A Critical Exploration of Culture in International Development Evaluation

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Abstract: In this article we provide a comprehensive review of 71 studies on evaluation in international development contexts published over the past 18 years. The primary purpose of the review 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. In this article we ask: 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? Based on our analysis, we identify and discuss five themes: the manifestation of culture along a continuum from explicit to implicit, a cultural critique of participatory practice in international development, the limits of social constructivist epistemologies and representations of voice, evaluation as a cultural practice, and cultural engagement and the multifaceted evaluator role.

Keywords: cultural context, culture, international development

Résumé : Cet article présente une revue exhaustive de 71 études portant sur l’évaluation en contexte de développement international publiées depuis 18 ans. Le but de ce travail est d’explorer la conceptualisation et la définition de la culture dans le milieu du développement international, ainsi que la façon dont les spécialistes de l’évaluation – praticiens, chercheurs et décideurs – qui œuvrent dans ce milieu conçoivent le rôle de la culture et du contexte culturel. Nous y abordons les questions suivantes : comment la culture est-elle abordée dans les écrits sur l’évaluation du développement international? Dans quelle mesure la description des évaluations (conception, déroulement, résultats) reflète-t-elle le savoir, les valeurs et les perspectives de systèmes de pensée différents? À qui appartiennent les valeurs et la vision du monde qui modèlent la conception et les méthodes de l’évaluation? Comment le contexte culturel de la communauté influence-t-il

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Evaluation has become an institution in society (Dahler-Larsen, 2012) as well as a major player on the global stage (Bhola, 2003), as evident in the increasing attention given to the 2015 International Year of Evaluation and to emerging issues in the international development arena (Donaldson, Azzam, & Conner, 2013). In the past 30 years, we have witnessed a significant expansion in the field, function, and reach of evaluation across the globe, as well as an increase in the demand for evaluation, monitoring, reporting, and audit practice, led in large part by pressure from nongovernmental organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, and other international monitoring agencies (Leeuw & Furubo, 2008).

Amidst this backdrop, the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) is currently building a community of national professional evaluation associations across the globe, which has grown from one of the first in the 1980s (the Canadian Evaluation Society) to over 158 today. EvalPartners, jointly founded in 2012 by the IOCE and UNICEF, has led the initiative to create new evaluation organizations and networks throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia (Kosheleva & Segone, 2013). To keep pace with this increasing demand for evaluation, there has also been a considerable increase in the number of evaluation journals, conferences, training opportunities, internet resources, and consultancies with an international focus.

Within this shifting and increasingly globalized evaluation context, boundaries and borderlands become spaces of cultural interaction and contestation, particularly as multiple and diverse communities and audiences now share this historically contested terrain. Given the history of “development,” the international context is not a neutral space, as issues and struggles over meaning, identity, representation, power, and equality endure (Bauman, 2000). Moreover, despite ongoing discussion about the relationship between culture and development spanning more than 50 years, scholars and practitioners working in the field observe very limited progress in making meaningful connections between culture and international development work (see Mbakogu, 2004; Rao & Walton, 2004; Serageldin & Taboroff, 1992).

Evaluation is not immune from the realities of the development agenda. Considered an intensely cultural practice founded on principles of Western
modernity, rationality, and progress, the field (and all of us who do this work) enters the international development milieu at the behest of multinational development agencies to support project delivery and to evaluate the flow and impact of aid (Carden & Alkin, 2012). As Carden (2013) reminds us, evaluation in the Global South is “borne out of the need of funding agencies” (p. 577).

As such, evaluation as it is conceptualized and practiced today remains very much a Western practice (Bhola, 2003; Hopson, 2003) closely attuned to the exigencies of Western donor nations, and designed to satisfy accountability requirements rather than address local economic and societal needs (Hay, 2010). As evaluators involved in promulgating our methodological practices across the world, it thus becomes incumbent upon us to reflect on the cultural implications and context of our practice, on the role of culture in international development, on how we are situated as Western evaluators, and on how we co-construct knowledge within such contested and culturally diverse program and community contexts.

We position this current issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* amidst ongoing discussions about the role of culture in international development evaluations dating back to Michael Quinn Patton’s volume on culture and evaluation in *New Directions for Evaluation* (Patton, 1985) and Pauline Ginsberg’s critique of Western-based approaches in international evaluations for *Evaluation and Program Planning* (Ginsberg, 1988). Consider Patton’s challenge on how to develop understanding of culture in evaluation (specifically in international settings) as framed in the Editor’s Notes of his 1985 volume:

> Today, evaluators are discovering the responsibilities of being a citizen of the world. One major responsibility lies in taking the notion of culture seriously . . . This volume is a contribution to the study of culture and evaluation. The authors share a concern for unraveling the cultural dimensions of international evaluation practice. The need for such an unraveling stems from the power of culture to make us relatively oblivious to the limitations of our own perspectives, behaviors, and values. The need to unravel the cultural dimensions of evaluation derives also from the increasingly international nature of evaluation practice. (Patton, 1985, p. 1)

In this issue we take seriously Patton’s point about the power of culture to blind us to our own perspective, to the “ground upon which we stand.” Along with Patton’s and Ginsberg’s work more than 30 years ago, there have also been subsequent commentaries and critiques about evaluation and culture in international settings (e.g., Hopson, 2003; Smith, 1991, 2008, 2009). Thus while there has been significant progress in terms of the recognition of culture and cultural context in evaluations conducted in North American and European contexts, including within Indigenous and immigrant communities (e.g., Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2015; Hood, Hopson, & Kirkhart, 2015; Kawakami, Aton, Cram, Lai, & Porima, 2008), evaluations that are explicitly responsive to culture and cultural context seem to be lacking at the global level (Bhola, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Ofir & Kumar, 2013).

In this article, we present a comprehensive review that includes the analysis of 71 studies on evaluation in international development contexts published over
the past 18 years. The primary purpose of this article is to explore where, how, and whether culture is located in published international evaluation studies. Specifically, we are interested in how culture is being conceptualized and defined in international development contexts and how evaluation practitioners, scholars, or/and policymakers who work in international development evaluation frame the role of culture and cultural context in their practice. Our review focuses on the following 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?

In terms of the layout of the article, we begin with a brief discussion of the context in which international development evaluations take place, focusing on the issues and tensions surrounding international aid and “development,” and the cultural implications of current practices. Section II provides a description of our sample of 71 studies and the methods we used for selection and analysis. In Section III we provide a thematic analysis of our review informed by the seven dimensions of cultural practice identified in our conceptual framework. The concluding section discusses the implications of our review, and includes future directions for a critical exploration of culture in international development evaluation.

I. THE INTERNATIONAL “DEVELOPMENT” CONTEXT: SETTING THE STAGE FOR CRITICAL EXPLORATIONS OF CULTURE IN EVALUATION

Our intention in this section is to depict very broadly the context in which international development evaluation takes place, while recognizing that our characterization of the international setting will not do justice to the breadth of the field and the complexity of the issues and challenges that prevail. In the current age of globalization, amidst increasing cleavages between the Global North and Global South, the goals of international development are evermore elusive. Despite decades of “development” and the flow of international and humanitarian aid to the Global South, disparities between high- and low-income countries continue to grow at an accelerated pace, nearly doubling in the past 20 years (United Nations, 2013). Against this backdrop lies a history of colonialism, poverty, economic disadvantage, civic, religious, and tribal tensions, and postwar conflict, as well as health and natural disasters. Addressing these challenges is significant.
Since the end of colonial rule in the mid to late 20th century, there have been numerous shifts in international theories of development, from a focus on donor-designed economic policies, to an emphasis on strategies that focus on partnerships and local ownership (Conlin & Stirrat, 2008; Slater & Bell, 2002). More recent policy trends introduce conditions of austerity, more public-private partnerships (the merging of aid and business), a redirected focus on frontline states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, and on zones of ongoing conflict, as well as the inclusion of new donor nations (e.g., China, India, Russia) (Mosse, 2013). At the same time, the focus for many international and bilateral aid agencies over the past 15 years has shifted to the UN-sponsored Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), designed to address issues of extreme poverty and hunger across the Global South. The MDGs, designed by the United States, Europe, and Japan in 2000, are based on eight broad goals to be achieved by the international community by 2015 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development).

While there is broad consensus that there has been significant progress on MDGs in terms of increased levels of health and well-being across many of the countries involved, many point to only mixed success in achieving these goals across all targeted countries (Fehling, Nelson, & Venkatapuram, 2013). India and China, for example, have been the most successful in attaining the millennium targets, while poorer countries (many of which are on the African continent) have been unable to achieve what many describe as “overly ambitious” and “unrealistic” goals (Fehling et al., 2013). Others critique the goals themselves, arguing that they are a measure of goal fulfillment as dictated by the West, rather than a valid measure of development (Hayman, 2005, 2006). There has also been criticism about the manner in which the MDGs were identified, how they were selected, who was involved in their selection, and what political agendas were behind the initiative (see Easterly, 2009; Fehling et al., 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Shepherd, 2008; Sumner, 2009). For others, current MDG development efforts represent the donor-recipient model of aid, with too little attention given to the local cultural context and to gathering input from low-income nations and civil society constituencies (Kabeer, 2005; Shepherd, 2008). Thus for many, the concept of “development” continues to be problematic, as it represents values of modernization and Westernization, and the continued evidence of further colonization toward low-income countries (see Eversole, 2005; Hobart, 1986; Scherech & Haggis, 2000). Overall, the international development literature describes settings where program and community contexts are considered to be more complex and less predictable, with institutions perceived as more vulnerable and more easily destabilized (Chinyowa, 2011; Makgamatha, 2009; Ofir and Kumar, 2013).

As the foregoing suggests, despite changes in international theories of development over the past decades, ongoing issues of political complexity and economic uncertainty continue to define the global landscape. Evaluation first enters the international context as a Western practice exported to the Global South by
multinational development agencies primarily as a tool to help support project
delivery and assess the flow and overall impact of aid (Carden & Alkin, 2012).
Under this conception, development evaluation tends to reflect the judgement
and values of donor agencies and sponsoring countries (Carden, 2013). Many have
found that evaluation so conceived primarily privileges the needs and interests of
external donor agencies, and is thus neither useful nor responsive to the needs of
in-country policy makers and other stakeholders (Carden, 2010; Hay, 2010; Ofir &
Kumar, 2013). As Donaldson et al. (2013) explain, “getting good and sustained
results in developing countries is more complicated and unpredictable than in
developed countries, and when development is driven from outside, even with the
best intentions, the chance of success diminishes” (p. 3). For Ginsberg (1988), if
we accept American-centred models and approaches as the baseline standard in
overseas development, evaluation then becomes a tool for imperialism. For some,
this leads to the ongoing challenge of reconciling the information requirements
of funding agencies (along with their preferred methodological approaches) with
the information needs and cultural context of recipient countries (Bamberger,
2000). Contextual complexity for some is represented by the increasing number of
funding partners and program sponsors involved, all of which represent the need
to balance and meet what are often diverse and conflicting needs and priorities
(Bamberger, 1991; Conlin & Stirrat, 2008; Crawford, 2003). While some authors
identify the challenge of adopting Western, “American” methods (Bhola, 2003) in
non-Western contexts (Carden & Alkin, 2012; Ofir & Kumar, 2013), others see
globalization as an extension of colonialism (Chilisa, 2012).

The need to focus on the context of the program community is paramount
in the international development literature and in the evaluation of overseas
development projects, particularly given the diversity of program stakeholders
involved, and the level of political and economic uncertainty present. Thirty years
ago, Patton (1985) called for “situational responsiveness” when working overseas,
what Ofir and Kumar (2013) today might refer to as a “developing country lens”
(p. 1), as a way to ensure greater methodological and cultural commensurability
with the program community. More recently, Carden and Alkin (2012), in a recon-
cceptualization of the evaluation theory tree (Alkin, 2012), distinguished between
“adopted methodologies” and “adapted methodologies.” While both approaches
originate in the West, “adopted methodologies” represent colonial approaches to
evaluation and are designed to satisfy the accountability requirements of Western
donor nations, while “adapted methodologies” have a collaborative focus and are
designed to address the needs of the local context. The key distinction between
the two approaches is the focus on methodology as context-sensitive (adapted
methodology) rather than context-neutral (adopted methodology). Our focus on
culture and cultural context (and our seven dimensions of cultural practice identi-
fied in our conceptual framework) is intended to draw attention not only to the
broad and far reaching expressions of culture in the field, from the epistemic to the
local and relational, but also to the need for evaluation approaches that are more
culturally commensurate and sensitive to the program and community context.
II. METHODS AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

While there has been an increase in research on evaluations that are responsive to culture and cultural context in Western countries (e.g., culturally responsive evaluation, cross-cultural evaluation, multicultural evaluation), much of this research has not extended to evaluations in international development contexts (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015). By limiting our research to a focus on empirical studies conducted in the international development arena, this article is intended to address this knowledge gap. In this section we describe the 71 studies that we selected for our analysis, our selection protocol, the characteristics of our sample of studies, and our review strategy and procedure for analysis.

Sample Selection

We limited our search criteria to empirical studies of evaluations conducted in international development—what many refer to as the “developing world.” Empirical studies were based on case narratives or mixed method forms of inquiry and consisted of reflective narratives written primarily from the evaluator perspective describing their evaluation experiences in the developing world. We searched databases that would provide the broadest selection of studies in journals related to evaluation, development/international studies, education, and health. Although our sample is likely overrepresented by Western journals, we did search through international databases and followed up related bibliographies to augment our sample. The majority of our studies come from peer-reviewed journals and from two edited volumes (Estrella et al., 2000; Jackson & Kassam, 1998). In total we analyzed 71 studies published from 1998 to early 2015. Appendix A (see online supplement at http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.30.3.02) provides a table summarizing all of our selected studies organized by sample/context, approach, methodological orientation, and cultural consideration(s), observations, and implications.

Sample Characteristics

In total, we located 71 studies in English-language journals published between 1998 and 2015, with all but the Estrella et al. (2000) and Jackson and Kassam (1998) articles coming from peer-reviewed journals. Almost all of the articles were reflective case narratives written from the evaluator perspective, with descriptions of evaluation focused on challenges and lessons learned. The studies were located across the Global South, with the majority in Africa (n = 37), then Asia/South East Asia (n = 21), Latin America (n = 17), the Middle East (n = 5), the Caribbean (n = 3), and multiple nonspecified locations (n = 4). We grouped program contexts into six key domains of practice: environmental conservation (n = 19) that included projects in forestry, fishing, agriculture, rural development, natural resources management, and wetland restoration; community development (n = 15) with projects focused on youth crime, racism prevention, youth empowerment, and slum improvement; education (n = 12), with projects in primary school literacy, children’s clubs, and youth programs; health (n = 12), with
projects focused on HIV/AIDS prevention, birth control, reproductive issues, and public health; civic arena \((n = 9)\) that included a focus on democracy, post conflict, and governance; and food/aid \((n = 3)\). No specific domain was mentioned in one, and one was a survey of international evaluators.

While there was some commonality in terms of evaluation approaches used, with 91% \((n = 65)\) using a collaborative approach (e.g., participatory evaluation, \(n = 5\); transformative participatory evaluation, \(n = 8\); participatory monitoring and evaluation, \(n = 7\); and practical participatory evaluation, \(n = 6\)), we nonetheless were able to identify 44 different approaches to evaluation across all 71 studies, with numerous studies citing combinations of more than one approach, either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed. We also identified 30 different approaches or combinations of approaches to collaborative evaluation, with some contextualized to the local culture of the community (e.g., Sistematización, SISDEL, Most Significant Change), others based on the need to balance diverse stakeholder needs (e.g., multipartner evaluation, community-based monitoring and evaluation, outcome mapping), and others representing surveys of international evaluators across multiple contexts. Only five studies did not cite the use of collaborative approaches: results oriented/impact (Elkins, 2010); randomized control trial (Faulkner, 2014); performance monitoring (Welle, 2014); document review, content analysis, and interviews (Hanley, 2014); and posttest design (Bollen, Paxton, & Morishima, 2005). We also noted that 14 of the studies included a combination of a collaborative approach and an outcome/impact approach (e.g., monitoring and evaluation and outcome mapping, Duggan, 2012; impact monitoring and participatory evaluation, Guerra-López & Hicks, 2015; and summative, formative, and developmental approaches, Potter & Naidoo, 2009). Appendix B (see online supplement at http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.30.3.02) provides a list of all of the approaches identified across the 71 studies.

Thirty percent of the studies selected for review considered culture a methodologically and epistemologically relevant construct and gave it explicit attention in their evaluation design, process, and implementation. Many of these studies also identified evaluation as a Western construct that is based on a modernist agenda, highlighting potential incommensurability with local and indigenous epistemologies. The other 70% of the studies in our review, while in many instances attending to the complexities of the local context, did not explicitly discuss culture or the cultural implications of evaluation.

The majority of the studies were based on reflective case narratives used to describe the experiences of evaluators working in the field. Through our reading of the studies, we were able to discern that the majority of the studies were written from the perspective of the primary program evaluators, rather than from the perspective of both evaluator and stakeholders or from the stakeholders themselves. As such, our understandings of the evaluation and of the collaborative experience must be considered partial. Moreover, while the narrations describe the evaluation process and include reflections about the experience, there is no longitudinal perspective provided about evaluation consequences and possible use of findings. Notwithstanding these limitations, the studies nonetheless provided a vivid and
rich account of the experiences and challenges of working in what are often very
diverse and demanding contexts.

**Review Strategy and Analysis**

Our analysis consisted of reading through each of the studies, making margin
notes (highlighting), and recording any issues of possible interest and cultural
significance for further discussion between authors. We also summarized each ar-
ticle, focusing on the context, evaluation approach used, methodological orienta-
tion, cultural considerations, implications, and overall findings. Appendix A (see
online supplement at http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.30.3.02) provides a summary
of our principal findings. Both authors read through the summaries and discussed
any areas of disagreement or discrepancy. The summary (and the discussions that
followed) enabled us to do a descriptive cross-case analysis and identify reoccur-
ing patterns and themes across all of the studies we included in our analysis. Our
guiding questions for our analysis of the 71 studies and the conceptual framework
for inquiry and dimensions of cultural practice identified in the Introduction
to this issue (epistemological, ecological, methodological, political, personal,
relational, and institutional) provided a guide for further analysis and synthesis
of our findings. Our analysis was further enhanced by the theoretical literature
on research and evaluation in international development contexts. Through this
process of analysis, we identified five broad themes that we believe capture the
dynamic complexity of evaluation contexts in international development milieus.

**III. THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

In this section, we use the conceptual framework for inquiry developed in the
Introduction to this issue as a cultural lens to bring a critical focus to five areas
of thematic interest based on our analysis of the 71 studies: (a) the manifestation
of culture along a continuum from explicit to implicit, (b) a cultural critique of
participatory practice in international development, (c) the limits of social con-
structivist epistemologies and representations of voice, (d) evaluation as a cultural
practice, and (e) cultural engagement and the multifaceted role of the evaluator.
While there are important connections and overlap between these five themes,
there is merit in providing a separate analysis, as they each provide a unique per-
spective from which to explore the cultural implications of evaluation practice in
international development contexts.

**1. The Manifestation of Culture Along a Continuum from
Explicit to Implicit**

In looking at the 71 studies included in our review, we observed that although
most of the studies (93%) reflected on culture and cultural context, considerations
ranged along a continuum from explicit (30%) to implicit (70%) mention. Only
five studies did not consider the cultural implications of their work to any signifi-
cant extent. The articles that make explicit mention of culture have characteristics
that distinguish them from articles that make implicit (or no) mention of culture or cultural context. The 30% of the studies that we identified as explicit considered culture a methodologically and epistemologically relevant and vibrant construct, giving it focused attention in their evaluation design, process, and implementation. Many of these studies also identified evaluation as a Western construct based on a modernist agenda, highlighting potential areas of incompatibility with local and indigenous epistemologies. The other 70% of the studies in our review, while in many instances attending to the complexity and diversity of the local context, did not explicitly discuss culture or the cultural implications of their evaluation work.

Our findings suggest that explicit mention of culture identifies, attends to, and integrates several dimensions of cultural practice, with clear and directed attention given to cultural locations and contexts. Explicit mention of culture goes beyond a focus on participatory and stakeholder inclusionary practices, highlighting an approach to evaluation that is sensitive to cultural values and contexts. Many of these studies also address issues of power, with a focus on developing culturally relevant methodological approaches that reflect potential biases and cultural assumptions on the part of the evaluator or researcher. Although all of the explicit studies adopted participatory approaches, rationales for use focused on collaboration for understanding the diversity of cultural perspectives and approaches within the program and community context. Thus, despite the use of participatory approaches, explicit studies also described the need to ground the evaluation and methods used in the cultural context of the community (Abes, 2000; Van Vlaenderen, 2001) with a focus on the cultural appropriateness of the method or methodology (Luo & Liu, 2014). For some, this meant excluding Western ideas for possible local adaptation (Nagai, 2001) and providing an epistemological critique of the modernist and highly prescriptive Western agenda (Chinyowa, 2011). For others, issues of culture were evident in a critique of their own social and cultural location (Luo & Liu, 2014; Newman, 2008; Whitmore, 1998), with a recognition of the need to acknowledge cultural differences and worldviews, what Buskens and Earl (2008) refer to as an “inward looking dimension.” Others noted the need to spend time building relationships, engaging in everyday activities, and participating in the culture (Bowen & Tillman, 2015; Luo & Liu, 2014). Overall, explicit considerations of culture remain grounded in the community and its cultural context, critical of the use (and validity) of Western-based methodologies in non-Western contexts, and critically reflective of power and privilege, ethnocentrism, evaluator stance, and positionality.

While implicit articles, on the other hand, identify the need to tap into local/Indigenous knowledge (McDuff, 2001), develop an understanding of the local context, and give voice to participants and address issues of power (Mullinix & Akatsa-Bukachi, 1998), there is no mention of culture or the cultural implications of evaluation. In fact, for studies that we designated as implicit, we note an overreliance on Western models and processes to address what we consider the complexities of culture and cultural context. Several of the studies also
mentioned the need to address socioeconomic and cultural elements in the evaluation (Cornachione, Trombetta, & Casa-Nova, 2009; Torres, 2000; von Bertrab & Zambrano, 2010), but they did not provide any further discussion of what these approaches might look like in practice. Overall, missing in implicit studies was any mention of culture or of the cultural implications of selected methodological and epistemological approaches to evaluation. The implication seems to be that the right methodological approach, however Western in historical and epistemological origin, will address the complexities of culture and cultural context. We return to Carden and Alkin’s (2012) distinction between “adopted” and “adapted” methodologies and to the cultural differences and cultural incommensurabilities of knowledge systems, practices, and histories between the West and the rest (Hall, 1992). Given the history of colonial practices, we in the West need to be particularly critical of our methodological approaches, of our evaluator’s toolkit, as we wield power by virtue of a historical narrative that spans over two thousand years. Our cultural continuum reflects the complexity of evaluation practice in international development contexts and the challenges of modifying (however slightly) Western methodologies in non-Western cultural contexts (Smith, 2009).

2. A Cultural Critique of Participatory Practice in International Development

The diversity of programs, geographic and cultural contexts, evaluation approaches, orientations, and outcomes identified across the 71 studies selected for our review (see Appendix A online at http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.30.3.02) highlight the need to understand context and its variability in international development evaluation. Although definitions of context ranged significantly across studies (from considerations of local group dynamics and hierarchies of power to broader perspectives on sociopolitical norms and ideological constructs), most studies adopted participatory approaches to mitigate contextual, political and cultural tensions, and complexities. In our review, 66 of the studies (92%) adopted participatory approaches, either alone or in combination with other impact-oriented approaches. We also identified more than 30 distinct approaches to participatory practice distinguishable by rationale, contextual specificity, programmatic emphasis, and political orientation (including a mix of approaches and methods), a proliferation of practice that likely reflects the cultural diversity and complexity of program and community contexts. The practice of participatory approaches raises numerous personal, political, professional, and cultural challenges that extend beyond the parameters of the production of information (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

While some of the rationales for participation were philosophic in orientation and based on epistemological justifications for advancing local knowledge, most rationales were framed as either pragmatic (techniques and methods designed for problem-solving purposes) or political (to promote social justice, empowerment, and transformation), or a combined rationale advanced to reconcile distinct methodologies and motivations. A dominant theme throughout our selected studies was the notion of balance between two conflicting or disparate
constructs, at the level of either politics, epistemology, culture, or methodology, a
dichotomous struggle Chinyowa (2011) characterized as “walking on a tightrope”
(p. 353). However the binary is defined (e.g., North-South, community-donor,
micro-macro, bottom-up-top-down, centre-periphery, powerful-powerless,
insider-outsider), participatory or collaborative approaches were introduced
(alsiog the or more donor-driven approaches) as a means of resolving, addressing,
and potentially reversing this dichotomy (Kothari, 2001; Reason, 1988).

For some, resolution of these tensions was focused on finding technical solu-
tions to provide the “right” combination of methods, techniques, and approaches,
what Leal (2010) might refer to as the “technification of social and political prob-
lems” (p. 95). For others, these tensions were part of a much larger development
discourse framed by the social, historical, political, and cultural relations that
prevail between donor and recipient nations (Crush, 1995; Ebbutt, 1998). Thus,
while these tensions might appear at some level to be related to method choice,
many argue that the fundamental issues have little to do with method choice and
everything to do with power and politics, with who defines the problem, and with
who collects and analyzes the data (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; McGee & Gaventa,
2011). The use of participatory approaches, while perhaps valorizing local voices
and perspectives, cannot disguise evaluation’s inherent cultural authority (House,
1993), nor obscure its power to define the parameters of what constitutes legiti-
mate discourse and knowledge in the social sciences (Reagan, 1996). The meth-
odologies, collaborative though they might happen to be, remain social, cultural,
economic, and political expressions and constructions of knowledge (Chouinard
& Cousins, 2015; Hopson, 2003). In a world dominated by Western discourses of
modernity, rationality, and progress, participation itself thus becomes far more
problematic, particularly if we consider the broader social, cultural, economic,
and political context within which our methodologies are embedded and supported
(Morgan, 2013; Ofir & Kumar, 2013). For some, participation has thus become
a form of “tyranny” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), a source of “broken records” and
“broken promises” (Cornwall, 2008), reflecting little more than another form of
Western cultural imperialism (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

At a fundamental level, the positioning of participatory approaches alongsid
e other, more donor-driven approaches, sets up an artificial dichotomy between what
are, historically, two politically and culturally discordant narratives (see Chilisa,
2012). For example, studies in our review provided combinations of process and
outcome-based approaches (Hashimoto, Pillay, & Hudson, 2010), transformative
and practical approaches (Maclure, 2006), expert-led and community-led (Njuki
et al., 2008), learning and accountability (Symes & Jasser, 2000), outcome map-
ping and participatory action research (Buskens & Earl, 2008), accountability and
participation (Anderson & Gilsig, 1998), cultural responsiveness and scientific
rigour (Ebbutt, 1998), instrumental and transformative (Chinyowa, 2011), and
local and external stakeholder expectations and perceptions (Parkinson, 2009).
While the mixing of methods and approaches may indeed provide a way of
embracing the plurality of perspectives and engaging with difference (Greene,
we also noted the emphasis on finding a technical solution to what we consider a much broader sociopolitical and cultural issue. Appreciating these dynamics shifts the focus from participation as a technique, to participation as an inherently political process.

3. The Limits of Social Constructivist Epistemologies and Representations of Voice

As we noted, the majority of studies selected for our review adopted a participatory or collaborative approach to evaluation, an interactive approach to social inquiry that goes beyond traditional empiricism and is rooted in epistemologies derived from social constructivist and critical theory (Heron & Reason, 1997). Participatory evaluation is considered a dialogic process of inquiry where stakeholders and evaluators become active partners and collaborators in an “intersubjective space” (Heron, 1996), together coproducing evaluative knowledge. In this context, knowledge is not seen as something that is merely collected and stored through the selection and use of appropriate methodological practices, but something that is jointly constructed through processes of social interaction, negotiation, and exchange (Long, 1992). In contradistinction to other noncollaborative and perhaps top-down practices, participatory approaches focus on knowledge created with/in the community and for the community. Given the active role of the evaluator in guiding the collaborative process, Heron and Reason (1997) argue for a “critical subjectivity” on the part of evaluators, a stance that requires a “critical” awareness of self, interaction, and relationship. This approach to knowledge construction thus requires both a co-construction with diverse others and an ongoing and critical reconstruction on the part of evaluators, a way of knowing and acting that Reason (1988) describes as forms of experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing, and practical knowing.

Of concern is that despite the use of collaborative methodologies in culturally complex ecological settings, the co-construction of knowledge and meaning amidst such diversity does not remain uncontested, as one cannot simply discount the history of colonialism and donor–recipient relationships that define and drive North–South relationships. Power does not enter the setting only at the moment of contact and representation (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), but rather circulates and is continuously mediated by cultural and historical forces that reside outside of the local evaluation and program context. In her analysis of institutional processes and practices, Canadian feminist scholar Dorothy Smith (1987) reminds us that people’s everyday world of experience is historically and politically mediated by (often invisible) social and institutional forces that originate outside of the parameters of the local setting. In other words, stakeholder, evaluator, and donor relationships are socially constructed prior to the evaluation (or development project), and must thus be understood within this broader historical, cultural, political, and economic narrative. Our evaluations take place amidst metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979) of North and South, developed and developing, all of which serve to create, enact, and reinscribe colonial discourses and ongoing sociohistorical processes and
practices. Considerations of culture in international development evaluation must thus transport us far beyond demographic descriptors to epistemological and ontological concerns about who is involved in the construction of knowledge, how the parameters of what is considered knowledge are defined, and what forms of knowledge are validated, valued, and taken seriously.

Culture and power are bound together (Rosaldo, 1989) and, despite a stance of critical reflexivity on the part of the evaluator, the process of “cultural translation” (Asad, 1986) remains in all of its ecological and political complexity. In culturally complex settings, social constructivist epistemologies are thus problematic, as questions of authority, representation, voice, and power persist (Rabinow, 1986). For Guba and Lincoln (2005), whether one assumes a social constructivist, critical theoretical, or participatory epistemological stance, challenges of textual representation—what they identify as “fiction formulas” or “regimes of truth”—endure. The notion of negotiated consensus (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) amidst such confounding diversity and issues of power must thus be considered a political rather than a methodological issue (Kushner, 2000), as relationships that are continually shaped and reshaped by colonialism cannot be so easily bridged.

4. Evaluation Situated as a Cultural Practice

Despite the multiple challenges and dilemmas evaluators encounter in conducting evaluation in international development contexts, including implementing participatory approaches amidst issues of power and privilege, only a few studies in our sample (e.g., Abes, 2000; Brandon et al., 2014; Chinyowa, 2011; Whitmore, 1998) identified tension between localized conceptions and the notion of evaluation as a Western concept. Luo and Liu (2014) observed that conducting evaluation in rural China requires responsiveness to the complex cultural context that shapes the lives and experiences of farmers, a particularly noteworthy finding given that evaluators and project participants do not share similar social and economic status and cultural traditions. Chinyowa (2011) focused his critique on the challenges posed by conventional social-science-driven monitoring and evaluation strategies in African countries, a critique focused on the cultural incommensurability of the rationalist-based principles of M&E approaches. To be culturally relevant in these communities requires significant sensitivity to other ways of knowing and a concomitant awareness of the cultural implications of our own methodological practices. As Rabinow (1986) has argued, “we should be attentive to our historical practice of projecting our cultural practices onto the other” (p. 241), requiring that we explore questions of epistemology and explore what knowledge is, how we create it, what we do with it, how it circulates, and how it is transformed.

As a “Child of America” (Bhola, 2003, p. 403), evaluation continues to reflect Western perspectives, norms, and values, what for many is considered “reductionist, linear, objective, hierarchical, empirical, static, temporal, singular, specialized and written” (Smylie et al., 2003, p. 141). In fact, in a recent analysis of international development evaluation, Carden and Alkin (2012) note that the evaluation theory
tree (Alkin, 2012) is itself most heavily dominated by Western evaluation theorists, situated predominantly in the USA. According to Smith (1999), these Westernized research methods “are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions about gender and race” (p. 44), all of which are potentially incommensurate with the local worldviews, perspectives, behaviours, and values of the communities in which evaluators work. This cultural system, what for Foucault (1972) might be included in the West’s “cultural archive,” stores, organizes, classifies, and controls knowledge, and is symbolic of how we construct, organize, and read our history. As Schwartz and Cook (2002) have noted, “archives are then not pristine storehouses of historical documentation that has piled up, but a reflection of and often justification for the society that creates them” (p. 12). Despite the fact that our evaluation approaches can be considered “historical artifacts” (Packwood & Sikes, 1996, p. 336), we nonetheless apply them with universal confidence, wielding an almost hegemonic certitude in our evaluation practice throughout the international community. Working in the international development community requires a level of cultural fluency that transcends the understanding of culture as a material expression (e.g., food, clothing, art) to one that includes an understanding of how wider cultural systems operate to frame the parameters of methodological possibility and practice. From this perspective, evaluators are not only positioned within their own research, but they also disseminate Western approaches to social inquiry that may well be culturally incommensurate with the community in which they work. As Rabinow states (1986):

We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world. (p. 241)

An overall reliance on evaluation as method and technique merely creates further distance (and dissonance) between the work that evaluators do (whether collaborative or not), the communities in which they work, the approaches that they adopt for evaluation purposes, and the possibilities of social, political, and cultural change.

5. Cultural Engagement and the Multifaceted Role of the Evaluator

In evaluation, the role of the evaluator is considered a fluid and dynamic construction (Kushner, 2000) characterized along multiple dimensions (e.g., facilitator, mediator, partner, observer, judge) and continuously altered and transformed by the sociocultural specificities of the program and community context. Our findings suggest that the concept of role takes on particular significance in culturally and sociopolitically complex environments, as evaluators must assume multiple, often conflicting and competing roles as the evaluation unfolds, from juggler, conciliator, cultural translator, tight-rope walker, conflict manager, and negotia-
tor (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2000; Laperrière, 2006; Parkinson, 2009; von Bertrab & Zambrano, 2010). By way of example, our selected studies identify the need for evaluators to juggle competing and conflicting agendas (e.g., Anderson & Gilsig, 1998; Mensa-Bonsu & Andersen, 2010), combine multiple evaluation approaches to address issues of inclusion and diversity (e.g., Blauert & Quintanar, 2000; Edge & Marphatia, 2015), and address ongoing issues of conflict and power between diverse stakeholders and stakeholder groups (e.g., Duggan, 2012; Earl & Carden, 2002; Edge & Marphatia, 2015). Our findings point to the dynamic of an evaluator role very much tied to the situational and cultural complexity of the evaluation context, and evolving through interaction and relationship with others. The focus shifts to the notion of “evaluator-as-engaged person” (Greene, 2000, as cited in King & Stevahn, 2002), with an emphasis on the behaviour, attitude, values, and beliefs of the evaluator, rather than on methods and techniques used (Chambers, 1994). This characterization of role involves both relational and interpersonal dimensions, and fundamentally reflects the stance evaluators take in their work in terms of their engagement with moral and ethical complexity, as well as their engagement from multiple positions and locations (either in terms of addressing local concerns and conditions or in addressing broader sociopolitical and institutional needs) (Greene, 2000, as cited in King & Stevahn, 2002).

This dual conception of role—what in the sociological literature is referred to as social interactionism—situates role in a mediating position between the individual and society (Bailey & Yost, 2001), between who we are as evaluators and what the context in all of its sociocultural and political complexity demands. This duality brings focus to the dynamic and often contradictory tension evaluators must address in international contexts. Stronach, Halsall, and Hustler (2002) depict this as a tension between our “bidding selves” and our “reporting selves” (p. 178), between “economies of performance” (the demands of accountability and audit systems) and a “theology of practice” (as represented by our professional aspirations and ideals) (p. 182). Our selected studies thus highlight the evaluator as methodological gymnast, arranging and rearranging approaches to fit the cultural landscape while at the same time satisfying a diverse range of stakeholder needs and requirements. As Goffman (1959) so aptly describes, “the image that emerges of the individual is that of a juggler and synthesizer, an accommodator and appeaser, who fulfills one function while he is apparently engaged in another” (p. 40). The striking contrast between satisfying accountability requirements and providing meaningful community-based evaluation thus highlights the dichotomized nature of the evaluator role, a contrast appropriately descriptive in international development work.

The notion of “critical subjectivity” (Heron & Reason, 1997) also speaks to the need for evaluators to be attentive to their roles as collaborators in the co-construction of knowledge and to relationships in the program and community context. As Heron and Reason (1997) explain, “critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing” (p. 7), and to an understanding of self as both inquirer and participant. While critical self-reflection or self-knowledge on the part of the evaluator is essential in participatory evaluation contexts, it takes on

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even greater significance in culturally diverse communities. Hopson (2002) further refers to the evaluator as ethnographer, a role that requires deliberation around the multiple roles, meanings, values, and positions adopted throughout the evaluation process. The notion of evaluator as ethnographer (particularly in diverse community contexts) highlights the need to focus on and understand the sociopolitical and cultural complexities of evaluation work. As we noted, our findings abound with descriptions of evaluators dividing their allegiances between satisfying funder requirements and meeting community needs, often requiring the use of two quite distinct, divergent, and incommensurate approaches. Given the context, the role of the evaluator (questions around who we are, who we are serving, and what values and biases guide our practice) matters deeply in international development contexts, where the challenges, constraints, and compromises required to meet such a profound diversity of needs can be confounding.

IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The 71 studies included in our review provide a comprehensive overview of the published literature on evaluations in international development contexts spanning the past 18 years. Our reading and analysis of these studies led to the development of five broad themes, all of which help situate the multiple, dynamic, and often conflicting expressions of culture in evaluation practice in the Global South. Although the five themes (the manifestation of culture along a continuum from explicit to implicit, a cultural critique of participatory practice in international development, the limits of social constructivist epistemologies and representations of voice, evaluation as a cultural practice, and cultural engagement and the multifaceted role of the evaluator) cover a very broad cultural and social canvas, they do nonetheless highlight some of the key cultural assumptions behind evaluation as it is practiced today, particularly in the international setting.

In our reading of the literature, we were particularly struck by the incredible diversity of program and community contexts, the range and combination of evaluation approaches and methods used, the large number and diversity of stakeholders involved across programs, the tension between the notion of evaluation as a technocratic, accountability-based mechanism and the notion of evaluation as leverage for community change and empowerment, as well as the overall lack of consideration given to culture and to the cultural implications of evaluation practice across the majority of selected studies. Overall, the studies in our sample suggest that development persists from the top down, very much externally imposed and accountability driven, rather than as a bottom-up initiative based on the cultural, political, and socioeconomic needs of the community. As Ofir (2013) has argued, “these countries have rich cultures with knowledge and wisdom spanning thousands of years—often as relevant today as ever—that have yet to be applied to the field of evaluation” (p. 586). As evaluators, it is thus incumbent upon us to recognize local cultures or we threaten to recreate and redefine the colonizing past (Verhest, 1987).
Numerous scholars and practitioners recognize that an understanding of culture and cultural context is central to successful development (see Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995; Eversole, 2005; Hobart, 1986). To ensure that evaluation does not serve as a means of monitoring and compliance for oppressive policies (Kirkhart, 2015), it thus becomes essential that discussions about evaluation in international development contexts be framed against the broader concepts of aid and development (Ebbutt, 1998). Colonialism and development represent institutionalized discourses that originated in the West (Kothari, 2001) and thus represent Western-based perspectives and frames of meaning. Decolonization, according to Chilisa (2012), is a “process of conducting research in such a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference” (p. 14). Decolonization extends also to a critique of the Western Academy, to a privileging of Western-based approaches to knowledge construction over local, Indigenous perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 1999). In our conceptual framework for inquiry (Chouinard, this issue), the epistemological dimension is associated with key questions to help disrupt and potentially reframe Western-based knowledge (e.g., 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?).

Engaging with difference cannot be about choosing sides, or privileging one perspective over another, but about creating a new space, what Denzin and Lincoln (2008) might call a “shared, critical space” (p. 5) for transformation and change. As Bhabha (1994) has argued,

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of new as an insurgent act of cultural translation . . . an “in-between” space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (p. 10)

As evaluation becomes more global in its reach and seemingly more tightly coupled with the goals of international aid, it cannot remain immune from the realities, exigencies, and politics of the development agenda. We recognize that much more work is needed to ensure that non-Western perspectives, worldviews, and cultures become a key part of the evaluation conversation, and with this issue we hope to encourage and inspire this dialogue.

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NOTE

1 Our use of the term “development” requires clarification. While we acknowledge that the term is often used to designate a program, a process, or a region, we remain quite cognizant of its metaphoric power to impose, define, and prefigure the ongoing colonial relationship between the North and the South. As such, we use it throughout our paper descriptively, and principally as a way to designate a historic process.

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