

# Introduction: Decolonizing International Development Evaluation

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Despite the recognition that evaluation is an intensely cultural practice (House, 1993) influenced by Western epistemological approaches to social inquiry, there seems to be little discussion in the literature about the broader implications of our practice in terms of highlighting the relevance (and location) of culture and cultural context in international development evaluation (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015). This is a significant omission, particularly given the rather long history of Western colonialism in much of the developing world. In this Special Issue we raise some fairly fundamental questions about how culture is being conceptualized in international development contexts, and how and to what extent local, extremely marginalized, and Indigenous cultures are being included in the conversation. Who is defining the parameters of what counts as legitimate discourse? More importantly, where is culture located in our definitions of evaluation as we continue to export and expand our methodological practices across the globe?

## DEFINING CULTURE

The concept of culture has endured as an immensely complex and highly contested concept, and the subject of much discussion in both academic and popular forums. An online search of “culture” located almost one and a half billion results in a diversity of fields including anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology, geography, business, and the arts. As a multidimensional and fluid concept, culture can refer to a people, a way of life, beliefs and customs, organizations, art forms, and activities, and can serve as either a noun or an adjective depending upon context. According to Williams (1983), a leading cultural theorist, “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (p. 87). Bocoek (1992) identifies five ways that culture has been traditionally defined: (a) it is associated with the cultivation of land, crops and animals; (b) it is related to “high” culture, civilization, and the arts (aesthetic); (c) it describes processes of social development practice linked to specific groups; (d) it refers to shared meanings, knowledge, values, morals, and customs (ethnographic); and (e) it describes practices that produce a system of shared meanings (symbolic). While perhaps not all of these definitions are directly relevant to our purpose, they highlight the shift in the definition of culture from demographic descriptor to a socially, politically, and historically vibrant construction that in fundamental ways is constitutive of the values and norms that govern our society. At the same time, these multiple definitions also highlight the multifaceted, evolving, and dynamic nature

of culture—the varied lenses in which it can be understood historically, as well as across disciplines. Of note is that culture so conceptualized is posited as a process rather than as an object or thing (Gregory, Johnson, Pratt, Watts, & Whitmore, 2009), as an emergent, flexible, and re/constructed concept (Nagel, 1994).

The very concept of culture shifts and changes shape as parameters of global space and communication interconnect and become enmeshed in radically different, and more complex, ways. Technological innovations, globalization, and environmental and health crises connect us to one another across distant spaces in new and unforeseen ways, as constructs—of insiders and outsiders, local and foreign, who is in and who is out—shift and merge in dramatic ways. Relationships between North and South (both past and present) are shaped by our shared history of colonialism, by who we were and who we have become. As Kellner (2002) explains, “culture is an especially complex and contested terrain today as global cultures permeate local ones and new configurations emerge that synthesize both poles, providing contradictory forces of colonization and resistance, global homogenization and new local hybrid forms and identities” (p. 295). Culture thus becomes a very complex concept, as constructions of here and there, centre and periphery, upset our fixed and polarized conceptions, becoming blurred, blended, borrowed, and changed (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Nagel, 1994). Globalization ensures that cultures are no longer insular (Bandura, 2002), as they are constantly being made and remade through processes of migration and acculturation (Guarnaccia & Rodriguez, 1996). Culture and cultural boundaries are thus not fixed but unstable, shifting and fluid concepts that are under constant construction, reconstruction, and revision (Botcheva, Shih, & Huffman, 2009).

Increasingly, cultural and socioeconomic complexity and diversity both at home and abroad ensure that discussions and debates about culture will endure, as issues of cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural sensitivity take on new urgency. As program evaluators work in diverse local and international communities and countries across the world, and in program contexts that are designed to address increasingly intractable social, economic, and environmental issues, it becomes incumbent upon us to better understand the culture and cultural context of our program communities. As SenGupta, Hopson, and Thompson-Robinson (2004) explain:

Culture is an undeniably integral part of the diverse contexts of evaluation, and therefore an integral part of evaluation. Culture is present in evaluation not only in the contexts in which programs are implemented but also in the designs of these programs and the approach, stance, or methods evaluators choose to use in their work. (p. 6)

Conveyed in this description is a sense of culture as more than a mere demographic descriptor of communities. It is a construct that in very fundamental ways is inscribed and shaped by the evaluator, making it more generative, more grammatical, and less fixed conceptually (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Culture thus takes on a relational focus, as it is situated and embedded in a far more symbolic, discursive, and political environment (Fortun, 2009). As evaluators

or researchers working in the field (collecting and analyzing data), we must be aware that culture is not something that we discover or locate somewhere out there (something found), but something that we create, that, essentially, we write (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

As evaluators, our role at a very basic level involves judging the merit, worth, or significance of a program or policy. Whether we involve program and community stakeholders in a collaborative process, our role is nonetheless one of passing judgement or establishing merit or significance. On what basis do we frame assessments? Who decides what or whom to include or exclude? How do we decide? Whose ideas and perspectives structure the design and reporting framework? Who narrates and writes the final report? As Fortun (2009) explains, writing culture “also happens in the *performance* of analysis” (p. xi). From this perspective, culture is not something that exists externally to us, but something that we participate in the production and in the creation of through the work that we do. As Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart (2015) argue, “culturally defined values and beliefs lie at the heart of any evaluative effort” (p. xx). In other words, there are no culture-free evaluations, as culture itself remains a socially, politically, and historically vibrant construct that is fundamentally expressive of societal values and norms. Thus our understanding of culture and its myriad connections to evaluation have significant implications for evaluations in international settings, particularly when we consider the very recent history of the colonizing past.

## IDENTIFYING DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE AND CULTURAL PRACTICE

In previous work (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009; Chouinard & Milley, 2016), we identified dimensions of cultural context to reflect how and in what ways culture is implicated (and expressed) in evaluation and, more specifically, in the contexts in which evaluation takes place. These dimensions, which we have modified as a result of our recent analysis of 71 additional studies of evaluations conducted in international development contexts (Chouinard & Hopson, this issue), at this point include epistemological, ecological, methodological, political, personal, relational, and institutional dimensions of cultural practice. We consider these dimensions as multitextual, dynamic, and overlapping, interweaving throughout the evaluation and very much framed by the specific program and community context in which the evaluation occurs.

Table 1 provides a conceptual framework for inquiry that further expands upon the seven dimensions of cultural practice, with guiding questions related to evaluation practice. We consider that these seven dimensions of practice (and guiding questions) shed light on the contours, shapes, parameters, and dynamics of practice, and foreshadow for us the possible tensions, conflicts, and challenges that evaluators may encounter in the field, particularly in international contexts.

**Table 1.** Conceptual Framework for Inquiry: Locations of Culture in International Development

Dimensions of cultural practice	Key questions guiding analysis
<p><i>Epistemological</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Approaches to knowledge construction</li> <li>–Western versus local/Indigenous paradigms</li> <li>–Evaluator role/positionality</li> <li>–Frames of representation and meaning</li> </ul>	<p>Which forms of knowledge are privileged? Which forms are dominant? Which are excluded? Whose perspectives are used in the design of the evaluation? Whose voices and perspectives frame the analysis? Whose are excluded? What role does the evaluator play in the evaluation? To what extent is the evaluator engaged in the process?</p>
<p><i>Ecological</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Culture and contextual clarity and understanding</li> <li>–Community history, culture, and background</li> <li>–Broad social, historic, and economic history and influences</li> <li>–Local program/information needs</li> </ul>	<p>What is the history of the program community? To what extent does the history, culture, and background of the community inform the evaluation design, process, and consequences? In what ways are the community's social, historical, and economic realities taken into account? How are their information needs expressed in the evaluation? How are local and external information needs balanced?</p>
<p><i>Methodological</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Range of philosophical approaches</li> <li>–Multicultural validity/definitions of data quality</li> <li>–Levels of inclusion/exclusion and voice</li> <li>–Method and instrument development</li> <li>–Local adaptation and cultural commensurability</li> </ul>	<p>To what extent are methods commensurate with/reflective of the local culture? Do they reflect diverse needs of the population? Whose views are represented, by whom, and how? Whose are excluded? Who in the community participates in the evaluation? What factors are considered in the formation of the evaluation team? Who interprets, writes up, reports, and uses the findings? Whose language is used/translated in evaluation documentation? Is validity defined in culturally appropriate ways?</p>

Dimensions of cultural practice	Key questions guiding analysis
<p><i>Political</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Power and privilege</li> <li>–Diversity of values and dominant discourses</li> <li>–Norms of representation</li> <li>–Conflict/commensurability of policies and agendas</li> </ul>	<p>What expressions of power can be observed in the evaluation? Who holds power? Who doesn't? Whose values dominate? To what extent is the evaluation driven by external norms and standards of accountability? How do issues of power and privilege inform the evaluation design and process? What is the rationale for the evaluation (e.g., accountability, learning, social justice)?</p>
<p><i>Personal</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–“Critical”/reflexivity and self-awareness</li> <li>–Values and personal biases</li> <li>–Openness and learning</li> <li>–Researcher culture and social location</li> </ul>	<p>Are cultural similarities/differences observed? To what extent are evaluators aware of their own cultural location and values? How does their position inform their work and their understanding of context and approach? How open are they to learning about the cultural context? In what ways do their self-reflections and awareness inform their evaluation approach?</p>
<p><i>Relational</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Situational identity (insider/outsider)</li> <li>–Coconstructions of knowledge</li> <li>–Rapport and understanding</li> <li>–Time spent in community</li> </ul>	<p>How much focus is given to building relationships with community members and other stakeholders? How is knowledge framed and constructed within the evaluation process? How much time is spent in the program community building relationships and becoming familiar with community norms, values, and customs?</p>
<p><i>Institutional</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Policies and political agendas</li> <li>–Evaluation purpose/rationale</li> <li>–Program and information needs</li> <li>–Professional norms and ideologies</li> <li>–Time and resources</li> </ul>	<p>Which policies/political agendas guide practice? What is the guiding rationale behind approach and evaluation purpose? How are community and funder needs balanced/counterbalanced? How much time and resources are dedicated to project? Are dedicated resources feasible? Whose professional norms and ideologies guide practice? How are these norms balanced with local practices?</p>

The *epistemological dimension* reflects the diverse approaches to knowledge construction and highlights the flow and co-creation of knowledge between evaluators and stakeholders and among stakeholders themselves, as well as the evaluator's role and positioning amidst what are often a multiplicity of competing paradigms (e.g., constructivism, positivism, critical social theory). A key concern for evaluators is often whose voices and languages are included and whose are excluded in the encounters that take place, as the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion comprise the knowledge co-construction processes and ultimately also the evaluation outcomes.

The *ecological dimension* provides a temporal conception of context, highlighting the need for evaluators to look at programs and the evaluation process not as a fixed entity in time and space, but as a set of relations connected to larger sociopolitical systems that act on and influence the local setting (and, with it, the program) in myriad ways, historically, politically, culturally, and economically. This dimension represents what Guzman (2003) might refer to as a "hierarchy of social forces" (p. 174) that interweave throughout the evaluation, calling attention to the multiple levels of influence at play in an evaluation.

The *methodological dimension* describes the commensurability and range of philosophical approaches to knowledge construction and highlights the point that these methodologies, collaborative though they might be, nonetheless remain social, cultural, economic, and political constructions (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015; Hopson, 2003), and as such cannot be considered neutral. This dimension has a strong cultural dynamic in terms of methodological justifications of validity (Kirkhart, 1995, 2005) and commensurability with the local cultural community and context. We are drawn to Reagan's (1996) notion of "epistemological ethnocentrism" as a way to describe the assumptions and biases of a field, a description that underscores the point that knowledge is a contestable construct mediated by social, political, and cultural influences, all of which are involved in the process of social inquiry.

The *political dimension* identifies the multiple connections between evaluation and politics (House, 1993; Weiss, 1993), and brings the focus to the political implications of policy formation, in the relationships that we develop, and in the selection of our methodological approaches. This dimension is particularly salient within diverse and complex cultural contexts, as well as in communities that have a history of exploitation, marginalization, and dependence. This dimension also highlights the connection between evaluation and politics (Weiss, 1993), from evaluation as part of the fabric of political decision making to the politics surrounding the multiple relationships within an evaluation. Evaluation thus enters the political realm at the level of policy, where decisions are made about which programs to evaluate and why, whether for decision-making purposes, accountability, or program improvement.

The *personal dimension* refers to the evaluator's positioning within the program context, to their "critical subjectivity" (Heron & Reason, 1997) as self-reflection is related to the values and personal biases that guide their personal and

professional practice. Acknowledgement and awareness of one's culture and social location ("the ground upon which we stand" as a measure of self-reflection) are also identified in this dimension. [Symonette \(2004\)](#) describes the need to cultivate multilateral self-awareness, a concept that encompasses self as cultural being and an understanding of self as researchers positioned within a dominant Western (and highly privileged) paradigm.

The *relational dimension* is attuned to relationships within the evaluation context and to the predominance of collaborative approaches and constructivist forms of knowledge construction. This dimension also highlights the need for openness and rapport, and the need to spend time immersed in the program community. This dimension is considered a more complex construct in international development settings, as encounters occur across cultural, class, gender, and racial divides that are most often saturated with unequal status, power, and privilege.

The *institutional dimension* brings focus to the overarching professional norms, ideologies, and institutional policies and practices that inform the project and the evaluation. This dimension also provides a sense of the interplay between community and program-funder needs, with attention given to the use of culturally appropriate/inappropriate methodological approaches required by funding agencies. In international contexts, the challenge is also one of dealing with insufficient time or resources to develop the kinds of relationships and understanding required to conduct evaluations in complex and diverse community contexts. This challenge can be further exacerbated by program funders who view evaluation as a technocratic exercise in accountability and control, over community needs that value local knowledge and the inclusion of community voices and perspectives.

## THE ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In this Special Issue, evaluation practitioners, scholars, and policymakers from across the globe share their research on the influence of culture and cultural context on their evaluation practices, with a focus on the challenges and tensions experienced between Indigenous and Western methods and approaches. All of the authors were asked to reflect on the cultural dimensions of their work, either from a geographic perspective (e.g., Turkey, South Africa, India) or conceptually (e.g., social equity, Kaupapa Maori). What follows is a brief description of each article.

In the **first article**, Jill Anne Chouinard and Rodney Hopson present a comprehensive review that includes the analysis of 71 studies on evaluation in international development contexts published over the past 18 years. Their primary purpose is to explore how culture is being conceptualized and defined in international development contexts and how evaluation practitioners, scholars, and/or policymakers who work in international development evaluation frame the role of culture and cultural context in these settings. They pose a number of questions: How is culture framed in the international development evaluation literature? To what extent do descriptions of evaluation (design, processes, and outcomes)

reflect other knowledge and value systems and perspectives? Whose values and worldviews inform the evaluation design and methodology? How does the community's cultural context inform the evaluation methodology and methods used? Following from their analysis, they identify five themes that highlight some of the key cultural assumptions behind evaluation as it is practiced today, particularly in the international setting: (a) the manifestation of culture along a continuum from explicit to implicit, (b) a cultural critique of participatory practice in international development, (c) exploring the limits of social constructivist epistemologies and representations of voice, (d) situating evaluation as a cultural practice, and (e) cultural engagement and the multifaceted role of the evaluator.

In the **second article**, Hanife Cakici uses a multiple streams model (focused on the problem, policy, and political streams) as a conceptual framework to explore the rise and fall of evaluation (and evaluation capacity building) on a governmental agenda in the Global South, using Turkey as a case example. Her main argument is that while evaluation capacity building may well be needed in the Global South, its success hinges on the need for evaluation to develop indigenously on the national agenda, rather than from a top-down position. Her use of the multiple streams model highlights the influence of political, historical, and sociocultural contextual dimensions involved in identifying which topics make it (or not) to the national agenda. As Cakici argues, despite a politically favourable climate for evaluation in Turkey, evaluation failed to be seen as a culturally valid policy solution, and thus failed to ignite as a form of inquiry within governmental decision-making process and practices.

In the **third article**, Fiona Cram provides an overview of Kaupapa Maori theory and evaluation, looking to identify what learning might be shared to support culturally responsive approaches to evaluation involving other Indigenous and vulnerable populations in the international development community. With the extension of the Kaupapa Maori perspective to the international development context, Cram highlights four key ways in which non-Indigenous evaluators can contribute to decolonizing evaluation practices: develop an understanding of the cultural history of the Indigenous population before the evaluation, assist the community in identifying its own understanding of the problem and initiative, get acquainted with the cultural protocols of the community, and acknowledge your insider/outsider status from the outset.

In the **fourth article**, Bagele Chilisa, Thenjiwe Emily Major, Michael Gaotlhobogwe, and Hilda Mokgolodi heed [Carden and Alkin's \(2012\)](#) reconfiguration of the evaluation tree metaphor to locate African voices, perspectives, and epistemologies with a view to decolonizing, indigenizing, and re-envisioning new evaluation tools and practices that culturally resonate in Africa. The authors begin with a critique of the dominant Euro-Western paradigms and approaches to evaluation, positioning them as a cultural artifact, a form of "epistemological imperialism" that reinforces donor-driven, accountability-based approaches. They argue that "cosmetic contextualization" is insufficient, as what is required is an African evaluation theory that emphasizes African relational forms of evaluation on an



African relational evaluation paradigm. The question “Who sets the agenda?” is paramount.

In the **fifth article**, Hind Al Hudib, J. Bradley Cousins, Jayshree Oza, Undurthy Lakshminarayana, and Vasant D. Bhat explore, through a guided conversation, a cross-cultural evaluation experience that took place over a five-year period between external evaluators from Canada and a group of local Indian evaluators. The focus of the conversation is on the benefits obtained and the challenges encountered in the process of bridging Western and Indian knowledge systems. This brief yet rich conversation highlights the cultural differences between evaluators in terms of the selection of evaluation questions, stakeholders and potential users, the methods of data collection, and the methods of reporting. Of particular interest are the tensions that surface in terms of perceived evaluation rigour and local Indian expressions of knowledge and hierarchical frames imposed as much internally as from the outside.

In the **sixth article**, Kelly Robertson takes an analytic look at the equity-focused evaluation guidance documents published by 21 major international development organizations. Her focus is on the extent to which international development evaluation policy and practice guidance documents provide recommendations for considering barriers to social equity and equality at various stages of the evaluation process, with implications for evaluation quality, cultural responsiveness, and the decolonization of evaluation. Her findings suggest that while there is some progress, there is also “room for improvement” in terms of the clarity and direction of language with evaluation guidance documents and in terms of the quality and level of detail on how to address the social determinants of equity in evaluation.

In the **seventh** and summative article, Michael Quinn Patton shifts the “culture of inquiry” from a focus on the nation state as the unit of analysis (the evaluand) to a “transcultural perspective” that is global and includes the earth and all of its inhabitants as the unit of analysis. Patton argues that global problems require global thinking, a paradigm shift away from a nation-state-based international evaluation toward a global systems change perspective in evaluation. This provocative approach requires building the capacity and competence of evaluators who are competent in global systems analysis (e.g., those who possess global perspectives, world systems knowledge, global systems analysis skills, and global systems change network connections). For Patton, a transcultural perspective is congruent with a decolonizing approach to evaluation, as it is inclusive of local, Indigenous perspectives framed within a globally based transcultural framework.

The issues and questions raised in these articles challenge us to think critically about our work as evaluators, who we are in service to, what kinds of relationships we need to foster to create meaningful change, how our work impacts (or has the potential to impact) the culturally diverse and marginalized populations across the globe, and even how our work relates to the health of the planet itself. Our hope is that this issue offers readers ideas that inspire, as together we work diligently and creatively to build a healthier and more humane world for everyone.

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