

Donna M. Mertens. (2009). *Transformative Research and Evaluation*. New York: Guilford Press. 402 pages.

Reviewed by Jill Anne Chouinard

As we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Canada's ethno-cultural landscape, dubbed a "vertical mosaic" by John Porter in 1965, has become a more polarized montage of ethnic and cultural diversity. At the same time, the prevailing social, economic, and political climate has become increasingly cost-conscious, resulting in more targeted and directed funding of social programs for those most in need in our society. It is against this backdrop that program evaluation enters the social and economic maelstrom of the 21st century. It is against this backdrop that we witness the interplay between culture, theory, method, and practice, as we seek out new possibilities and opportunities for understanding the complexity of our social world. Donna Mertens' book, *Transformative Research and Evaluation*, thus provides a very timely and provocative addition to the research and evaluation literature, providing us with theoretical insight and a practical hands-on approach in which to explore and expand upon the culturally and socially meaningful ways of understanding our practice.

In *Transformative Research and Evaluation*, Mertens provides a detailed description of the theoretical foundations of the transformative paradigm, as well as helpful strategies to assist the reader in navigating through the methodological challenges associated with conducting research and evaluation in ethnically diverse and marginalized communities. Mertens writes the book as a first-person narrative, an approach that is particularly engaging and definitely enhances the book's readability. The book is 402 pages and consists of 10 chapters, roughly half of which are focused on the theoretical orientation of the transformative paradigm, with the remaining half dedicated to the research and evaluation process, including choice of methods, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Each chapter begins with advance organizers that preview what to expect. "Student perspectives" are also interspersed throughout and provide important researcher insight, and "questions for thought" as well as questions posed throughout the book provide the opportunity for further reflection. Examples of evaluations and research

studies provide a rich understanding of the transformative approach in diverse contexts, and finally a summary concludes each chapter.

The transformative paradigm is motivated by a strong social justice and human rights agenda that is specifically targeted to marginalized communities, such as women, racial or ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, the poor, and other people from what are considered non-dominant cultural groups. As Mertens explains, “the transformative paradigm emerged in response to individuals who have been pushed to the societal margins throughout history and who are finding a means to bring their voices into the world of research” (p. 3). As such, this approach directly engages the researcher or evaluator in working inclusively with communities to challenge the status quo and analyze positions of power and privilege, as a means of ultimately furthering social justice and human rights. Mertens’ book provides a number of excellent examples, interwoven throughout the text, of research and evaluation studies conducted from the transformative perspective that build on commensurate theories, including feminist theories, critical race theory, queer theory, and post-colonial and Indigenous theories. Research and evaluation contexts vary as well, from school reform efforts for low-income and African American students in the United States, peace polling strategies in Northern Ireland, and HIV/AIDS projects in Botswana, to name only a few.

While the transformative paradigm shares much in common with the constructivist, pragmatic, participative, and critical paradigms, particularly in terms of its strong stance away from the post-positivist approach, what ultimately differentiates it is its focus on the dimensions of culture, power, privilege, and social justice. The significant overlap between paradigmatic positions illustrates what Guba and Lincoln (2005) would refer to as the fluidity of postures and the shifting of categories, as researchers and evaluators confront the methodological limitations of a single paradigm in capturing the multiple voices that demand our attention. In providing a theoretical framework that builds on other philosophically commensurate positions and on qualitative and mixed-method approaches, the transformative paradigm provides a much needed alternative to assist us in addressing the complexity of our world. While there may be critics who would object to such methodological bricolage, particularly given the continued demand for evidence-based practice and randomized control group designs (still considered the “gold standard”), there can be little doubt that it is no longer possible to describe the world in simplistic and singularly one-dimensional ways.

While Mertens' book does not provide a specific set of methods or approaches to conducting transformative research and evaluation, it does make a strong case for a serious rethinking of the research and evaluation methodologies and tools that we use in the field. As such, the book does make a valuable contribution to the literature on research and evaluation with culturally diverse and marginalized people, as it builds upon the principles of participatory action research, feminist research, critical ethnography, culturally responsive research and evaluation, Indigenous research, disability research, and research in the international development community. Thus while Mertens' book may be considered controversial in some circles, it does challenge us to re-examine the basic beliefs and assumptions that currently guide our practice. As such, I would recommend *Transformative Research and Evaluation* not only to those who conduct research and evaluation in culturally diverse and marginalized communities, but to others who may be interested in exploring the cultural and normative nature of our methodological tools and practice.

REFERENCE

- Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (Chap. 8). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.