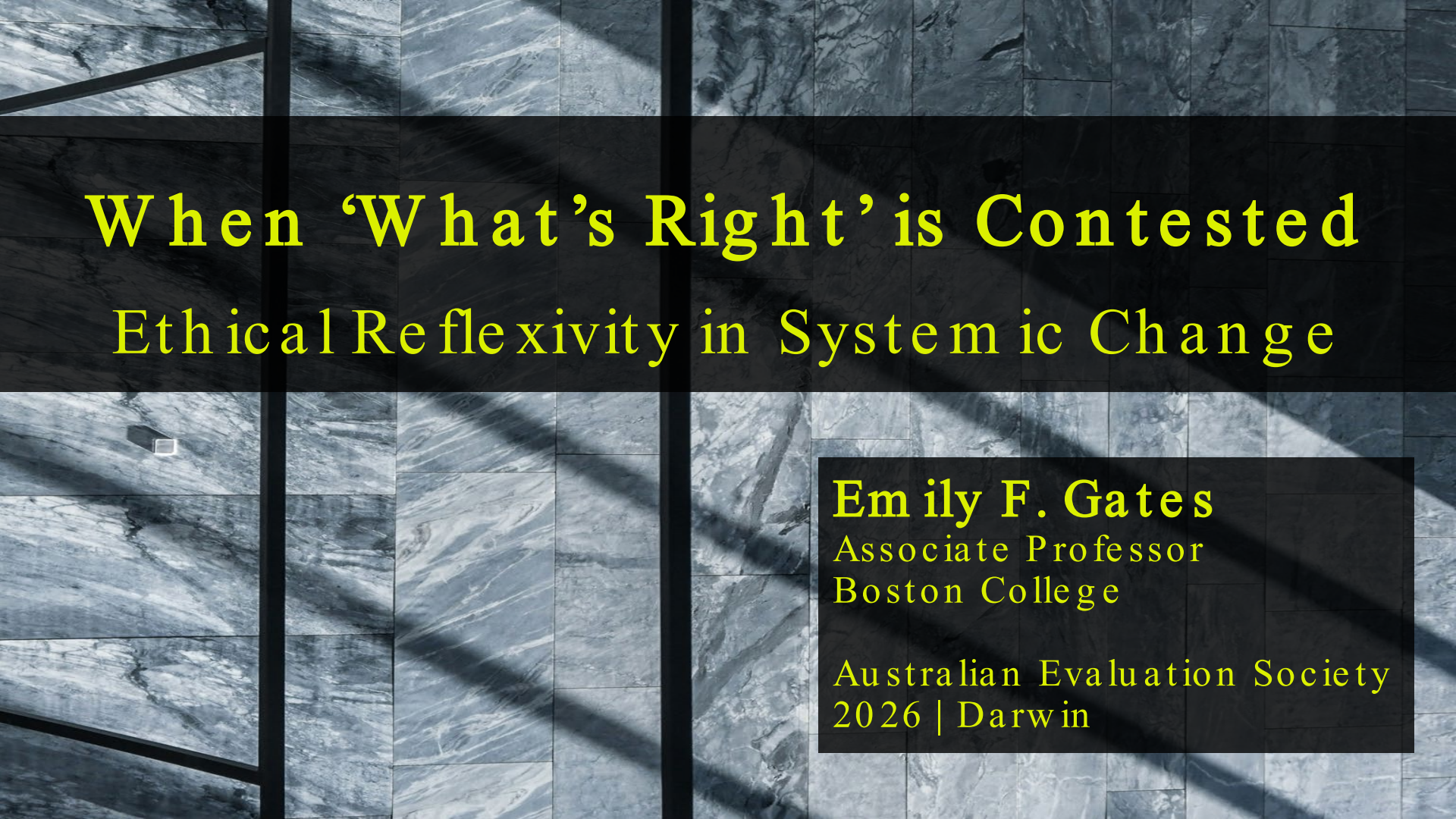
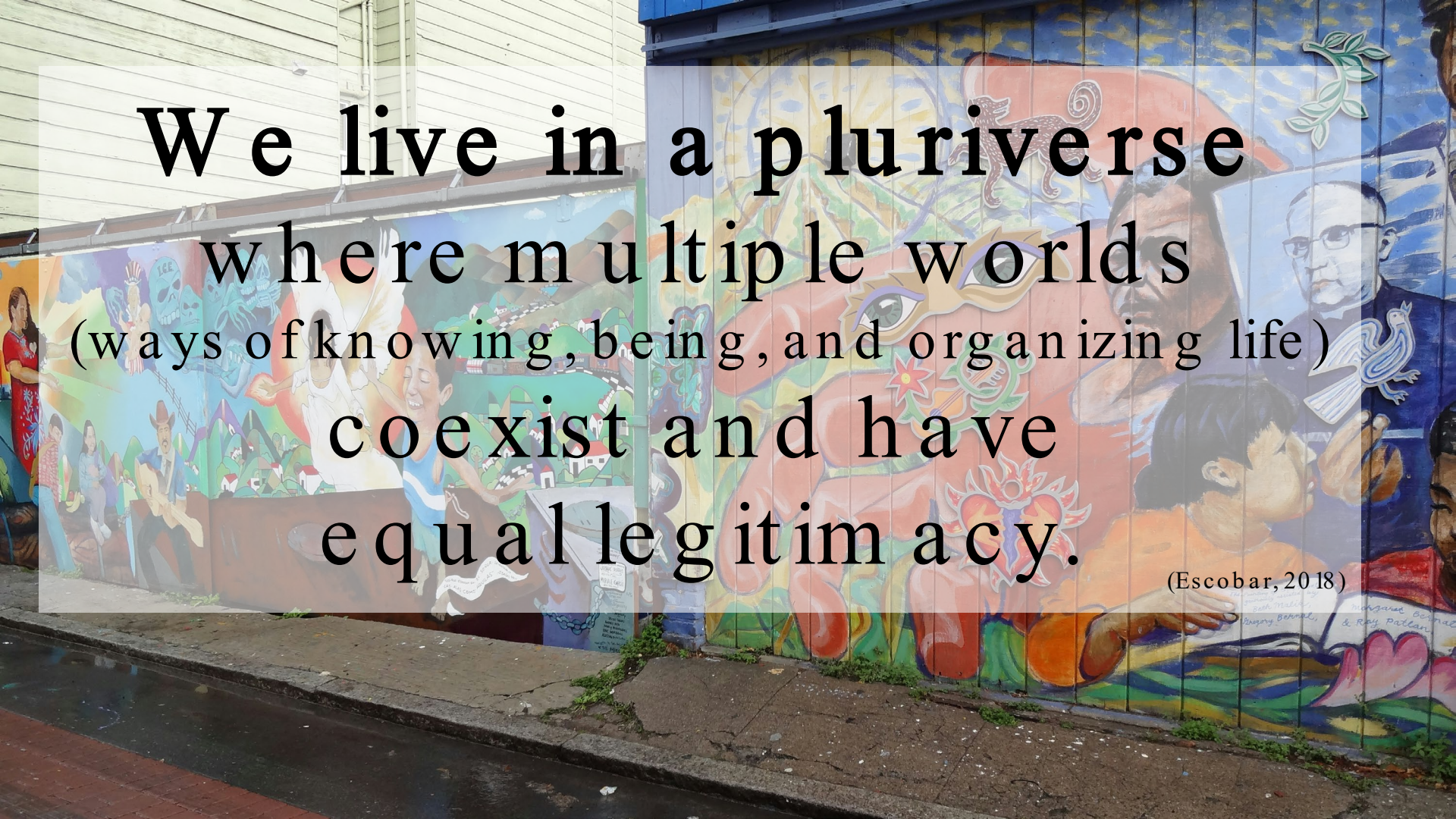


When ‘What’s Right’ is Contested

Ethical Reflexivity in Systemic Change

Emily F. Gates
Associate Professor
Boston College

Australian Evaluation Society
2026 | Darwin



We live in a pluriverse

where multiple worlds

(ways of knowing, being, and organizing life)

coexist and have

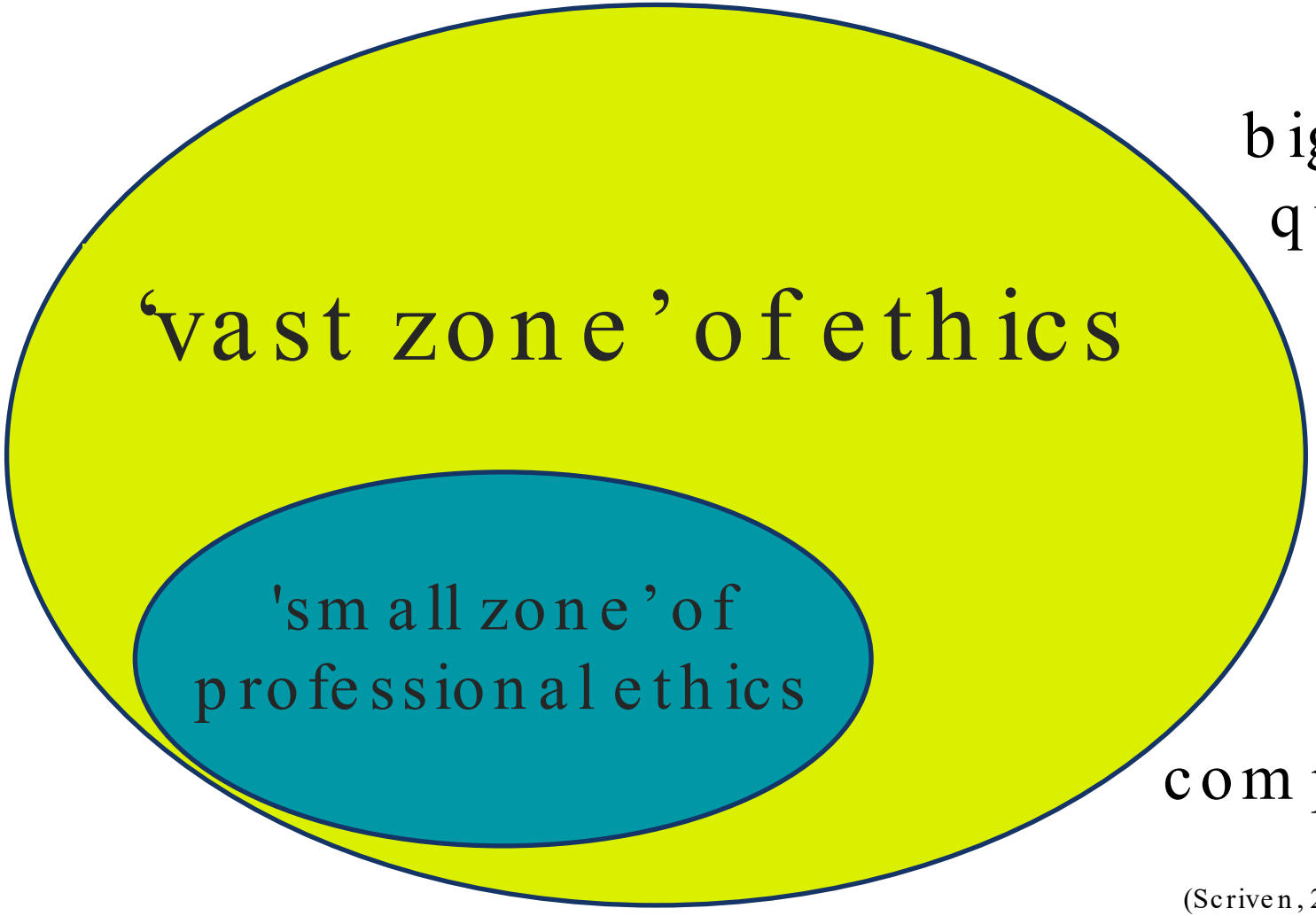
equal legitimacy.

(Escobar, 2018)

How do we act with integrity when ‘what’s right’ is contested *and* unknowable?

In a few words…

What's a dilemma about 'what's right' in your practice right now?



big societal questions

everyday ethics

compliance

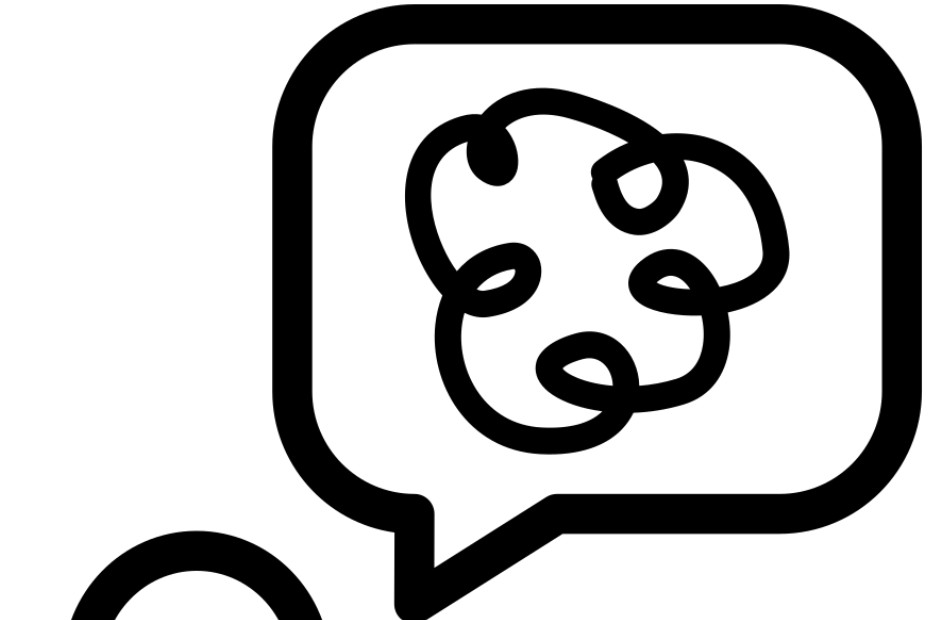
(Scriven, 2016; Hornby et al., 2026)

A review of 22 evaluation guidelines found a shift from:



(Van den Berg, Hawkins & Stame, 2021)

ethical dilemmas:



choosing
among
multiple ‘right’
actions within
a situation

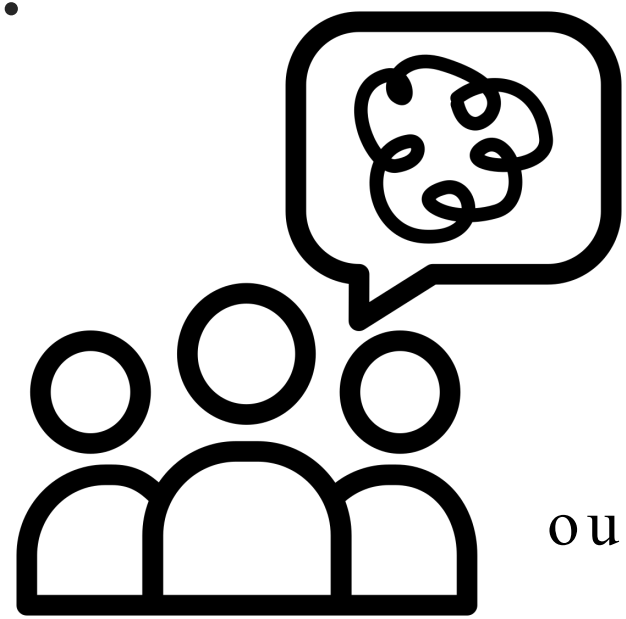
(Morris, 2008; Hornby et al., 2026)

to navigate:

professional guidelines, standards, & frameworks

education and training

mentors and colleagues



shaped by:

our role & identities

organization

context

(Goodyear, 2012; Desautels & Jacob, 2012; Gates & Li, 2025; Onyura et al., 2023; Hornby et al., 2026)

When Will Illinois Stop Pushing Discredited Coal Education Program on Children, Schools?

Two years after a national campaign exposed a coal industry-bankrolled curriculum foisted on unwitting teachers and children, the state of Illinois is still dragging its feet to revamp its own widely denounced, misleading and climate change-denying "Coal Education Program" for schools.



By Jeff Biggers, Contributor

Guest Writer

Aug 29, 2013, 01:26

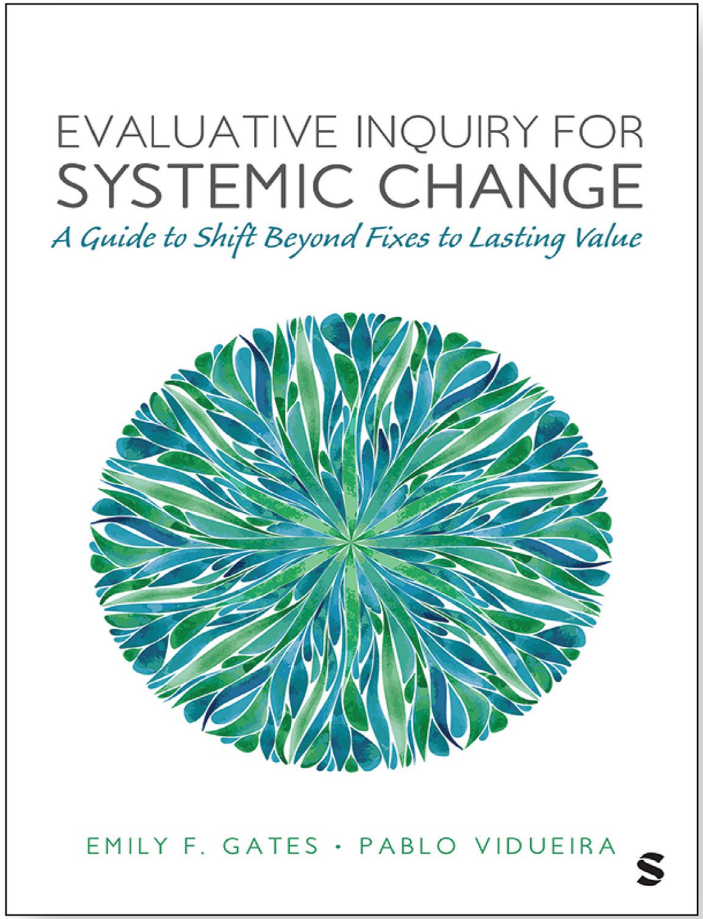






Whose and what values?





What counts as 'success'?

Systemic Change

purposefully shift conditions of complex situations toward deep, lasting change

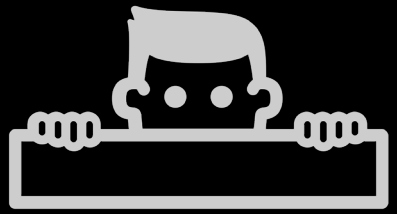
(Schwandt, 2018; Schwandt & Gates, 2021; Gates & Vidueira, 2025)

There ain't no answer.
There ain't gonna be any answer.
There never has been an answer.
That's the answer.

Gertrude Stein



Three Stances



Neutral



Advocate



Deliberative

(Schwandt & Gates, 2021)

Neutral

Serves the public good through
independence and methodological rigor

Ethics = professional conduct

Strength: non-partisan

Risk: makes value choices invisible

(Datta, 2011; Schwandt & Gates, 2021)

Advocate

Serves the public good by challenging injustice

Ethics = social responsibility

Strength: transparent values

Risk: downplays value difference

(Datta, 2011; Greene, 1997)


Before we get started.
Who would like things to be better?
Me!
freshspectrum

Deliberative

Serves the public good through **dialogue**

Ethics = **situated relational practice**

Strength: **opens** moral questions

Risk: depends on **perspectives** and **process**

(Schwandt & Gates, 2016; Gates, 2018; Gates et al, 2022)

Which stance are you closer to?

Neutral
Advocate
Deliberative
I shift between them
None quite fit

Let's Practice Together...

Scenario 1:
Whose Knowledge?



The funder expects modeling. Local communities resist. What would you do?

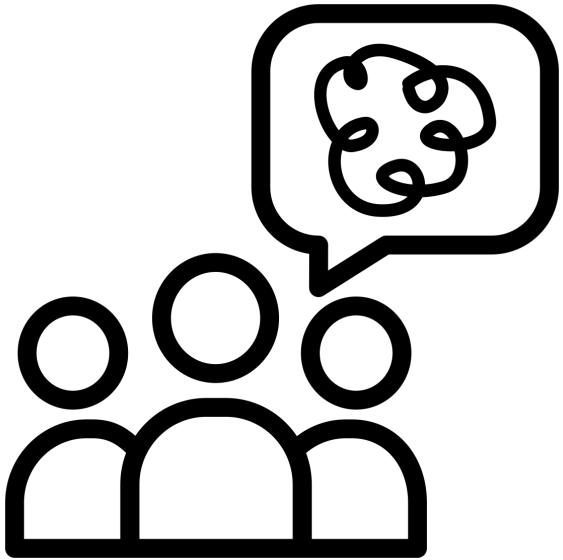
Prioritize the modeling

Reject it as inappropriate for this context

Slow down and work across perspectives

Something else

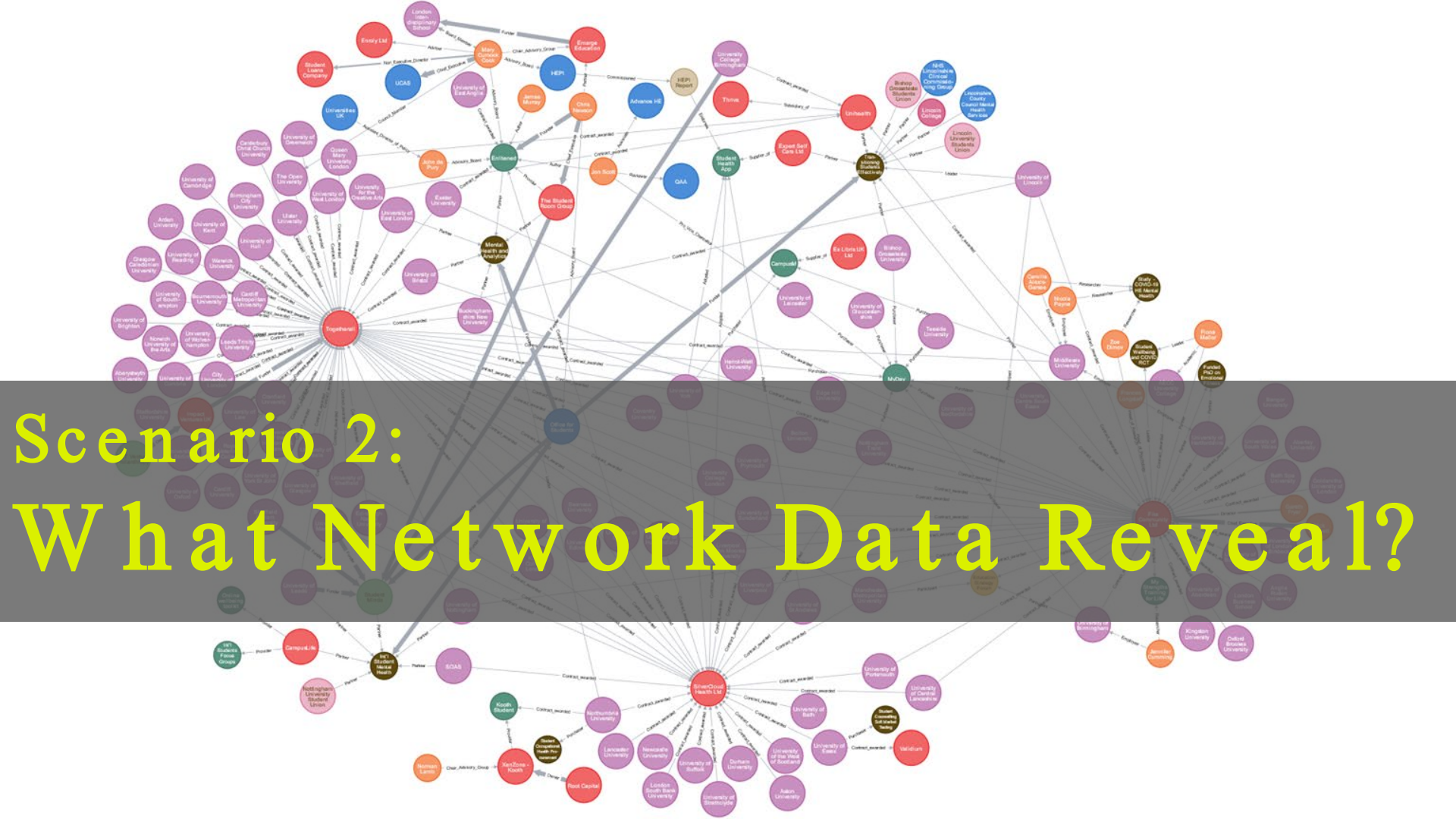
Talk with someone nearby



What's at stake ethically?

Would you do the same or different things?

What wise action might you take together?



Scenario 2:
What Network Data Reveal?

The data is revealing and potentially harmful. What would you do?

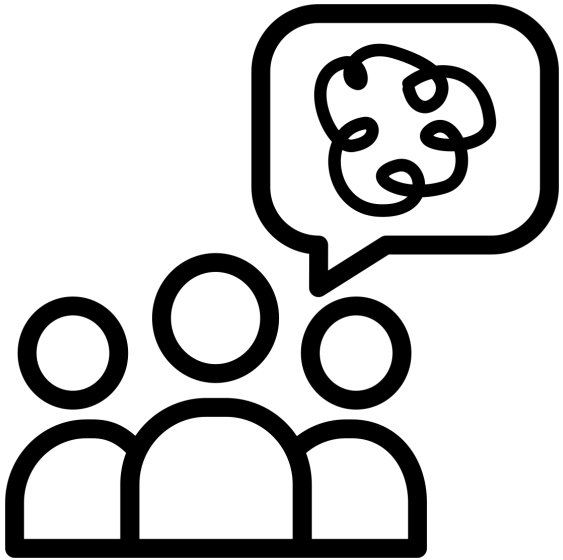
Share it fully

Pull back and only share part of it

Do what those at risk are comfortable with

Something else

Talk with someone nearby



What's at stake ethically?

Would you do the same or different things?

What wise action might you take together?



Scenario 3:
What Counts as ‘Success’?

(Peterson, 2026)

Intended outcomes worsened but other things shifted. What would you do?

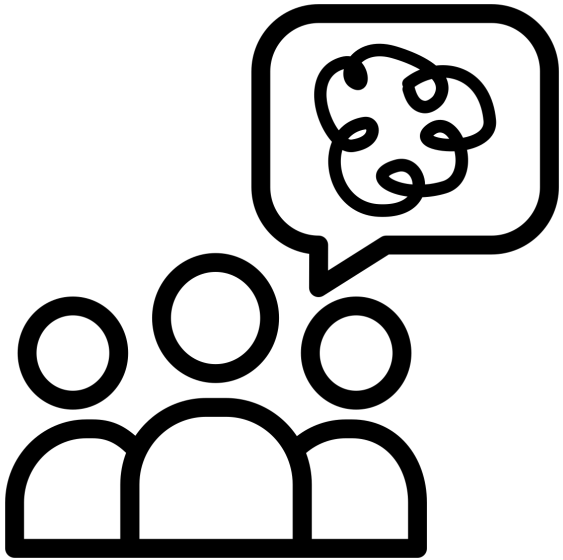
Assess against the original goals

Redefine success according to those most vulnerable

Expand success to include multiple dimensions of value

Something else

Talk with someone nearby



What's at stake ethically?

Would you do the same or different things?

What wise action might you take together?



"Ethics are a **necessary but insufficient** condition for moral practice."

- Melvin Hall


How are/could you
make space for ethical
deliberation within the
places you practice?



Listen to your inner questions

Seek out divergent perspectives

Document difference and dissent

Normalize conversation about what's right

Consult ethics guidelines & frameworks

(Onyura et al., 2023; Hornby et al., 2026)

THANK YOU

Let's Connect!

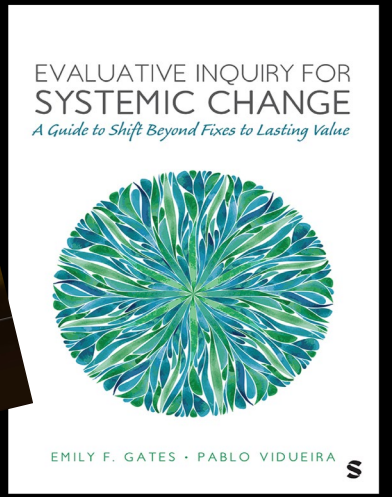
emily.gates@bc.edu

AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY

For ethical situations & input on this presentation ☺

Pablo Vidueira
Catherine Kelly
Drew Koleros
Heidi Peterson
Zoe Enticott
Kate McKegg





References

Desautels, G., & Jacob, S. (2012). The ethical sensitivity of evaluators: A qualitative study using a vignette design. Evaluation, 18(4), 437–450.

Escobar, A. (2018). Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds. Duke University Press.

Gates, E. F., & Li, R. (2025). Equity-related ethical questions in evaluation practice. American Journal of Evaluation, 46(2), 265–286.

Gates, E. F., & Vidueira, P. (2025). Evaluative inquiry for systemic change. SAGE.

Goodyear, L. (2012). Resources to support ethical practice in evaluation. American Journal of Evaluation, 33(3), 459–461.

Greene, J. C. (1997). Evaluation as advocacy. Evaluation Practice, 18(1), 3–13.

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. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X261483279

Hurteau, M., & Gagnon, C. (2022). Contribution of practical wisdom to resolving ethical issues. Evaluation, 28(2), 182–191.

Onyura, B., et al. (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), 265–312.

Peterson, H. (2026). Democratic deliberation as a North Star. Evaluation, 32(1), 64–81.

Schwandt, T. A. (2007). Expanding the conversation on evaluation ethics. Evaluation and Program Planning, 30(4), 400–403.

Schwandt, T. A. (2018). Acting together in determining value: A professional ethical responsibility of evaluators. Evaluation, 24(3), 306–317.

Schwandt, T. A., & Gates, E. F. (2021). Evaluating and valuing in social research. Guilford Press.

Scriven, M. (2016). The last frontier of evaluation: Ethics. In S. I. Donaldson & R. Picciotto (Eds.), Evaluation for an equitable society. Information Age Publishing.

Stame, N. (2018). Strengthening the ethical expertise of evaluators. Evaluation, 24(4), 438–451.

Van den Berg, R. D., Hawkins, P., & Stame, N. (2021). A framework for approaching ethics in evaluation. In R. D. Van den Berg, P. Hawkins, & N. Stame (Eds.), Ethics for evaluation: Beyond "doing no harm" to "tackling bad" and "doing good" (pp. 3–16). Routledge.