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Interview

Rethinking evaluation from an equity perspective: A conversation with Jara Dean-Coffey

Repensando a avaliação a partir da equidade: Uma conversa com Jara Dean-Coffey

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Abstract

Jara Dean-Coffey is an internationally recognized leader in equitable evaluation and a key voice in rethinking the ethical, relational, and axiological foundations of evaluative practice. In this interview, conducted by researcher Rayane Freitas, she reflects on the limits of conventional evaluation frameworks and invites us to move beyond technical and methodological debates toward questions of positionality, care, strategy, and the co-creation of knowledge. The conversation explores the meanings of equity, the historical roots of evaluation as an instrument of control, and the need to expand what counts as evidence by embracing relational, contextual, and experiential forms of knowing. Jara Dean-Coffey argues that rigor and validity are strengthened, rather than threatened, by proximity, humility, and shared ownership of knowledge. Addressing the Global South, she highlights the importance of valuing local epistemologies and building context-responsive evaluative practices. This dialogue positions evaluation as a deeply human, strategic, and transformative field of inquiry.

Keywords: Evaluation. Equity. Care. Evaluators. Global South.

Resumo

Jara Dean-Coffey é uma liderança internacionalmente reconhecida no campo da avaliação equitativa e uma voz central na reconfiguração das bases éticas, relacionais e axiológicas das práticas avaliativas. Nesta entrevista, conduzida pela pesquisadora Rayane Freitas, ela reflete sobre os limites dos modelos convencionais de avaliação e nos convida a ir além de debates técnicos e metodológicos, em direção a questões de posicionalidade, cuidado, estratégia e coconstrução do conhecimento. A conversa explora os significados de equidade, as raízes históricas da avaliação como instrumento de controle e a necessidade de ampliar o que conta como evidência ao incorporar formas de conhecimento relacionais, contextuais e experienciais. Jara Dean-Coffey argumenta que o rigor e a validade são fortalecidos, e não ameaçados, pela proximidade, pela humildade e pela construção compartilhada do conhecimento. Ao abordar o Sul Global, ela destaca a importância de valorizar epistemologias locais e de construir práticas avaliativas sensíveis aos contextos. Esse diálogo posiciona a avaliação como um campo de investigação profundamente humano, estratégico e transformador.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação. Equidade. Cuidado. Avaliadores. Sul Global.

Weaving connections

Jara Dean-Coffey is one of the leading international references in the field of equitable evaluation, grounded in close to thirty years of practice and praxis with strategy and evaluative inquiry. She is always seeking ways to bring forward an ethical, relational, and justice-oriented perspective. As the founder and CEO of jdcPARTNERSHIPS she is widely recognized for her work in the philanthropic sector to deepen our understanding of origins and open our imaginations to create new paradigms that make sense for current times. This includes launching the Equitable Evaluation Initiative as well the Clarity Not Certainty Effect™. Jara has

Rayane Stephanie Gomes de Freitas, a Black cisgender woman, postdoctoral researcher in Public Health at the University of São Paulo (USP), is an associate at PACTO Organizações Regenerativas, where she works as an evaluator in the social field. In this special issue, she was invited as Associate Editor.

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made decisive contributions to shifting evaluation from a space of control and compliance to one where the implicit is made explicit and the implications for practice are named, explored and can evolve. By kindly accepting my invitation to this conversation, Jara engaged with me in a dialogue marked by her generosity, honesty, and openness to the exchange of knowledge. Her careful and accessible way of sharing complex reflections reaffirms, for me, that knowledge is also built through relationships. I am deeply grateful for this exchange and invite readers to approach this encounter not only as an opportunity for learning, but also as a space for inspiration and connection.

In this conversation, the interviewer Rayane Freitas[1] is identified as RF and Jara Dean-Coffey as jdc. Understanding the importance of expanding the reach of these reflections, in this special issue you will find the interview published in its original English version, followed by a publication with the Portuguese translation.

> RF: In recent years, terms such as equity, diversity, and inclusion have become more common in the field of evaluation. In your view, what makes the use of these concepts truly transformative? Where do you see the risk of these ideas losing their meaning, especially when we talk about racial equity?

> **jdc:** Thank you for the question. I want to preface my response by stating that I am speaking from a US-centric point of view. I am a Black, cisgender, heteronormative female who has worked in the philanthropic industrial complex for 30 years, primarily as a solopreneur, on the edges of the field. My viewpoint reflects that reality. Regarding the terms *equity, diversity, and inclusion*, I remember when they were first introduced in the philanthropic context here in the US. Immediately, I paused because I knew that by grouping them together, a time would eventually come to haunt us. That time has arrived.

One of my habits is to go to the etymology of words to learn their core definition, historical context and how that may have changed over time. Again, I offer this within the limits of the English language. Succinctly, diversity means the difference. Inclusion is making a part of. Equity has the quality of even, just, and fair. The latter also has economic grounding. You can have diversity and you can have inclusion and not have equity. To have equity, you are most likely inclusive, and there will be more diversity. The distinction between and relationship among these words in the context of this conversation is critical.

That said, I do think those terms opened up a conversation in evaluative practice that had us ask: how do we think about those terms, defined or not, within the history and present-day practice of evaluation? That was incredibly helpful. And still so often, folks don't have a working definition of equity.

With regard to what happens when you add race to the mix: because I am who I am, I was hypersensitive to *not* leading with race in my various efforts. It was a strategic choice on my part. Because in my country, it's perceived that Black people only do Black things. I understood that if one fully grasped the definition of equity you would get to race, if race is relevant to that context. But it isn't relevant in every context—it might be education, poverty, gender, and most likely the intersectionality of those things. I knew that leading with race, despite some strong pushes from folks to do so, would backfire for me personally. And because I am interested in something living outside of and beyond what I could imagine or make real, I had to create a way into the conversation that was accessible to folks. Also race is a social construct that does not necessarily translate across cultural contexts. My ultimate aim was to expand our definition of and how we co-create knowledge using evaluation as an entry point. I believed, and still do that if people got there on their own they would be less likely to return to an outdated paradigm when the context shifted as it inevitably does.

[1] Rayane Freitas is a Brazilian researcher and evaluation specialist. She is an associate at PACTO Organizações Regenerativas and a postdoctoral fellow in Public Health at the University of São Paulo. Her work focuses on reimagining evaluation through an antiracist and decolonial lens.

RF: Jara, I was thinking: when we talk about decoloniality, it can also become an empty concept if people don't know how to truly embrace it. What do you think about that?

jdc: I tend to orient toward the future with an understanding of the past. For me, equity is something to move toward. Decolonizing is something to understand most definitely. We tend to focus on problems, on deficit, on what's wrong. That doesn't get us toward a shared vision of what's actually possible. It is however a step towards a future where all of our complete humanity is honored.

RF: And in this sense, we know that evidence is a central topic in the evaluation field. When we think about this scenario of equity and decolonization, how do you see evidence and what counts as evidence in this context?

jdc: Let me reframe the question to **"What information is useful for us to understand?"** The words 'information' or 'indications,' expand your mind, open your heart, and your gut comes into play. The words we choose are incredibly important in these conversations because they can either encourage expansiveness or keep us limited. If it is the fomer, we can become discerning about what is possible in terms of evidence that is relevant and meaningful given the endeavor in question and its context and intention.

Because the US is very good at spreading its beliefs, it's important to return to history. Evaluation, as we have come to know it, was initially an instrument of control and compliance with regard to large-scale public dollar investments. The evidence sought was around return on investment and individual and program level changes that were aggregated. Some of what transferred over from the for-profit sector included efficiency, expedience and scale. Given the wide array of experiments and experiences we are trying to engage in and learn from, the evidence necessary starts with better questions. So, the resulting data we gather and information that comes from it is relevant. What gets lost in all this is that evaluation is part of how we co-create knowledge. So how and why we do it and who does it matters.

For some reason—and I understand why, and also I don't understand why—we are reluctant to be as expansive as we can be with regard to knowledge creation. We do so, even when we know, in our guts, that the data that we're collecting and the information we glean from it is not sufficient. It doesn't embrace the complexity, the nuance, the heart, the soul, the rhythm, the dance, the art, the nature. This is where the concept of knowledge from other cultures is more advanced than the western dominating orientation.

Depending on where you're situated, you may feel as if you don't have the power to do anything different or ask questions to get underneath and surface the mindsets and tensions at play. Another part may be that you don't even know what you don't know, that you don't realize that this paradigm that many of us hold so tightly to is from another time and place. It is a human construct. If we know it no longer resonates, then it's up to us—it's our responsibility. It's really our privilege to evolve it. It doesn't have to be an either/or; it can be a both/and+.

This is where agency comes into play: what is your positionality? What can you do wherever you're situated, to be able to expand the conversation? And you have to be patient. I'm incredibly patient. My relationship to time is not grounded in urgency. I am here with you now based on 30 years of experience during which I played with different ideas given my perspective of the world. I explored and changed my position over the decades. What I can or will say in spaces now I could not or would not have 10 years ago, even 5 years ago. I understand when I am the right messenger and when I am not. I think about what would have made it easier for me 20 years ago and I try to do that for those that follow or are alongside. And if I can shift a peer with a different position that is a bonus.

We didn't get here overnight. It's going to take a generation. So, where can you plant seeds? Where can you expand hearts? Where can you engage the holistic being to acknowledge: "This just isn't quite right enough yet"? And where can you try—where can you really be experimental and experiential? And through all this how can you be kinder to yourself. None of us have been here before, in this carbon based shell, in this time. It's all practice.

RF: And I was thinking that the U.S. and Brazil have very different contexts when we consider the inequalities and what happens here and there, and agency is so important in this case. So I'd like to ask you whether you see any limits to transforming the way we evaluate programs and initiatives today.

jdc: They are self imposed limits. We value expediency and efficiency; we want everything to change all at once. Our definition of risk is often unilateral, as opposed to considering the actual risk of *not* doing something different. Again, I think we bring all of these ideas and mindsets from other times and other sectors into what is deeply human work. It prevents us from actually tapping into what we instinctively know is insufficient.

The question is, what are you able to do wherever you're situated to move it towards something that is more holistic, inclusive, and human—and I would say more valid and rigorous.

RF: And this leads us to think about the role of care in evaluation, because evaluation can cause harm to many people. I'd like to hear from you: how do you see the role of care in evaluation? And how can this perspective help us transform evaluation?

jdc: Using Scriven's definition[2], it's "to determine the merit and worth". But what that lacks is a clear axiological point of view; it lacks a heartbeat. So it's whoever gets to determine the merit and worth. If we're going to use equity, and I would say move towards justice, liberation, and freedom as your end goal, then determining value, merit, and worth must also be reflected in how you engage in the evaluative work. You don't get to freedom by doing harm along the way.

So, what is your ethical responsibility? To engage in relationships in a way that the experience affords greater validity and thus more rigorous because it is contextualized. There is care in the selection, in the asking, in the sense-making, and the using of whatever comes from it.

Going back to history, this idea of objectivity and neutrality got in the way of care. The delusion was that somehow being proximate and actually being vested meant you weren't able to get the reais insights. Where, in fact, it actually meant you are *more* likely to be able to do so, to really understand what was happening, and to translate that into findings that are actually more useful.

But that also means the evaluator has to get close, and I'm not sure every evaluator wants this role.

RF: Yes. And evaluators need to have the courage to do this.

jdc: Yes, they need to have courage. They also generally have to *want* to be proximate. I don't think everyone wants to be that intimate. They want to see you as a subject, not as a human being in a shared context with differing experiences and history. If they have been trained in a conventional way, they've actually been told to get further and further away—to take their positionality, their instinct, their gut, their heart out of it. So I think it's more than a challenge to suddenly say, "be your full self."

RF: And you know that many times, when I am interviewing people, the simple act of speaking is very therapeutic. And the evaluator needs to be open to that. It's about not treating the person as a subject, but recognizing the human being there. Usually, people don't have the opportunity to speak about their lives, their choices, their perceptions, and their points of view. And this is very important when we are doing an evaluation process. This is human, and it has so much value for us.

jdc: It does. When we impose false timelines or feel the need to 'check things,' when we're trying to put people into boxes or circles instead of looking at their fullness and engaging in analysis that lets you see all of the magic, we continue to constrain the work.

[2] See more in: Scriven (1995).

> I don't think we're actually getting the information that would help us better understand what's truly at play. We're hampering our own efforts because of these dynamics and artifacts of practice never designed for the complexity of the human experiment.
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> RF: And, Jara, thinking of the future generations of evaluators, what skills do you think it's essential for them?
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> **jdc:** I think it's less about skills and more about qualities—like care. I don't know that you can train someone to care, or to be humble, or to be curious, or to be creative, or to be comfortable in ambiguity and emergence.

Evaluation training tends to focus primarily on method; it's a methodological exercise. Because we don't address the axiological, epistemological, and ontological framing, we continue to stay in a paradigm created by other people—most of whom are dead, for the record—for another time and place. For me, it's more about who you are as a human and your comfort with that, and how you can engage in inquiry in conversation with another human in a caring way.

The term *evaluation* inadvertently comes with a lot of baggage including harm. I tend to use the term *inquiry* because that feels more open, more inclusive, gentler, and more expansive. It allows us a level of rigor and validity that the term *evaluation* currently limits.

In terms of training, it would involve reading more philosophy across cultures. Of course, it would be reading Freire[3]. It should also be reading Sylvia Wynter[4] and Marie Battiste[5] of the Mi'kmaq and Potloek First Nation and others. A more expansive exposure and understanding of how different cultures' philosophies conceptualize knowledge creation would be more rigorous. Evaluation, at the end of the day, is one of the ways in which we commodify knowing.

For example, Shawn Wilson, of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation[6], writes about ceremony as a practice that renews relational accountability with our relationships. He says if research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right. Reading those sorts of things can help people give themselves permission to be part of the practice, rather than the over-prevalence of Western, male, cisgender, heteronormative frames about being separate from the work. This might allow more people to come into practice with that type of care you're talking about, which ultimately I believe increases the validity and rigor of the experience for both parties.

I've also been reading some work by Vine Deloria, Jr.[7], from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and I love this: he reclaims truth as a relational coherence. The western paradigm has an unstated assumption that knowledge is something to be used, not something to be revered. What would happen if those types of quotes were in your head as you were going into your evaluative practice? You would conceptualize the entire endeavor differently.

[3] Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher, a global reference in critical pedagogy, whose work emphasizes education as a practice of freedom and social transformation. For further information, see: Instituto Paulo Freire (2026).

[4] Sylvia Wynter, a Jamaican writer and cultural theorist, is known for her multifaceted body of work, which brings together contributions from the theory of history, literature, the sciences, and Afro-American studies to analyze race, the legacies of colonialism, and the forms of representation of the human. For further information, see: King's College London (2026).

[5] Marie Battiste is a Mi'kmaw educator from Potlotek (Canada), recognized for her work on cognitive imperialism, the advancement of Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies, and the decolonization of education, as well as for her commitment to Indigenous languages, pedagogies, and ways of knowing. For further information, see: Mi'kmaw Archives (2026).

[6] The Opaskwayak Cree Nation is located approximately 600 km north of Winnipeg, near The Pas, in Manitoba. The main Indigenous language spoken is the Swampy Cree dialect. For further information, see: Klemp (2026).

[7] Vine Deloria Jr. (1933-2005), a Hunkpapa Lakota intellectual from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, was one of the most influential Indigenous thinkers in the United States, bringing together political activism, scholarly production, and the defense of Indigenous sovereignty and epistemologies. His work, especially *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), critiqued colonial representations and affirmed the centrality of the spiritual relationship with the land and of other ways of knowing. For further information, see: Aktá Lakota Museum & Cultural Center (2026).

RF: And here in Brazil we have so many important thinkers, such as Nêgo Bispo[8], Paulo Freire, Conceição Evaristo[9] and many other authors who can guide us. These are perspectives that are more aligned with care, with humanity, and with relational ways of producing knowledge.

jdc: Let's erase the idea that care gets in the way of rigor and validity—that somehow being close means you don't grasp fully. That's the delusion of objectivity and neutrality. Perhaps by being closer to you, I feel you; I begin to understand more of what you're saying because I feel your energy, which allows me to make better sense of it or to acknowledge that I can't and to ask you to help me. The weight of it also gets shared in a different way. And that's not to make it extractive. It means: how is that understanding then shared? And how does the knowledge that I take from that become something that is also shared with you? I know we haven't talked about the Equitable Evaluation Framework™[10], but Principle 2 is about shared ownership and multicultural validity. So, how does this co-creation of knowledge that happens through care become something to which we both have access?

RF: You mentioned many ways in which we could transform how we look at evaluation. I would like to ask whether you have any message or invitation for the Global South, considering our contexts here.

jdc: What I would say to the Global South is: **don't look to the Global North** for your answers. Honor, value, and understand your own origin. Take from us what is relevant to you now. The responsibility is truly yours to create an evaluative practice that makes sense for your context and for your aims. It will take time, be patient with yourselves.

We are in uncharted territory in that we as a group have not been here before. We're not going to get there overnight. Where are there opportunities, conversations and hearts open enough that you can begin to explore what might be possible in your evaluative practice? I always tell people to find your people. By using different words, by entering lightly and softly with curiosity, you might be surprised about where there are places to expand your approach to evaluative practice. That is where and how you begin.

That is what I would offer up: to be gracious with yourselves.

When I think about my practice over the decades, what I aim to be is no longer necessary. If you have to continuously carry the water, then perhaps that isn't the place you should be, or maybe you've put too much water in the jug. If it hurts too much, then it's probably not the place for you to be, or you're not the right messenger, or it's not the right message, or it's not the right time. You have to get really strategic, humble and patient when you're trying to change a paradigm if you want that paradigm to take hold and continue to evolve with your vigilant attention.

Returning back to your opening question, the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion began a conversation AND I think it's going to take longer than people imagined. There is a push, pull and even a paralysis that comes from understanding origin and history and what it asks of all of us. Evaluation sits squarely in the middle of that. We rarely discuss it but evaluation is one of the ways we've commodified the co-creation of knowledge such that it does not advance. Because it was actually never designed to do so. You cannot method your way out of that reality.

[8] Nêgo Bispo (1959-2023) was a Brazilian quilombola intellectual, writer, and activist whose thought emerges from territorial experience and traditional knowledge. His work affirms counter-colonial perspectives, valuing orality, community, and other ways of producing knowledge grounded in the relationship between body, land, and ancestry. For further information, see: Rodrigues (2025).

[9] Conceição Evaristo is one of the leading contemporary Brazilian writers and intellectuals, whose work affirms the centrality of Black experiences in the production of knowledge and in the representation of the human. Through the concept of *escrevivência*, she brings together memory, body, and ancestry to challenge hegemonic narratives and to inscribe other ways of existing and of being in the world. For further information, see: Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG, 2026).

[10] See more in: Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI, 2026).

RF: What is the most important thing that you learned working with evaluation in all these years?

jdc: It is an **expression of and part of strategy**. If your strategy is not clear—if you don't have an explicit articulation of your perspective of the world and the position of the particular endeavor within it—then the evaluation will inevitably fall short. It's not something separate from the work; it's an intrinsic part of it. I wish those two things would dance closer together. When they do I find that the inquiry from the start - frame to apply - tends to be more alive, more useful, and more valid and rigorous. It serves a higher purpose.

Also, I tend to use the term *evaluative inquiry* because *evaluation* as it has been historically and conventionally approached tends to push people out, whereas *inquiry* brings people closer in. It invites a type of curiosity and humility in terms of deciding what questions are important to ask, when, why, for what, how and this includes how sense making occurs and is shared. When they get closer, in my experience people are better able to design and engage in a process and a practice that is more beneficial, careful, ethical, responsible, and useful to all parties concerned. This inquiry becomes embedded - part of holding one accountable to the strategy with care and intention. I have also noticed that one becomes a better client and consumer of evaluative services and supports.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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Use declaration of AI and/or AI-assisted technologies

During the preparation of this interview, the author used the video recording feature of Google Meet and the tool fireflies.ai for the transcription of the original interview in English. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited all content in accordance with the scientific method and assumes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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