

# Cultivating Cultural Competence

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**Abstract:** *Cultural competence is a complex and contested notion. Yet it remains integral to working with difference in the context of evaluation practice. Given its status in evaluation practice, the field's commitment to cultural competence prompts the need for further interrogation and reconsideration. Accordingly, this article explores the establishment and conceptualization of cultural competence. Potential challenges to cultural competence are also examined. In consideration of these challenges, an alternative framework is offered based on the philosophy of Emanuel Levinas. This work aims to support the evaluation community's ability to work with cultural diversity, a vital aspect of evaluation practice.*

**Keywords:** *cultural competence, evaluation competencies, responsive evaluation, social justice*

**Résumé :** *La compétence culturelle est une notion complexe et contestée. Pourtant, elle reste un élément incontournable de la pratique de l'évaluation. Compte tenu de ce contexte, l'engagement du domaine envers la compétence culturelle entraîne la nécessité de s'interroger davantage sur le sujet et de le considérer à partir de nouveaux points de vue. Le présent article explore l'établissement et la conceptualisation de la compétence culturelle. Des défis potentiels liés à la compétence culturelle sont aussi examinés. Compte tenu de ces défis, un nouveau cadre est offert, qui s'appuie sur la philosophie d'Emanuel Levinas. Ce travail vise à appuyer la capacité qu'à la communauté de l'évaluation de travailler dans un contexte de diversité culturelle, ce qui constitue un aspect vital de la pratique de l'évaluation.*

**Mots-clés :** *compétences culturelles, compétences en évaluation, évaluation réactive, justice sociale*

Interest in cultural competence in the field of evaluation has increased over the past few decades, as evidenced by the incorporation of culturally sensitive competencies in professional evaluation guidelines and scholarly discourse on culturally competent evaluation (AEA, 2011; AAE, 2020; ANZEA, 2015; CES, 2018; EES,

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2012; Hanberger, 2010; Hood et al., 2015; SenGupta et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2018). Strategies such as learning about the culture of stakeholders and exercising self-reflexivity are commonly mentioned in evaluation guidelines and literature on cultural competence as essential for cultivating cultural competence (AEA, 2011; CES, 2018; Hanberger, 2010; Symonette, 2004). While important, the assumptions undergirding these strategies—cultural content and reflexivity lead to ethical actions—are rarely interrogated. Furthermore, the increased popularity of cultural competence in evaluation does not eschew the dominance of positivistic evaluation approaches that reduce attention to dimensions of culture and ethics. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is twofold: first, to examine cultural competence in evaluation, focusing on definitions, practices, and assumptions; and second, to propose an alternative perspective to push for more ethical engagement with cultural differences in evaluation.

To ground the contributions of this article, I provide background on how cultural competence was initially advanced in service-providing fields (e.g., social work and education). Following this grounding, I describe how different evaluation scholars conceptualize and extend understandings of cultural competence (Botcheva et al., 2009; Chouinard & Cousins, 2009; Garaway, 1996; Hanberger, 2010; Hopson, 2009; SenGupta et al., 2004; Symonette, 2004). Then I discuss barriers (e.g., learning as a precondition for engaging cultural differences, evaluation's professional legacy) that can potentially impede successful cultural and ethical evaluation practice. Next, I discuss philosopher Emanuel Levinas's stance to cultivate more ethical engagement with cultural differences in evaluation. To conclude, I discuss the implications of Levinas's ethical stance for cultural competence, focusing on the profession, the evaluator, and stakeholders.

Combined, all the sections in this article contribute to the literature on evaluation by deepening awareness of how evaluation scholars conceptualize cultural competence, questioning assumptions of culturally competent evaluation practice, and offering an alternative perspective on ethically engaging cultural differences.

## BACKGROUND

The recognition of cultural competence developed across distinct contextual pathways. For instance, in the U.S. context, the push for cultural competence aligned with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The social unrest in the 1960s led U.S. service fields such as social work (Gallegos et al., 2008; Kohli et al., 2010) and education (NEA, 2020) to initiate cultural competency standards, requirements, theories, and training to guide services in a variety of settings. The following sections provide specific examples of cultural competence–related initiatives.

### *Social work*

In the United States, social work practitioners and educators have emphasized the need to consider the sociocultural context of clients since the 1960s (Kohli et al.,

2010). The consideration of minority perspectives and their context by practitioners and educators resulted in changes to the social work curriculum, practice, and literature. Gallegos et al. (2008), for instance, note that the term “cultural competence” first appeared in the social work literature (Gallegos, 1982). Also, theories (e.g., empowerment theory; Kohli et al., 2010) and textbooks (e.g., *Human Behavior in the Social Environment*) used in education programs substantially expanded cultural competence in social work literature and practice (Gallegos et al., 2008). Professional organizations and associations advanced cultural competence in social work practice as well. For instance, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) continues to promote cultural competence by requiring accredited bachelor’s and master’s social work programs to adhere to standards concerning diversity in the social work profession (CSWE, 2015; Policy 3.0).

### **Education**

As U.S. educational institutions became a target of sociocultural critiques in the 1960s, multicultural education emerged, promoting the meaningful integration of students’ cultural backgrounds to achieve educational equity for all children (Banks & Banks, 2004). By the 1990s, educational scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1995) had developed culturally responsive teaching theories to support teachers who respectfully draw on students’ cultural and linguistic strengths to enhance their academic achievement. Professional organizations also influenced the use of culturally responsive practices in education. For example, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), founded in 1954, has a long history of providing standards for educator preparation programs. One of the standards, *Diversity*, emphasized that programs provide curriculum, field experiences, and teaching opportunities that allow educators to learn about conceptualizations of diversity and apply teaching approaches that engage students’ culture and language (NCATE, 2008). Currently, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2022) provides standards for educator preparation programs.

Providing examples of how the fields of social work and education incorporated culture-related competencies demonstrates how service-providing disciplines initiated and encouraged cultural competence through curricular content, discipline-specific literature, and professional associations. Specifically, theories, standards, policies, and practices were used to foster culturally competent practice in these fields.

## **CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EVALUATION**

With the background of how cultural competence was initially advanced in other service-providing fields in mind, the discussion now turns to how cultural competence has been (and continues to be) advanced in the field of evaluation. Specifically, in this section, I bring attention to professional evaluation association guidelines and scholarly work to illustrate various conceptualizations, as well as evaluator skills and dispositions related to culturally competent evaluation across

various contexts (AEA, 2011; AAE, 2020; ANZEA, 2015; CES, 2018; EES, 2012; Hanberger, 2010; Hood et al., 2010; SenGupta et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2018).

### **Conceptualizations of cultural competence**

Evaluation scholars in the United States and abroad have defined and elaborated on the notion of cultural competence in evaluation practice. For example, U.S. evaluation scholars define culturally competent evaluation practice as a

systematic, responsive inquiry that is actively cognizant, understanding, and appreciative of the cultural context in which evaluation takes place; that frames and articulates the epistemology of the methodology; and that uses stakeholder-generated, interpretive means to arrive at the results for further use of the findings. (SenGupta et al., 2004, p. 13)

SenGupta et al. (2004) note that this definition emphasizes the importance of responding to the cultural context of the evaluation and using culturally appropriate theories and methodologies. They also suggest that this definition considers procedures for generating evaluative interpretations and implies ethical evaluation practice. Finally, they contend that cultural competence requires evaluators to critically reflect on their culture and how it might impact their evaluation practice.

Other U.S. evaluation scholars (Botcheva et al., 2009) accept SenGupta et al.'s (2004) definition of cultural competence but also stress the dynamic nature of the concept. For example, when describing their approach, Botcheva et al. (2009) suggest that culturally competent evaluation practice should include three main ingredients: first, collaboration, allowing stakeholders to incorporate their cultural perspectives in evaluation procedures; second, contextual analysis, embedding stakeholders' perspectives within their contexts; and third, reflective adaptation, which refers to seeking to understand how one's biases shape evaluation practice. Botcheva et al. also recognize the contextual constraints to implementing cultural competence, such as a lack of resources (e.g., time, funding). Additionally, these scholars acknowledge how evaluators face constraints with respect to the program itself. In these cases, the evaluator may have limited input in terms of the program or evaluation design. Often, as a result of such parameters, the program itself may not be culturally appropriate.

In her article, Hazel Symonette (2004) elaborates on the reflective nature of cultural competence. She asserts that reflective cultural competence involves discerning the cultural differences that matter in a particular evaluation context, assessing power relations and privilege, in addition to examining one's own cultural perspective. As Symonette points out, reflective practice is essential to cultural competence because it enables evaluators to better understand the evaluation context, cultivate appropriate social relations with stakeholders, address power issues, and make proper evaluative interpretations and judgments.

Hanberger (2010) also extends the notion of cultural competence. His expansion of cultural competence stems from his argument that more attention needs

to be given to how certain cultural perspectives and policies can fail to respect human rights and recognize difference. In his view, evaluators need the competence to understand and work against cultural norms that violate human rights. As a result, he advances the term *multicultural competence* and recommends that evaluators understand how underlying issues or problems are understood from different viewpoints, how the norms of the majority impact minority cultures, the extent to which practices and procedures are developed and implemented in culturally responsive ways, and the consequences of the program for individual and group rights.

Other notable extensions of culturally competent evaluation include *culturally responsive evaluation* (CRE) and *cross-cultural evaluation*. Similar to culturally competent evaluation, CRE suggests that various cultural dimensions (e.g., demographics, context, perspectives) are inherent aspects of evaluation (Hopson, 2009, as cited in Hood et al., 2015). Yet CRE expands cultural competence, as it is intended to be more attentive to the political and racial aspects of culture (Hood et al., 2005; Hopson, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Stevens, 2004). Additionally, Bledsoe and Donaldson (2015) mention how culturally responsive evaluators are self-reflexive, addressing internal biases and perspectives that influence evaluation practice. In short, CRE acknowledges different cultural characteristics, incorporates reflexivity, and brings a more sociopolitical and racial lens to the notion of cultural competence.

Compared to CRE, cross-cultural evaluation takes a more global view, considering how different cultures within and outside of North America interact within the context of a particular evaluation (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009; Garaway, 1996). Cross-cultural evaluation scholars expand understandings of the context in which evaluation takes place by offering a framework inclusive of five interrelated dimensions (i.e., relational, ecological, methodological, organizational, and personal) to inform the relationship between evaluators and stakeholders in cross-cultural evaluation practice (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009). Similar to other evaluation professional associations (AEA, 2011) and evaluation scholars who view culture as central to evaluation practice (Hanberger, 2010; Hood et al., 2005), cross-cultural evaluation scholars aim to be responsive to how the evaluation design might benefit or represent the interests of one cultural group more so than another cultural group (Garaway, 1996). Last, cross-cultural evaluators (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009) underscore the importance of evaluators examining their own culture.

### ***Professional evaluation association guidelines***

Like the fields of social work and education, professional associations play a key role in establishing the importance of culture in the field of evaluation (AEA, 2011; AAE, 2020; ANZEA, 2015; CES, 2018; EES, 2012). This section illustrates how evaluation associations use statements and guidelines to cultivate cultural competence in evaluation practice.

### *American Evaluation Association*

In 1999, the American Evaluation Association (AEA), in collaboration with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, began efforts to address culture in evaluation practice (AEA, 2018). This initial work set the foundation for AEA's Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation that was made public in 2011 (AEA, 2011). This statement explicitly uses the term *cultural competence* and characterizes it as a "stance taken toward culture," implying a particular mindset. AEA's statement (2011) also asserts that cultural competence is "not a discrete status or simple mastery of particular knowledge and skills." Furthermore, the statement acknowledges that engagement with the different cultures reflected in the evaluand is imperative to determine its merit or worth (Askew et al., 2012). In addition to positioning cultural competence as an ethical commitment to "fairness and equity," AEA's statement includes ethical practices for cultural competence such as considering the consequences for certain cultural groups when reporting evaluation findings.

In 2018, AEA presented their Evaluator Competencies. This initiative continues AEA's efforts to professionalize evaluation by advancing evaluator competencies as expressed by five interrelated domains: (1) professional practice, (2) methodology, (3) context, (4) planning and management, and (5) interpersonal (AEA, 2018). Woven through these five domains are competencies that relate to culture, context, privilege, power, and social justice. To illustrate, the fifth domain, *interpersonal*, states that the "competent evaluator addresses power and privilege, and supports interactions that are culturally responsive in the context of an evaluation" (p. 3).

### *Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association*

In 2013, the Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (ANZEA) began to develop evaluation guidelines, which resulted in the ANZEA evaluation standards in 2015. The ANZEA (2015) evaluation standards are framed by four principles: (1) respectful meaningful relationships, (2) ethic of care, (3) responsive methodologies and trustworthy results, and (4) competence and usefulness. Each principle includes standards that elaborate on the principle. While all four principles incorporate culturally relevant evaluation standards, only the *competence and usefulness* principle contains a standard with the term "cultural competencies." This principle describes specific competencies needed to enact cultural competence and states the particular professionals the standards apply to (e.g., commissioners and evaluators). For instance, a section of the standards for the *competence and usefulness* principle states that professional, contextual, and cultural competence involves "both evaluation commissioners and evaluators hav[ing] appropriate professional, contextual and cultural competencies for their roles in evaluation" (ANZEA, 2015, p. 23). Another section states that evaluators need to have "knowledge, abilities, skills, experience and credibility appropriate to the evaluation brief. These include evaluation and methodological expertise, project management skills, and context and cultural knowledge" (p. 23).

While not all professional evaluation associations have a statement on or use the term cultural competence like AEA and ANZEA, a growing number of

evaluator competency guidelines (AAE, 2020; AES, 2013; CES, 2018; EES, 2012) include specific culturally sensitive skills and dispositions an evaluator must demonstrate for quality evaluation practice. To illustrate, in the following sections, I discuss the African Evaluation Guidelines and the Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice.

### *African Association of Evaluation*

In 2002, the African Association of Evaluation (AAE) created the African Evaluation Guidelines (AAE). Since 2002, the AAE has been revised multiple times—first in 2007, second in 2012, and third in 2020. The most recent version of the [AAE \(2020\)](#) includes five key principles: (1) *powerful for Africans*, (2) *technically robust*, (3) *ethically sound*, (4) *Africa-centric, yet open*, and (5) *connected with the world*. Twenty-two implementation principles expand on the five key principles, providing a framework for evaluation practice in and for Africa. Although the [AAE \(2020\)](#) does not include the term cultural competence, the second key principle, *technically robust*, is supported by the implementation principle T6: *Be culturally responsive* (p. 4). This implementation principle includes strategies to implement culturally competent evaluations such as respecting contextual and cultural vulnerabilities, considering culturally-relevant theories and criteria, as well as drawing evaluative conclusions that are culturally credible and inclusive of stakeholder input. Additional key principles (*ethically sound*, *African centric, yet open*, and *connected with the world*) include implementation principles that address culture. For instance, an implementation principle for the *ethically sound* key principle directs evaluators to “include impartial, culturally sensitive dispute resolution mechanisms that safeguard the credibility of the evaluation process and results” (p. 7).

### *Canadian Evaluation Society*

In 2009, the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) crafted the Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice, a set of evaluation competencies including cultural competence, which were subsequently updated in 2018 ([CES, 2018](#)). Like the AEA Evaluator Competencies ([AEA, 2018](#)), the Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice document describes evaluator competencies as organized by five domains: (1) reflective practice, (2) technical practice, (3) situational practice, (4) management practice, and (5) interpersonal practice. The term culture is explicitly mentioned in one domain: *situational practice*. According to the CES document, situational practice competencies “focus on understanding, analyzing, and attending to the many circumstances that make every evaluation unique, including culture, stakeholders, and context” ([CES, 2018](#), p. 6). As with each domain discussed in the CES document, the situational practice domain includes the specific knowledge, skill, and disposition an evaluator must demonstrate to nurture culturally appropriate evaluation practice. For instance, the situational practice domain suggests that the evaluator identify the “rights, interests and needs with respect to the evaluation” and seek to “understand the wide range of variables affecting diversity and responds appropriately” (p. 13).

As noted, cultural competence is characterized as an ethical commitment (AEA, 2011; SenGupta et al., 2004) or stance taken toward culture (AEA, 2011) rather than a competency that can be mastered or achieved. Cultural competence is also described as a systematic form of inquiry (SenGupta et al., 2004). A notable strategy deemed appropriate to implement culturally competent evaluation includes generating knowledge about stakeholders' culture and context (ANZEA, 2015; Botcheva et al., 2009; CES, 2018). Another noteworthy strategy for fostering cultural competence is reflective practice (AEA, 2011; SenGupta et al., 2004; Symonette, 2004). These strategies are deemed imperative to critically engaging one's own cultural perspective, as well as issues of power and privilege related to the evaluation.

Further, this section sheds light on how the conceptualizations of cultural competence evolved. For example, Hanberger (2010) argued that the definition of cultural competence offered by SenGupta et al. (2004) did not sufficiently account for laws that violated stakeholders' human rights. Therefore, Hanberger advocated for the notion of multicultural competence rather than cultural competence. Other terms expanded on the notion of cultural competence by underscoring race and politics (Hopson, 2009), contextual complexities (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009), and the risks and benefits of the evaluation for non-dominant cultural groups (Garaway, 1996). Although definitions vary, as expressed in evaluation literature and professional association statements related to cultural competence, there is general agreement that culture-related competencies reflect the knowledge, practices, and mindsets that enable an evaluator to ethically encounter cultural differences (AEA, 2011; Hanberger, 2010; SenGupta et al., 2004).

The adoption of culture-related competencies by international professional evaluation associations indicates how the discourse on cross-cultural evaluation practice has achieved global standing. The global influence of guidelines and scholarship on cultural competence is significant, as it serves to establish professional norms, which, in turn, impact the preparation of current and aspiring evaluation professionals. Yet, despite the growing attention to culture in evaluation practice, potential barriers to cultivating cultural competence in evaluation practice persist. For example, evaluation guidelines and standards that espouse and promote evaluation as a tool for fiscal accountability position evaluators with less influence to implement evaluation practices that are contextually specific and culturally responsive. This barrier reflects the larger influence of evaluation's foundational purpose, rooted in the need to account for government spending (rather than stakeholders' concerns), thereby making culturally competent evaluation practice more difficult.

## POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO CULTIVATING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EVALUATION

In this section, I explore how evaluation's foundational positivistic orientation and traditional philosophical ideas about knowledge and ethics influence current evaluation practice in ways that can limit cultural competence in evaluation.



## ***The profession's legacy of positivistic methods***

Evaluation as we know it today can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s (Mertens, 2018). In its earlier years, evaluation served as a mechanism to hold programs accountable for the federal funding they received. For instance, in the United States, evaluation grew due to increased mandates to evaluate programs funded by the federal government, most notably programs as a result of the Great Society initiative, the Economic Opportunity Act, and the Manpower Development and Training Act (Alkin & King, 2016). In Europe, evaluation was used to assess the effect of the European Structural Fund and Cohesion Funds (Mertens, 2018). Many evaluations, then, focused on social programs intended to provide services (e.g., career training, health care) to those in need (Dean-Coffey, 2018; Weiss, 1998). Evaluations assessing the effectiveness of these service programs primarily utilized economic analysis techniques such as cost-benefit analysis (Dean-Coffey, 2018; Weiss, 1998). Evaluators also used randomized-control trials (Weiss, 1998), which became a mainstay in evaluation practice and relied on controlling for such things as context, dose, quality of treatment, characteristics of participants (age, sex, ethnicity), and other factors that may influence program effects. As has been noted in the literature, these types of evaluation designs reflect positivistic perspectives about the role of evaluation (accountability) and assumptions about the nature of scientific research generally and the primacy of objectivity specifically (Bhola, 2003).

Early evaluation purposes and designs continue to show up in contemporary evaluation practice. For example, using texts from different international organizations, Rutkowski and Sparks (2014) describe the dominance of positivism in the context of international development evaluation work. These evaluation scholars demonstrate how organizations like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank promote a global accountability agenda for donor and recipient countries through their evaluation guidelines and standards. Rutkowski and Sparks assert that the evaluation guidelines promote positivistic approaches to evaluation (e.g., impact evaluations) that are not appropriate for some international development evaluation contexts. As a result, these guidelines reduce or eschew attention to dimensions of culture in an evaluation and narrowly define quality evaluation practice. In addition, the guidelines further entrench existing power and funding inequities in international contexts. Rutkowski and Sparks argue that the global influence of international organizations and the lack of alignment that often occurs between the accountability agenda of these organizations and specific international contexts are moral concerns. Thus, they contend that as the work of evaluation increasingly involves various international contexts, evaluators working in these contexts will require more reflection on the ethical aspects of evaluation practice.

It is also important to note that generations of evaluators have inherited the legacy of evaluation's early positivistic orientation, mainly through their professional training. Evaluators often take their evaluation training for granted (Patton, 1998); however, they need to interrogate the assumptions that undergird their

received professional knowledge. Doing so is important for cultural competence; that is, unless evaluators develop a capacity to question or examine their received professional knowledge (in addition to their personal biases), they will be unable to successfully conduct cross-cultural evaluations. Although they are discussing how to cultivate cultural competence in the context of social work, [Furlong and Wight \(2011\)](#) make a similar point when they note,

it is not possible to learn to be culturally competent without learning to de-centre one's received discipline-specific and larger cultural knowledge. Moreover, unless the mono-cultural, and socially divisive (but that is another matter), premises that underpin one's discipline can be identified, and then actively reformulated at least to a degree, it follows that the disciplines will continue to pass their pseudo-objective knowledge from one generation of professional to another. (pp. 51–52)

Promising approaches to evaluation that decenter positivistic approaches and value culture in evaluation practice have been adopted in the last 15 years. These include but are not limited to equity-focused evaluation ([Bamberger & Segone, 2011](#); [Dean-Coffey et al., 2014](#)), Indigenous evaluation ([Wehipeihana, 2008](#)), and Latinx Critical Race Theory–informed evaluation ([Guajardo et al., 2020](#)). While these and other culturally responsive evaluation approaches advance important work, the evaluators implementing these approaches are still impacted by the broader sociopolitical context that created the need for these approaches in the first place ([Cloete & Auriacombe, 2019](#)). The point here is that evaluation, including its history, is bound up in larger social discourses and systems, including systems of oppression (i.e., racism and colonialism) ([Pon, 2009](#); [Thomas et al., 2018](#)). Thus, the implementation of evaluation approaches that are responsive to culture does not preclude how the legacy of evaluation and systems of oppression still impact current day-to-day evaluation practice.

### ***Knowledge as a precondition for cultural competence***

As noted earlier, a key strategy for cultivating cultural competence includes the evaluator seeking cultural understanding. For instance, evaluation literature associated with cultural competence in evaluation practice points out the importance of understanding cultural norms and rights ([Hanberger, 2010](#)) and the use of “boundary spanning roles” to cultivate cultural understandings between evaluators and the stakeholders being served by the evaluation ([Chouinard & Cousins, 2009](#), p. 480). In addition, the CES discusses situational practice, which refers to competencies that “focus on understanding, analyzing, and attending to the many circumstances that make every evaluation unique, including culture, stakeholders, and context” ([CES, 2018](#), p. 6). [Thomas et al. \(2018\)](#) make the focus on understanding in evaluation practice clear, when they affirm, “as evaluators, we seek knowledge—that is, knowledge about programs and people in programs” (p. 519). [Thomas et al.](#) also make clear that the knowledge generated in evaluation reflects the interests and values of the evaluators. As a result, while acquiring cultural understandings can be beneficial for developing trusting evaluator–stakeholder

relationships and addressing power differentials, it can also lead to misperceptions and exacerbate power differentials (Chouinard & Cousins, 2009). Furthermore, the emphasis on cultural knowledge as a way to foster cultural competence implies that the knowledge gained about the stakeholder transforms into ethical practices, which, in turn, produces better outcomes for the stakeholders (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010). However, as Ben-Ari and Strier (2010) point out, more knowledge about stakeholders' culture does not guarantee ethical evaluation, nor does it guarantee positive outcomes for stakeholders.

Assumptions about how exchanges of cultural knowledge between the evaluator and stakeholders can transform into ethical actions are based on a traditional philosophical perspective, which views knowledge generation as a method for accessing truth and understanding. To be sure, the word *philosophy* comes from the Ancient Greek word *philosophia*, which means the love of wisdom. Philosophy, then, is concerned with questions related to knowledge, being, and understanding. This concern with knowledge has shaped perspectives on the relationship between knowledge and ethics, encouraging the idea in evaluation that knowledge is a precondition for ethics. It is not surprising, then, that knowledge is assumed as a precondition for culturally competent evaluation practice (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010).

In what follows, I discuss the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995). His philosophical perspective is in stark contrast to traditional philosophy. That is, rather than emphasize the wisdom of knowledge, Levinas advances the *wisdom of love*. His stance posits that ethics precedes knowledge, encouraging more ethical engagement with cultural differences, which I consider useful for further enhancing culturally competent evaluation practice. Admittedly, Levinas's ideas, discussed in the following section, flip the script in terms of how evaluation and cultural competence are currently understood and practiced. Yet his ideas are vital to transform culturally competent evaluation practice into more ethical evaluation practice.

## AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Although a full discussion of Levinas's philosophy is beyond the scope of this work, I describe some of the key philosophical concepts and perspectives central to his ethical stance. Specifically, I discuss his views on concepts such as infinity, totality, and the "Other," which advance approaches to support his ethical stance. These approaches include recognizing the necessity of not-knowing, taking responsibility for the Other, and accepting the relationship with the Other as asymmetrical. To conclude, I discuss how Levinas's ideas on ethically engaging cultural differences can inform cultural competence in evaluation practice.

### *The wisdom of love*

As mentioned earlier, traditional philosophy is motivated by a longing to know or to understand the truth. In contrast, Levinas's philosophical stance aims to

go beyond what can be known or perceived (Levinas, 1987). Like the notion of cultural competence, Levinas's perspective is an ethical stance concerned with relationships, in particular, the self's relationship with the "Other" or other people (Blum, 1983). From Levinas's (1987) perspective, the Other is beyond what the self can conceive. This point is captured by the concept of *infinity*, which refers to the Other being radically different and incapable of being known. Infinity also acknowledges that the worth of the Other is inherent and not a result of the self's assessment of the Other's attributes or value (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010). As Levinas asserts, the value of the Other is based on the "Other's very alterity" (p. 83).

Fundamentally, Levinas's emphasis on the Other as incapable of being fully known is a rejection of *totality*, a notion that dominated traditional philosophy suggesting that what is perceived is all there is to know (Blum, 1983). Levinas (1987) argues that the notion of totality is problematic because it conceptualizes the Other as an object that can be reduced, labeled, consumed, and controlled. The main goal of Levinas's ethical stance, then, involves moving beyond totality to love. From this view, the Other is conceptualized as the "*loved One*" or the "unique one" with infinite differences, defying consumption (p. 108). Being in an ethical relationship with the Other, then, involves realizing that the Other is mysterious and uncontainable. Ultimately, the wisdom of love implies that fully knowing the Other is not possible and therefore can never be the goal.

The following sections discuss three interrelated approaches to cultivate an ethical relationship with the Other based on Levinas's wisdom of love.

### *Recognizing the necessity of not-knowing*

Essential to an ethical relationship with the Other is recognizing the necessity of "not-knowing" (Levinas, 1987, p. 89). Not-knowing implies a mindset that does not carry the expectation of being able to fully know the Other as the Other is always becoming. Because the Other is continuously evolving with a future yet to unfold and discover, the Other has mystifying significance. Being in a relationship with the Other from a perspective of not-knowing, then, includes a type of remoteness from the Other and anticipation for the possibilities the future holds. Ultimately, according to Levinas, a not-knowing stance enables a distant yet respectful relationship with the Other, which is purposeful to render the self open and accessible to new perspectives.

### *Taking responsibility for the Other*

Establishing an ethical relationship with the Other also involves taking responsibility for the Other. In his writings, Levinas makes clear that being responsible for the Other is not based on knowledge, rational decision making, logic, or deliberation (Levinas, 1987). Instead, taking responsibility begins with the Other (Lavoie et al., 2006). It starts with the Other's humanity. Through encountering the Other's humanity, a reassessment of the self occurs. Levinas (1987) describes this reassessment as a "disorientation" (p. 25). It is this disorientation or questioning of the self that is itself responsibility and, thus, ethically significant. As a result of the

reassessment, the view of the self as being of primary concern is disrupted, leading to more sensitive attention to and obligation for the Other. Taking this further, Levinas contends that taking responsibility for the Other is a moral commitment that involves being infinitely responsible for the life of the Other.

### *Accepting the relationship with the Other as asymmetrical*

As a result of accepting responsibility for the Other, the relationship between the self and the Other becomes unequal (Levinas, 1987). This is because encountering the Other's humanity not only compels the self to take responsibility for the Other but also puts into question the self's good intentions. According to Levinas, the wisdom of love drives the questioning of self as naturally good. This questioning of the self's goodwill and intentions "breaks the equilibrium," making the relationship with the Other "asymmetrical" (p. 108). The relationship is asymmetrical because the self focuses more on the well-being of the Other than herself (Lavoie et al., 2006). Doing so produces intense feelings of concern for the Other. Thus, ethical behavior toward the Other is driven by not wanting to hurt the Other. As Levinas argues, it is the recognition of the loved one's humanity and fear of harming them that transforms feelings or intentions into acts of goodwill—not necessarily knowledge.

## **DISCUSSION**

Other service fields such as social work (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010) and nursing (Lavoie et al., 2006) have used Levinas's stance to promote more ethical encounters with their clients. In the following section, I consider how Levinas's position can contribute to more ethical cultural competence in evaluation. Specifically, I discuss the implications of his views for the profession, the evaluator, and the Other.

### ***The profession***

The assumptions that undergird Levinas's philosophy on the wisdom of love stand in direct contrast to the philosophical assumptions that underpin evaluation, including positivist inquiry for fiscal accountability of dominant-cultural-monopolized government spending. To follow the wisdom of love with respect to the evaluation profession, then, means challenging the taken-for-granted beliefs that underpin evaluation practice. In terms of culturally competent evaluation practice specifically, the wisdom of love implies not only selecting culturally appropriate theories and methods—as suggested by culture-related professional evaluation association guidelines and the evaluation literature—but also investigating the "cultural location" of evaluation theories (Kirkhart, 2010) and methods. From this perspective, theories and methods themselves are considered "historically and culturally specific" (Furlong & Wight, 2011). Mignolo (2014) elaborates on this point, stating that the theories and methods of social science are informed by a range of histories, discourses, and interests (i.e., local, national, religious). Given the cultural specificity of theories and methods, they need to be interrogated with

close attention to the historical events and systems of power (i.e., racism, colonialism, sexism, ageism) that shape evaluation practice (AEA, 2020; Pon, 2009).

AEA's most recent document, a statement from the AEA Board of Directors regarding Systemic Racism (2020) is one example of how professional evaluation organizations have started to recognize the historic and contemporary events and systems of power that influence evaluation practice. Given the negative impact of systemic racism on Black and Brown communities in the United States, the statement demands that evaluators use their power as professionals to work against racism by pursuing more humane and equitable evaluation practices. That said, it is acknowledged that statements from professional evaluation associations do not preclude the considerable conversation and controversy within the evaluation community of practice concerning systemic racism, especially in the United States, and other forms of oppression.

### ***The evaluator***

As described previously, notions of cultural competence in the evaluation literature emphasize evaluator self-reflection to examine one's own cultural perspective, assess power dynamics, and make judgments informed by stakeholders' context and culture. While all of these purposes are important, Levinas stresses evaluator self-reflection toward a grander goal—being responsible for the life of the Other. Self-reflection, then, constitutes a continuous disorientation or self-critique that puts into question the evaluator's benevolence. The perpetual questioning of one's intentions is how the evaluator demonstrates responsibility for the life of stakeholders. In short, evaluator self-critique takes "*bad conscience seriously*" (Levinas, 1987, p. 27) and is driven and sustained by the fear of hurting the Other, rather than knowledge.

In addition, characterizations of cultural competence stress an evaluator–stakeholder relationship in which the evaluator honors and considers stakeholders' culture. Levinas goes beyond emphasizing a culturally responsive relationship to demanding an asymmetrical relationship. Here, Levinas calls for an evaluator–stakeholder relationship in which the stakeholders' culture is not only valued but prioritized in the context of evaluation practice.

Furthermore, an asymmetrical evaluator–stakeholder relationship underscores the inaccessibility of the Other. This ethical perspective is most evidenced in Levinas's characterization of not-knowing, which recognizes the infinite differences of the Other and promotes a distant yet respectful relationship. In doing so, not-knowing challenges the common use of knowledge as a form of control and evaluation as a tool that governments use to achieve such knowledge. Moreover, the practice of not-knowing is ethically significant because it infers that evaluators should respect the Other's refusal to be known—an aspect of difference not sufficiently taken up in previously described notions of cultural competence (AEA, 2011; Botcheva et al., 2009; SenGupta et al., 2004). It is in these ways that Levinas's perspective stands in direct contrast to the imperative of knowing advanced in the positivist foundations of evaluation training and practice, and is more ethically

radical than present notions of cultural competence expressed in professional association guidelines and scholarly literature associated with culturally competent evaluation.

An example of an evaluation approach moving toward a more radical and ethical orientation is the radical inquiry approach (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). This approach aims to facilitate empathy and humanization toward a more equitable and liberatory evaluation practice.

### **The Other**

To signal the Other's infinite differences, Levinas conceptualizes the Other as the "loved one." This conceptualization of the Other moves beyond the characterization of the Other as solely different from the evaluator as commonly depicted in the stakeholder–evaluator binary. This positioning of the Other also implies that no matter how much cultural content an evaluator acquires about a cultural group, that cultural group always exists beyond the evaluator's understanding of them (Blum, 1983).

### **CONCLUSION**

Levinas's emphasis on ethics preceding knowledge alerts us, as evaluators, to the tendency of rushing to understand and be responsive to stakeholders, which can lead to unsuccessful cross-cultural evaluation. Levinas's perspective on ethics also points out that learning cultural content does not guarantee culturally competent evaluation practices. Indeed, Levinas's perspective connects the desire for knowledge to an evaluator's intentions, which are not assumed to be good. Thus, the evaluator's goodwill is always put into question. Promising entry points to facilitate questioning the evaluator's benevolence include building critical reflection on evaluation's foundational commitments (accountability, objectivity) into evaluation training. Another possible entry point includes professional associations creating spaces for self-questioning intention.

Although Levinas's perspective is more radical than contemporary culture-related competencies and literature associated with cultural competence, professional associations, evaluators, and scholars concerned with engaging cultural differences in evaluation practice would do well to consider his philosophical stance. If taken seriously, Levinas's stance could not only move culturally competent evaluation toward more ethical engagement with cultural differences but also restore evaluation's moral commitment (Schwandt, 2015).

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