Making Research and Evaluation our Own: Ethical implications for Strengthening the Foundations for Africa-rooted and Africa-led Inquiry

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Abstract: The transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2005; in press) provides a framework of belief systems that directly engage members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice. This framework is offered as a way of exploring the philosophical assumptions and methodological decisions for ethical research in a diverse globalizing world.

Introduction
Gertrude Stein once wrote: “Rose is a rose is a rose.” Some mistakenly revise the original text to read: “A rose is a rose is a rose.” The difference is important. Saying “Rose is a rose is a rose” was a comment on an individual who Stein characterized by the use of the rose as metaphor. However, saying a rose is a rose is like saying an African is an African is an African. Such a statement may seem a bit absurd when stated so bluntly, but we argue that imposition of a framework for research and evaluative studies that does not look at the complexities of the African values and experiences is somewhat like saying that a rose is a rose is a rose, except that it has more serious implications in terms of social justice and human rights.

This paper presents the argument that, starting from a position of prioritizing, valuing has the potential to enhance the accuracy of results as well as the feasibility of making use of the results for social change. It discusses research as a basic belief system that puts the values of human rights and social justice at the forefront, thus placing priority on ethical implications of research and evaluation that is undertaken in Africa. It also addresses issues of validity, logistics, and costs of research and evaluation in relation to a social justice agenda.

Researchers and evaluators enter each context with a set of preconceived assumptions that guide their decisions about what variables are important to consider and how and from whom the data will be collected. In the context of donor agencies and Africa, many of the people the programs are intended to serve are those who have been pushed to the margins on the basis of race/ethnicity, language, native/immigrant status, education level, disability, socioeconomic status, and other contextually dependent variables. Issues of discrimination and oppression are commonly associated with those characteristics that are often connected with the focus of donor
agencies’ programs and policies. For researchers and evaluators who are aware of the historical and political factors that surround program participants, the need to consider power issues associated with greater privilege in society is apparent. We explore the issue of power later in the context of exploring the ontological assumptions that characterize the nature of reality and societal privileges associated with the construction of that reality.

The African context demands attention in its own right in its full array of complexity. We offer the use of a transformative lens to enable researchers and evaluators to explicitly address issues of human rights and social justice in this context with a legacy of intransigent social, educational, health, economic, civil, and environmental conditions that violate those rights on a daily basis. To that end, we offer the use of the transformative paradigm with its accompanying philosophical assumptions as a way of examining the underlying beliefs that donor agencies and researchers and evaluators can use in the African context. This paradigm suggests that the role of the inquirer is as a partner working with communities for social change.

The transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2005; in press) provides a framework of belief systems that directly engage members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice (See Figure 1 and Table 1). Being firmly rooted in the human rights agenda, ethical implications are derived from the conscious inclusion of a broad range of people who are generally excluded from the mainstream in society. It strives to extend the meaning of traditional ethical concepts to more directly reflect ethical considerations in culturally complex communities. Power issues in terms of determining the focus, planning, implementation, and use of research and evaluation studies are also examined from a transformative stance based on the axiological assumption related to respect for communities that have been pushed to the margins and the recognition of the resilience that rests within community members.
Table 1: Basic beliefs of the Transformative Paradigm (Mertens, 2005; 2007; forthcoming)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Explanations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Axiology: assumptions about ethics</td>
<td>Ethical considerations include respect for cultural norms of interaction; beneficence is defined in terms of the promotion of human rights and increase in social justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontology: assumptions about the nature of reality</td>
<td>Rejects cultural relativism; recognizes perceived realities shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and disability values and consequences of privilege in determination of accepted version of reality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epistemology: assumptions about the nature of the relationship between</td>
<td>Interactive link between evaluator and stakeholders; knowledge is socially and historically situated; power and privilege are explicitly address; development of a trusting relationship is critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>the evaluator and the stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Methodology: assumptions about appropriate methods of systematic</td>
<td>Inclusion of qualitative (dialogic) is critical; quantitative and mixed methods can be used; contextual and historic factors are acknowledged, especially as they relate to oppression</td>
</tr>
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<td>inquiry</td>
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The axiological assumption of the transformative paradigm leads to asking questions such as: On what basis do I define ethical theory and practice in research and evaluation? What is considered ethical or moral behavior? The axiological assumption guides the conceptualization of the other basic beliefs associated with a paradigm.

Helen Simons (2006) in the *Handbook of Evaluation* identifies two theories of ethics that are commensurate with the transformative axiological assumption. Rights-based theories justify their actions on the basis that every person must be treated with dignity and respect and that the avoidance of harm must be the primary principle. The social justice theory of ethics takes the rights-based theory to a group or societal level (House, 1993), leading to an awareness of the need to redress inequalities by giving precedence, or at least equal weight, to the voices of the least advantaged groups in society. The implicit goal of inclusion of those who may not have sufficient power for accurate representation of their viewpoints, but also to empower the less advantaged in terms of being able to take an active agent role in social change.

The revision of the American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles (2004) provides one example of how the use of a different lens to view this code of ethics yields different issues. For example, the original version contained five categories of principles: Systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honest, respect for people, and responsibilities for general and public welfare. This statement was added to the 2004 version of the Guiding Principles under the Competency category:

“To ensure recognition, accurate interpretation and respect for diversity, evaluators should ensure that the members of the evaluation team collectively demonstrate cultural competence. Cultural competence would be reflected in evaluators seeking awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions, their understanding of the worldviews of culturally-different participants and stakeholders in the evaluation, and the use of appropriate evaluation strategies and skills in working with culturally different groups. Diversity may be in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socio-economics, or other factors pertinent to the evaluation context.”

The establishment of a causal link between the transformative paradigm and this change in language is not possible. Nevertheless, this change in language arose because evaluators who work in a spirit compatible with the transformative paradigm provided feedback to the association. Hence, this change in language
is one example of what happens at the borders and crossroads of evaluation paradigms.

Such revisions of professional association codes can also be found in other organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Sociological Association (ASA), American Anthropological Association (AAA), and the United Nations (UN). Researcher guidelines are also available from indigenous communities that provide insights into ethical grounding of research.

People with disabilities and women in Africa have not been aware of their rights and may not have complete knowledge of the purpose of the study, who will receive the results, and the intended use of the results. They may not know that they have the right to say “no” if they do not want to participate, or they may feel coerced by organizations who receive funds for getting participants for the study. This underlines the importance of educating members of such organizations as well as the intended study participants on the meaning of informed consent and the right of refusal.

Following from the axiological assumption, the ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm holds that reality is socially constructed. However, it does so with a conscious awareness that certain individuals occupy a position of greater power and that individuals with other characteristics may be associated with a higher likelihood of exclusion from decisions about the definition of the evaluation focus, questions, and other methodological aspects of the inquiry. The transformative paradigm’s ontological assumption poses these questions: How is reality defined? By whom? Whose reality is given privilege? What are the social justice implications of accepting reality that has not been subjected to a critical analysis based on power differentials? How can methods be adapted for diverse groups to shed additional light on the capture and interpretation of reality?

When Wilson (2005) studied donor agencies’ views of deaf people in an international development context, she discovered that no deaf people were in place to provide guidance to the donors in any of the agencies that provided funds for programs designed to serve them. Hence, program donors viewed deaf people as those in need of a paternalistic style of helping or in the case of religious institutions, in need of having their souls saved. She worked to provide feedback from the participants in her study to the donor agencies to bring the voices of deaf people into the decision making process. When Chilisa (2005) worked with a European university on HIV/AIDS prevention in Botswana, she found that a Western definition of the problem and the English language were used in the program. The African way of knowing about AIDS and the languages used by the most vulnerable groups were ignored, with the consequences of a continued spiraling of infection and death.
Researchers and evaluators should never avoid the voices of the concerned benefactors of the program. The realities of persons with disabilities, women and other marginalized people should always form the major focus of any inquiry process, including planning, analysis and dissemination. In most programs, the objectives of the research or evaluation are set to assess the effectiveness, impact and relevance or any changes or problems that result from the program. These reports are used to draw conclusions regarding the current and future programs. They form the reality that will be used to judge the program’s strengths, weaknesses, and benefits. Since the objectives of the researchers or evaluators are set by the funding agencies, there is a question as to what extent the reality gathered at the end of the project is indeed a replica of the participants. Their realities are created from their experiences, a reflection of their situation and the actions taken by themselves or others on various issues affecting them. It is thus important for the researchers and evaluators to be conversant with not only the African languages and culture but also specific issues that form the agenda of the concerned groups, for example, women or people with disabilities in Africa. This can only be achieved through prior research in partnership with the impacted community in its full diversity.

Language and power issues must be given serious attention. Should the researchers or evaluators be competent in the local languages? Should programs be provided in many local languages? In the hypothetically dominant English language? What if those most likely to be harmed from an ineffective program are those least likely to know English? What are the implications of working through an interpreter in terms of accuracy of information and resources needed to support research or evaluation work? Can funds be allocated for the purpose of paying interpreters to translate when the focus of the study is to be determined by a partnership?

One of the major principles underlying transformative research and evaluation is the belief in the strength that is often overlooked in communities that are rising to the challenge of addressing seemingly intransigent problems. When theoretical perspectives such as resilience theory, positive psychology, and critical race theory are used to frame a study, then a deliberate and conscious design can reveal the positive aspects, resilience, and acts of resistance needed for social change. Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett (2001) argue that research and evaluation have largely failed as an instrument for advancing social-organizational transformation because they maintain a problem-oriented view, rather than focusing on the strengths of a community. Historically, research and evaluation have had a deficit-based orientation, such that the “problem” was derived from deficits found in the people designed to be helped by the program. They propose turning away from such a deficit-based view and looking instead at what is positive. The basis for social change is seen as emanating...
from an unconditional positive question that reaffirms the life-giving and life-sustaining aspects of organizational existence.

The epistemological assumption illuminates the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the researcher/evaluator and the participants. Questions arise from this such as: If I am to really know if something is real, how do I need to relate to the people from whom I am collecting data? Should I be close to the participants so I can really understand their experiences, or should I maintain distance between myself and the participants, based on the belief that distance brings objectivity? The transformative epistemological assumption reflects the need to be cognizant of cultural diversity within the community and that this is established by building a trusting relationship between the researcher or evaluator and the participants. This is premised upon understanding one’s own self, as well as understanding one’s self in relation to others.

In some situations, knowledge is provided by those in power for the minority. This knowledge may not be the same as that held by the minority. Bearing in mind that some of these minorities may not be represented nor do they participate in the policy making, the researcher or evaluator is faced with a situation of deciding which knowledge to receive. It is even more difficult if contracts were entered between the donor agencies and those in power about the program. For transformative purposes the evaluator has to resolve the source of knowledge on which to build the reality. This raises the question how can the political implications be ethically addressed?

Finally, methodologically, the transformative paradigm leads us to reframe not only the understanding of our world views, but also to understand that subsequent methodological decisions need to be reframed as well. The transformative model of research and evaluation is situated in the dynamic hands of community participation. This cyclical model allows for community participation in the inquiry process at all levels. A central element is the revisiting of program processes and outcomes so that modifications can be made and implemented to better match the community’s needs. The challenges that donor agencies, service providers and evaluators face in Africa suggest that basing practice and policies on a social justice theory of ethics will allow the community to redress inequalities by given precedence, or at least equal weight, to the voice of the least advantaged groups in society, who may not have sufficient power for accurate representation amongst the stakeholder groups.

Experts (Banjerec et al, 2006) who reviewed evaluation of programs for the World Bank from 1998 to 2005 warned that the Bank should avoid taking an advocacy position for programs where data are unavailable to justify such advocacy. We agree with this bit of insight – advocacy without data is a dangerous game. However, the experts then recommended that the Bank make
more use of randomized experiments in those cases where they are possible, for example, for many projects in the social sector.

The American Evaluation Association (2003) takes the position that there is not one right way to evaluate the effectiveness of a program. In response to US Department of Education's (USDOE) requirement for the scientific method as specified in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the American Evaluation Association (AEA) stated, “While we agree with the intent of ensuring that federally sponsored programs be “evaluated using scientifically based research to determine the effectiveness of a project intervention,” we do not agree that “evaluation methods using an experimental design are best for determining project effectiveness.”

AEA is joined by other organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) in providing commentary on NCLB. The NEA cautioned that we need to use an approach other than the scientific method to demonstrate effectiveness of programs. Their position specifically states, (1) the evaluation approach used be appropriate for the problem or question the program itself seeks to address; (2) that the evaluation definition and set of priorities used are not so narrow that they effectively preclude the funding of worthwhile programs; and (3) that the Department continue to recognize the importance of third party, independent evaluators.

In some countries data of some groups will be missing since they have not been a subject of interest, for example persons with disabilities. In most African countries many agencies and governments have noted the lack of data on how many people they are serving and the nature of the marginalized community members needs. There is limited or no research conducted about people with disabilities in most countries making data scarce or outdated. For example the last statistics on population census for people with disabilities in Kenya was in 1989 which showed an estimated 0.7 per cent of the total population (estimated at 21.4 million in 1989) was disabled. The population has changed since then. The current population of Kenya is about 34,707,817 though there is no information as it regards to population increase of those with disabilities since 1989.

The axiological and methodological assumptions together force the question: How can Africans be included in a way that is respectful of their culture and language? In methodological terms, sampling needs to be reframed to reveal the dangers of the myth of homogeneity, to understand which dimensions of diversity are important in a specific context, to avoid additional damage to populations by using labels such as “at risk” that can be demeaning and self-defeating, and to recognize the barriers that exist to being part of a group whose data can contribute to a more ethical and accurate evaluation. Barriers are contextually based, but can include differences in language, access to
transportation and child care, and meeting times that may not conform to the non-mainstream work schedule. The transformative paradigm also leads us to reframe data collection decisions to be more inclined to use mixed methods, and to be consciously aware of the benefits of involving community members in the data collection decisions, the appropriateness of methods with a depth of understanding of the cultural issues involved, the building of trust to obtain valid data, the modifications that may be necessary to collect valid data from various groups, and the need to tie the data collected to social action. These data collection decisions are complex and require an awareness of the cultural values and practices in the specific population of interest.

**Validity**

Gavena and Cornwall (2001) argue for the need to evolve new concepts of validity set in the context of participatory research, but with relevance for research and evaluation in culturally complex communities. In participatory research, one measures the quality of participation, as well as the quality of knowledge. “This implies a new understanding of participatory ethical concerns regarding such things as confidentiality and protection of research subjects, to ask questions about who participates in and benefits from research processes, how information is used and by whom, and how the process transforms or supports power relations. How to evolve such quality standards, and how to use them to hold differing actors and institutions to account, represents one of the most important challenges facing participatory research today.” (p. 80)

Chilisa (2005) furthers the conversation about the need for Eurocentric epistemologies, especially the post-positivist ones, to honor their cherished value of multiple realities and be able to extend it to Africa. For instance, whose validity is privileged, where there are multiple realities? “If validity is achieved through triangulation, what is triangulated? In countries where the written text was produced by the First World researchers, how much of it is validating invalidity and perpetuating stereotypes about the ‘other?’” (p. 678). Ethics in research and evaluation should include creating space for other knowledge systems through the use of local knowledge as archival sources to identify research and evaluation problems and to legitimize findings. The concept of validity enters the axiological arena as a critical dimension in the pursuit of ethical evaluation practice. To establish the validity through a cultural lens, evaluators need to address the cultural diversity through appreciation, awareness, respect, and engagement. Kirkhart (2005) explains the concept of multicultural validity as “the authenticity of understandings across multiple, intersecting cultural contexts” (p. 22), hence the importance of this dimension of validity in evaluation that involves evaluators’ appreciation.
and understanding of culture. Evaluators' embedded biases toward culturally diversity threaten validity. Validity is enhanced by cultural awareness.

Resources
Of course, the pragmatic question "how can the resources be found to support an ethically appropriate inclusion strategy?" needs to be answered. The axiological focus on the strengths of the community provides one avenue to address this issue through an exploration of options for partnership and community involvement. The staff may be able to recommend individuals who are leaders in the community. The researchers or evaluators can also speak to members of the community to identify civic organizations, customs, and traditions that are associated with the communities. This may be churches, adult education centers, tribal centers, or social clubs. The researcher/evaluator can then work through this social network to determine who needs to be included in discussions of the study's focus and approach.

What is the "right" way to collect data within this cultural milieu? Are individual or group interviews better or even possible? Is there a local university that can provide language support and will funds be allocated to that purpose? Is it possible to combine funds from a donor agency and another source such as a foundation, church or civic organization to support these efforts? It is critically important to understand which dimensions of diversity have relevance in any situation. A leader in the community might be able to identify the characteristics of importance in a particular context. What are the issues that might arise in terms of diversity? Would there be different communication needs amongst these participants? What subgroups might provide ideas for improvements or might be placed at greater risk by failure of a program to meet their needs? Who has been excluded from the program? What are the reasons for exclusion? How can the program be modified to address the community needs more fully?

Costs
Resources certainly have an impact on decisions as to what is or is not feasible in an evaluation. We may ask ourselves: How feasible is it to do the extra work required to conduct this research or evaluation study within the transformative paradigm? Is it sufficient to acknowledge the limitations and communicate the potential lack of representation of specific groups to the service providers and funding agencies? What can be done to address the integrity, accuracy, and usefulness of research or evaluation findings? What are the risks involved in allowed discrimination, oppression, and differentials in access to power to continue unexamined? What do we gain by inclusion of indigenous voices?
References


