

# Moving Beyond the Buzzword: A Framework for Teaching Culturally Responsive Approaches to Evaluation

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**Abstract:** *The terms cultural responsiveness and cultural competence have become ubiquitous in many fields of social inquiry, including in evaluation. The discourse surrounding these issues in evaluation has also increased markedly in recent years, and the terms can now be found in many RFPs and government-based evaluation descriptions. We have found that novice evaluators are able to engage culturally responsive approaches to evaluation at the conceptual level, but are unable to translate theoretical constructs into practice. In this article we share a framework for teaching culturally responsive approaches to evaluation. The framework includes two domains: conceptual and methodological, each with two interconnected dimensions. The dimensions of the conceptual domain include locating self and social inquiry as a cultural product. The dimensions of the methodological domain include formal and informal applications in evaluation practice. Each of the dimensions are linked to multiple domains within the Competencies for Canadian Evaluation practice. We discuss each and provide suggestions for activities that align with each of the dimensions.*

**Keywords:** *culture, cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, teaching evaluation*

**Résumé :** *Les termes sensibilité culturelle et compétence culturelle sont maintenant omniprésents dans de nombreux domaines d'enquête sociale, notamment en évaluation. Le discours entourant ces questions en évaluation s'est aussi intensifié de façon marquée au cours des dernières années et ces termes sont maintenant présents dans de nombreuses demandes de proposition et descriptions d'évaluation émanant d'organismes gouvernementaux. Nous avons trouvé que les évaluateurs débutants sont en mesure de concevoir des approches d'évaluation culturellement adaptées, mais sont incapables de transférer ces notions théoriques à la pratique. Dans le présent article, nous décrivons un cadre pour l'enseignement d'approches évaluatives qui soient culturellement sensibles. Le cadre inclut deux sphères – conceptuelle et méthodologique – chacune ayant deux dimensions interconnectées. Les dimensions de la sphère conceptuelle implique de positionner l'évaluateur et le processus de recherche comme un produit culturel. Les dimensions de la sphère méthodologique comprennent des applications formelles et informelles pour la pratique*

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*de l'évaluation. Chacune des dimensions est liée à de multiples domaines de compétence pour la pratique canadienne de l'évaluation. Nous discutons de chaque domaine et offrons des suggestions correspondant à chaque dimension.*

**Mots clés :** *culture, compétence culturelle, sensibilité culturelle, enseignement de l'évaluation*

## INTRODUCTION

The terms *cultural responsiveness* and *cultural competence* have become ubiquitous in many fields of social inquiry, including in program evaluation. Simply put, culturally responsive evaluation has been defined as responsive evaluative inquiry that meaningfully attends to and addresses the cultural context of the community (SenGupta, Hopson, & Thompson-Robinson, 2004). Evaluations can achieve cultural competence by being responsive to the needs of the program community and specifically tailored to the unique groups and communities of focus (Hopson, 2009). Culture is dynamic and ever-changing, and as such, evaluators are encouraged to continuously seek to understand the culture, context, historical perspective, power, oppressions, and privilege in each new evaluation context (Greene, 2005; Pon, 2009; Symonette, 2004). With justification rooted in our field's continued expansion in racially, ethnically, linguistically, economically, politically, and culturally diverse international contexts (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2015), many global voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs) have developed public statements related to culture, cultural competency, and cultural responsiveness (Kosheleva & Segone, 2013). In addition, training of culturally responsive and equity-focused approaches are offered within university courses (Davies & MacKay, 2014) and at VOPE conferences around the world (Catsambas, Segone, de Silva, & Saunders, 2013). The discourse surrounding these issues in evaluation has also increased markedly in recent years, and the terms can now be found in many Request for Proposals (RFPs) and government-based evaluation descriptions (Botcheva, Shih, & Huffman, 2009).

While a definitive relationship between evaluation theory and practice remains elusive (Christie, 2003; Cooksy, Mark, & Trochim, 2009; Tourmen, 2009) and in need of further study (Chelimsky, 2013), our initial examinations indicate that attempts at cultural responsiveness in practice are in need of attention. As instructors of six evaluation courses within an educational research methodology department with program evaluation-focused M.S. and Ph.D. program tracks, we endeavour to train evaluators who not only have strong technical and methodological skills, but who also think well and critically about how to meaningfully and responsively attend to culture and context within an evaluation setting. As with other theoretical evaluation approaches, we have found that novice evaluators, students, and practitioners are able to engage culturally responsive approaches to evaluation at a theoretical level, but remain challenged when translating their theoretical constructs into practice (Chouinard & Boyce, in press, a; Chouinard et al., 2016). For example, novices have trouble understanding how to design

data collection instruments that are culturally commensurate, how their personal biases influence the evaluation, and how issues of race, power, inequity, diversity, and culture might influence their relationships with stakeholders. Moreover, our research, as well as our observations as reviewers of journal articles, conference proposals, and evaluation plans, would indicate that, in many cases, attempts at culturally responsive evaluation are little more than the inclusion of symbolic and politically correct buzzwords (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009). As the conversation surrounding culture, cultural competence, and cultural responsiveness is increasing exponentially, the need to teach novice evaluators both the theory and practice of culturally responsive approaches becomes critical. In this article we share a framework that we have used for teaching culturally responsive approaches to evaluation, followed by implications for evaluation practice.

## DIMENSION OF PRACTICE

Ideally, all evaluators should attend to the social, ethical, political, cultural, and value dimensions of any evaluation context (Chouinard, 2016), and aim for nuanced and responsible methods to evaluation (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2015). As such, several evaluation approaches have surfaced to guide evaluators in meaningfully and responsively engaging in diverse contexts, with what Kirkhart (2005, 2010) refers to as “multicultural validity.” Evaluation frameworks that guide practitioners to explicitly address issues of power, social justice, equity, human rights, and cultural complexity include transformative participatory (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), transformative (Mertens, 1999, 2009), democratic (Kushner, 2005; MacDonald, 1976), deliberative democratic (House & Howe, 2000), equity focused (Segone, 2011), critical evaluation (Everitt, 1996; Fay, 1987), values-engaged, educative (Greene, Boyce, & Ahn, 2011; Greene, DeStefano, Burgon, & Hall, 2006), restorative justice (Chouinard & Boyce, in press, b), and cultural and contextually responsive approaches (Frierson, Hood, Hughes, & Thomas, 2010; Hopson, 2009; Madison, 1992; Thomas & Stevens, 2004). What seems clear is that more evaluators have been intentional about anchoring their work in inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive ideals (Frierson et al., 2010; Greene, 2006; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). With more than 200 articles that mention culturally responsive or culturally competent evaluation in the literature (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2015), empirical examinations of this phenomenon have also gained significant traction (see Chouinard & Cousins, 2009; Chouinard & Hopson, 2016; Samuels & Ryan, 2011).

No program or evaluation is value-free or culture-free (House, 1980). Although multiple definitions exist, culture is generally thought of as representing the shared norms, values, and assumptions of a group (Samuels & Ryan, 2011; SenGupta et al., 2004). Culture can also refer to shared language, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, social class, sexual orientation, disability, age, and/or geographic location (Merriam-Webster, 2011; Bowen & Tillman, 2015). Theoretically, culturally responsive evaluation is situated at the intersection of (a) decolonizing/indigenous epistemologies and frameworks, (b) critical theories of epistemologies and race, and (c) social agenda and advocacy theories and approaches in evaluation

(Hopson, 2009). In culturally responsive practice, evaluators are encouraged to analyze the program's cultural and sociopolitical context, develop evaluation questions with the active inclusion of multiple stakeholders, utilize culturally commensurate data collection and analyses methods, and share findings with a variety of audiences (Frierson et al., 2010). Culturally responsive evaluators generally aim to be collaborative, respectful, and attentive, and to honour cultural norms, illuminate structural injustices, promote action to redress inequities, and be reflective about their own culture, prejudices, assumptions, and biases.

## METHODS

We are both tenure-track assistant professors within an educational research methodology department. In addition to teaching other graduate methodology courses, we also teach an introduction to evaluation, a practicum in evaluation, advanced evaluation theory, public policy and evaluation, collaborative approaches, and a culturally responsive approaches to evaluation course. We are both committed to developing students' technical skills needed for evaluation practice, while also encouraging the adoption of a critical lens (Everitt, 1996; Fay, 1987) and attention to social justice. As Thomas and Madison (2010) have argued, "evaluation students also must be inspired to challenge the status quo, to care about the interests of the disadvantaged, and to uncover weaknesses within the system that contribute to inequities within society" (p. 571). We both have a social justice orientation that is reflected in the courses we teach, our research interests, and our evaluation practice. Our hope is that students who complete our courses will have a strong methodological foundation, and conduct evaluations that are based in democratic principles and that promote equity, fairness, and diversity.

Our insights for this article are based on reflections from a graduate course in culturally responsive approaches to research and evaluation that we co-taught during the Spring 2016 semester. The aim of this course was to provide a comprehensive overview of culture and its centrality in evaluation and research practice. The focus of the course was on culturally responsive approaches to evaluation and research in educational settings, with a combination of both theoretical and practical applications. The course was conducted as a mix of lecture, student-led seminars, and group learning activities. The course provided an overview of approaches that are considered culturally responsive, and many of the readings examined key dimensions of practice (e.g., context, relationships, validity, methodology, and design). Students were required to keep a journal throughout the semester, and were encouraged to reflect personally and academically on the course readings and classroom experiences. In their journals they highlighted theoretical wrestlings, noted interpretive insights, and attempted to define their own cultural location. Aside from ongoing class discussions, other formal course assignments included a position paper on an issue or dilemma confronting researchers working in culturally diverse communities, and a final paper integrating culturally responsive theory and practice with their own research interests.

Prior to the start of the semester, we decided to systematically capture how the course was planned, designed, implemented, and evaluated with particular attention to logistics, pedagogy, and strategies. As course instructors, we met weekly throughout the semester to critically reflect upon our pedagogy and student learning, share resources, and offer constructive feedback as we prepared for the following week. Each week we took notes of the main ideas and topics covered during these reflections. At the end of the semester, we reviewed our reflective notes as a way to better understand course triumphs and challenges, and to map out changes for future iterations of the course.

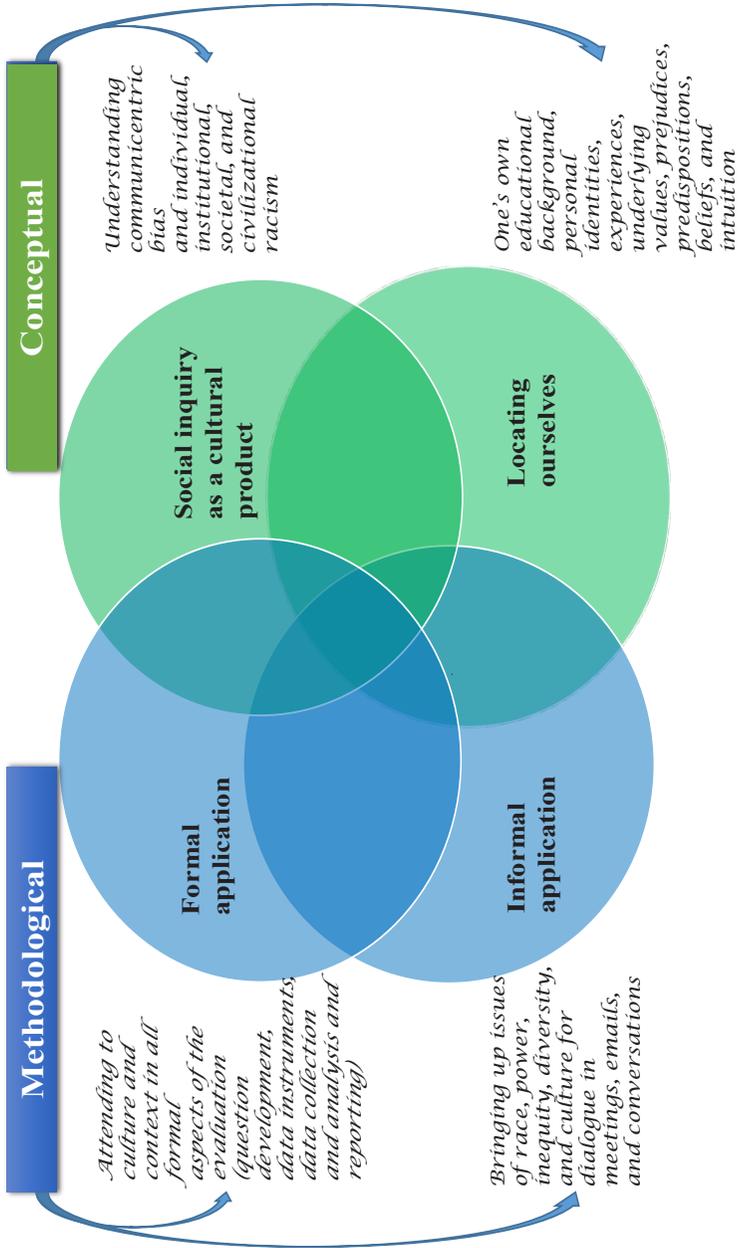
## LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our experiences teaching this course demonstrate that while students were able to understand cultural responsiveness intellectually, they were unable to easily translate their concepts into practice. For example, while some students were able to understand ongoing issues of trustworthiness within historically marginalized populations, they were unable to identify what this would mean when working within these communities, how they would address responsiveness to stakeholder needs, and how they would include voices that represented diverse stakeholder perspectives (Bowman, Dodge Francis, & Tyndall, 2015; LaFrance, 2004; Smith, 1999). Others were able to recognize the need to develop culturally and contextually appropriate data collection instruments for specific populations, but were unable to move beyond the suggestion that this could not be accomplished merely through simple language translation.

To aid in puzzling through these experiences, we developed a conceptual framework to help us better understand pedagogy as it related to teaching culturally responsive approaches to evaluation. The framework depicted in [Figure 1](#) includes two domains: conceptual and methodological, each with two interconnected dimensions. The dimensions of the conceptual domain include two foci: locating self and social inquiry as a cultural product. The dimensions of the methodological domain are formal and informal applications in evaluation practice. Each of the dimensions are linked to multiple domains within the Competencies for Canadian Evaluation practice (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2010; Stevahn, King, Ghore, & Minnema, 2005). The conceptual dimension is connected to the reflective, situational, and interpersonal competency domains. The methodological dimension is connected to the technical, situational, management, and interpersonal practice competency domain. Ideally, teaching would occur at the intersection of all dimensions, and include instruction and activities across both domains. What follows is a discussion of each dimension, with suggested activities aligned to each dimension.

### *Locating self*

The lens through which we view the world influences all evaluation processes from design to implementation and interpretations (Milner, 2007; Symonette,



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for understanding pedagogy as it relates to teaching culturally responsive approaches to evaluation

2015). To think well about issues of culture, power, equity, class, race, and diversity, evaluators should first seek to understand their own personal and cultural values, all of which are influenced by their educational backgrounds, personal identities, experiences, underlying values, prejudices, predispositions, beliefs, and intuition (Symonette, 2004). As Peshkin (1988) has noted, the practice of locating oneself can result in a better understanding of one's own subjectivities.

To advance our students' understanding of their own cultural locations, they kept a reflective journal throughout the semester. At the beginning of the course, students were asked to reflect on their own backgrounds and cultural locations, with a focus on their own social identity, the identity of others, whether they belong to any groups with power and privilege, and how their educational background and identities shape their role and experiences (personal, societal, and research). We then invited students on a "privilege walk" that began with all students standing in a line together, shoulder to shoulder. We had several prompts and, based on responses, students took a step forward, a step backward, or stood still. A few examples of these prompts were: if you are a white male, take a step forward; if your work holidays coincide with religious holidays you celebrate, take a step forward; if you have visible or invisible disabilities, take a step back; if you took out student loans to advance your education, take one step back; if you attended private school or summer camp, take one step forward. At the end of the activity, students engaged in a discussion of their final locations in comparison to the locations of their peers. Further class discussion also included student reflections on their own values in response to current events. For example, we watched the Beyonce video *Formation* and asked students to share thoughts and reactions, after which they were asked to reflect upon the underlying values associated with their reactions. If they were offended, they shared what specifically about the video they found offensive. If they felt vindicated or connected with the video, they offered reasons why.

### ***Social inquiry as a cultural product***

It is imperative that evaluators understand individual, institutional, societal, and civilizational racism and its intersections with knowledge production in the social sciences (Scheurich & Young, 2002). Cultural responsiveness, sensitivity, and competence was born out of the need to dismantle archaic discourses of power and inequity. As Symonette (2004) proclaims, "evaluators need to proactively interrupt the operation of critical autoloading of default settings because they result in trust-eroding inaccuracies, truncated understanding, and twisted representations" (p. 97). Historically, "communicentric bias"—the tendency to make one's own community, often the majority class, the centre of conceptual frames that constrains all thought—has resulted in negative consequences for minority populations (Gordon, Miller, & Rollock, 1990). Further, social science knowledge of minority populations has demeaned characteristics, distorted interpretations of conditions and potential, and remained limited in its capacity to inform efforts to understand and improve life chances of historically disadvantaged populations

(Johnson et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000). While efforts to dismantle communicentric bias and epistemological racism have been underway for more than 80 years (Hood, 2001), knowledge production in and of itself is still a cultural product. To engage with these topics, we began with conversations about social science paradigms and discussed the role of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology in social inquiry. Students were required to read, critique, and discuss articles and chapters related to epistemologies of difference, racialized discourses, and critiques about the nature of social inquiry.

### ***Formal applications in practice***

Numerous scholars have addressed the implications of cultural responsiveness in practice (Frierson et al., 2010; Hood, Hopson, & Kirkhart, 2015), with some encouraging contemplation surrounding threats to, as well as evidence for, multicultural validity by examining relational, consequential, theoretical, experiential, and methodological justificatory perspectives (Kirkhart, 2005, 2010). However, as previously mentioned, we have found that novice evaluators need additional practical examples, supplemental guidance, and multiple iterations to work through what the application of these approaches look like in practice. As such, we engaged students in activity-based practice to provide them with the opportunity to apply cultural responsiveness in planning, designing, and implementing an evaluation.

As an aid, we developed three case study contexts and asked students to work through formal methodological applications. We purposely chose racially, ethnically, linguistically, economically, politically, and culturally diverse global contexts. These included an evaluation of a government program for Quilombos, descendants of an African slave community in Brazil; an evaluation of a dating violence prevention program for American Indian youth; and a research project to gain knowledge about family violence within immigrant and refugee communities. We used these case studies to provide students with opportunities to develop evaluation designs that are culturally and contextually appropriate. Students worked within constraints of program contexts to identify key stakeholders and the evaluator's role, develop evaluation or research purposes and questions, establish strategies to address practical and method-based problems, and consider innovative reporting approaches. After observing group discussions, reading final papers, and reflecting upon the course, we realized that there was a need to also facilitate attendance to potential informal applications of culturally responsive approaches.

### ***Informal applications in practice***

Evaluation is not simply composed of question development, data collection and analyses, and reporting. While evidence of successful attention and responsiveness to culture should be found in formal evaluation documents, engagement with these issues can also take place through the less formal occasion of dialogue and discussion with stakeholders (Boyce, 2017; Tillman, 2014). Tactful engagement

with sensitive issues, informal actions, and interactions with cultural responsiveness can take many forms. These include bringing up issues of race, power, inequity, diversity, and culture for dialogue in meetings, emails, and conversations with clients, funders, and stakeholders. Evaluators who are committed to social justice will acknowledge differing stakeholder opinions, while also attempting to nudge stakeholders and assist them in surfacing their own values, prejudices, and subjectivities (Greene et al., 2011). As such, evaluations require interpersonal, facilitation, negotiation, and collaboration skills.

To do this we recommend having students and novice evaluators work to become comfortable discussing these topics. To be culturally responsive and to engage with issues of power, values, culture, diversity, and inequity, evaluators need to have access, credibility, and authority within the context (Greene et al., 2011). We believe that case study exercises will assist students in practicing to enlist culturally responsive approaches during informal settings (Patton & Patrizi, 2005). In the next iteration of our course we plan to have students do a small-scale, culturally responsive study so they can practice some of the aforementioned topics.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we have provided a framework for teaching culturally responsive approaches to evaluation. The framework includes two domains: the conceptual ground upon which we as evaluators stand, including our own experiential values and culture and the epistemological location on which our practice sits; and the methodological ground upon which we stand, including formal and informal applications in practice. To engage with each of these dimensions, much of the work to be done is reflective and case study-based. We recognize that no evaluator can ever become truly culturally competent, as each evaluation context comprises varying social, ethical, political, cultural, and value dimensions (Symonette, 2004). While we continue to grapple with the development and implementation of culturally and contextually responsive evaluation in our own practice, it is our hope that more and more evaluators will be encouraged to be respectful, be attentive to, and honour cultural norms; illuminate structural injustices; be reflective about their own culture, prejudices, assumptions, and biases; and formally and informally be culturally responsive in their evaluation practice.

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