

Jill Anne Chouinard & Fiona Cram. (2020). *Culturally responsive approaches to evaluation: Empirical implications for theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Paperback, 210 pages. (ISBN 978-1-5063-6853-5)

Reviewed by Sandra Sellick

The publication of *Culturally Responsive Approaches to Evaluation: Empirical Implications for Theory and Practice* was a harbinger of North American conversations that were to dominate the news in the months that followed. Truths of inequality, social injustice, and racism were laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic (Farquharson & Thornton, 2020; Funnell et al., 2020). Deep cultural division and political polarity were exposed by the 2020 election cycle in the United States (French, 2020; YWBoston, 2021). Renewed calls for truth and reconciliation resounded in Canada when ground-penetrating radar on the lands of former residential schools confirmed the tragic stories that generations of families have told of children who went missing from schools constructed to eradicate their culture and assimilate them into a colonial one (Hopper, 2021; Joseph, 2018).

Chouinard and Cram have identified five purposes for their book:

- to explore what it means to design and conduct culturally responsive evaluations in changing cultural and political landscapes;
- to address knowledge gaps in how to conduct culturally responsive approaches to evaluation in underserved, underrepresented, colonized, and/or marginalized communities;
- to conduct a systematic review of empirical studies in Indigenous, Western, and international development domains;
- to critically examine distinctions in the culturally responsive approaches to evaluation in the three domains; and
- to challenge criticism of the validity of culturally responsive methodologies. (pp. 15–16)

The book is elegantly designed and deceptively simple, with introductory and concluding chapters framing six chapters in which the authors present a conceptual framework and methodology for their research, draw knowledge from the culturally responsive features of 81 studies of evaluations in the three domains, and discuss the conceptual framework across nine dimensions of cultural practice (i.e., epistemological, ecological, methodological, political, personal, relational, institutional, axiological, and ontological).

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Such elegance and simplicity are deceptive. As the fourth volume in Sage's five-volume *Evaluation in Practice* series, the book was expressly "designed to offer readers the opportunity to delve into a specific evaluation issue or topic with focus, depth, and complexity" (Sage, n.d.), and it does. The series is intended for use by academic faculty as supplementary reading in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses and also for use by practitioners as "routes into the evaluation literature on theoretical, technical, and practice issues" (Sage, n.d.).

Foundational to the book are definitions of culture and cultural responsiveness. Chouinard and Cram trace a history of definitions of culture before offering their own definition as "a socially, politically, and historically vibrant and embedded construct, implicating and entwining our epistemological and ontological questions in the social, political, and cultural assumptions norms, and values that govern our society" (pp. 20, 76). They define cultural responsiveness as "an interdisciplinary approach to evaluation informed and influenced by multiple critical discourses and liberatory philosophies, defined by a bricolage of emergent critical representations and constructions played out within dynamic, shifting, and evolving contexts of practice" (p. 13). They cite Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) in grounding culturally responsive practice in an "epistemology of complexity," with theory and practice informed by "indigenous epistemologies, critical theoretical approaches (e.g., postmodernism, critical geography, critical ethnography, critical race theories), postcolonialism, participatory research, feminist studies, qualitative approaches, cultural sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology" (p. 13).

Chouinard and Cram assert that "every evaluation context is unique in its historical, social, political, and cultural configuration. There is no blueprint for cultural responsiveness" (p. 135). In arguing this tenet, they provide evidence to reveal the current landscape of culturally responsive approaches for evaluators. Although some evaluation practitioners may find this book overly theoretical, Table 2.1 presents a practical framework of key questions for guiding practice with methodological implications. (pp. 26–30).

As an introduction to the literature on culturally responsive approaches to evaluation, this book is superb, with a reference list including 412 sources. Some of the more prominent authors cited include Peter Dahler-Larsen, Stuart Hall, Stafford Hood, Rodney K. Hopson, Karen Eileen Kirkhart, Donna M. Mertens, Thomas A. Schwandt, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Among the most unique features of the book are the appendices cataloguing the studies on which Chouinard and Cram based their research. All 81 empirical studies report a culturally responsive approach to evaluation published between 2000 and 2017. They include 32 drawn from Indigenous contexts, 24 set in the Western context, and 25 situated in the context of international development. Together, they form a valuable tool for use by evaluators and researchers in charting future projects.

What this book offers evaluators aligns well with the *CES Guidance for Ethical Evaluation Practice* (CES, 2020), professional competencies (CES, 2018), and standards (CES, n.d. b; Yarbrough et al., 2011) foundational to the Canadian Evaluation Society's credentialed evaluator designation (CES, n.d. a). First, three

core professional values on which ethics guidance is positioned are “(a) rights and well-being of persons and peoples; (b) truth-seeking, honesty, and transparency; and (c) responsibility to stakeholders and society” (CES, 2020).¹ Second, the seven competencies of situational practice focus on “understanding, analyzing, and attending to the many circumstances that make every evaluation unique, including culture, stakeholders, and context” (CES, 2018). Third, cultural responsiveness is implicit in evaluation standards. This is clearest in the feasibility (F) and propriety (P) standards: F3 Contextual Viability (Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups) and P2 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation (Evaluations should be responsive to stakeholders and their communities) (CES, n.d. b).

Chouinard and Cram conclude their work with a call to action:

Cultural responsiveness in evaluation requires kinetic and creative thinking, a shift away from the methodological allure (and safety?) of the Western canon. We need to listen to community voices and perspectives and have the courage to choose a pathway that may very well take us beyond what we know and understand and that may require us to cross a border and enter into territory that is more familiar to those with whom we work. The courage we need to do this comes from our knowing that we will not be alone on this journey since it will be fueled by growing trust relationships and by the mutual sharing of knowledge, skills, and expertise. In this sense, we need to share control of the “steering wheel” and open ourselves to the enlightenment that a be gained from others’ ways of being and knowing. (p. 138)

This book provides inspiration for the journey.

NOTE

- 1 The reviewer acknowledges that the term *stakeholder* holds culturally sensitive connotations, and controversy over its use is another sign of the fast-moving waters of the current dialogue on culturally responsive evaluation (MacDonald & McLees, 2021).

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