

## Repositioning Validity<sup>1</sup>

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The premise of my panel contribution is that validity is the mechanism through which we can make culture a central concern in assessment and evaluation. Broadening what we understand as legitimate validity arguments will create space to bring new epistemologies, methods, theories, and perspectives to the table. As we know from the theme of this conference<sup>2</sup>, context is critical, so I'll begin with a bit of context on how I came to the position that I will discuss here.

In 1994, I served as President of the American Evaluation Association. Faced with the task of selecting a conference theme on which I would also deliver a Presidential Address, I dug into my intellectual roots in social work and community psychology and my working class personal roots and chose Evaluation and Social Justice. As I worked with the topic, and its true scope came into focus, I realized that one could only hope to offer a partial perspective. But, wanting to use my window of influence wisely, I wanted it to be something significant that would stimulate dialog and even stir debate. I chose to engage the privileged and contested territory of validity. Historically, this was a period when Cronbach and Messick were both still living, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*<sup>3</sup> were under revision, early ideas of Culturally Responsive Evaluation were being framed and named, and polarizing debates between qualitative and quantitative paradigms of inquiry were commonplace.

I entered this project by (1) reflecting on the cultural location of traditional majority definitions of validity (inclusive of both measurement and design), and (2) exploring understandings of validity embedded in standpoints or perspectives of specificity—feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory and later disability studies, aging studies and Indigenous epistemology. In my early work on validity, I saw my task as moving culture to the center of validity arguments. I now understand it as centering validity arguments in culture. To be clear, I am using an inclusive definition of culture, which I understand to span multiple, intersecting identifications at individual and collective levels. The salience of identifications can be fluid and context-dependent, and ideographic (personal) meaning must always be considered apart from nomothetic (normative) meaning (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeier, &

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation was one-half of an invited plenary panel, Perspectives on Repositioning Culture in Evaluation and Assessment, presented at the CREA Inaugural Conference, April 21-23, 2013, Chicago, IL.

<sup>2</sup> The theme of the inaugural CREA conference was Repositioning Culture in Evaluation and Assessment.

<sup>3</sup> The revised edition of *Standards for educational and psychological testing* appeared in 1999 (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999).

Zenk, 1994). Moreover, power is attached to cultural identifications such that culture cannot be read as neutral. It is infused with privilege and discrimination. I have used the term **multicultural validity** to refer to the accuracy and trustworthiness of understandings and actions across multiple, intersecting dimensions of cultural difference (Kirkhart, 1995), but I am also skeptical of attaching modifiers to validity. As Messick, I believe that there is one unified validity but with multiple means of argument and validation.

Today, I would like to briefly review the evolution of validity repositioned in culture, and then share some newer work that translates validity theory into concepts central to good practice, presented as a checklist in the tradition of Scriven's Key Evaluation Checklist (KEC) (Scriven, 1991, 2013).

To free ourselves from epistemological racism<sup>4</sup> and other dimensions of culturally-connected bias, we must repurpose, reposition and reconstruct cornerstones of our methodology to provide space for evaluation and assessment to embrace cultural dimensions. Validity is one such cornerstone. It is a construct of legitimation that occupies a position of privilege. It is also particularly relevant to this gathering, because it has roots in both assessment and evaluation, so conversations from each tradition can inform our current reflections.

Within both intellectual traditions and professional applications of validity, there remains a tension between narrowness and breadth. Validity is contested space and the center of vibrant debates.

My conceptualization of multicultural validity rests on an arguments-based approach in which justifications supporting confidence in the accuracy of understandings and actions are countered by opposing arguments (threats) that undermine such confidence. Originally three justifications were proposed: methodological, interpersonal, and consequential (Kirkhart, 1995). These were expanded to four, adding experiential justifications following Stanfield's 1998 AEA plenary address (Stanfield, 1999) and then to five as my work moved more deeply into theory (Kirkhart, 2005). Over the past few years, it has been revised incrementally, thanks in large part to my collaborations with Joan LaFrance and Richard Nichols (see, for example, LaFrance, Nichols & Kirkhart, 2012) to arrive at Figure 1.<sup>5</sup> Validity is depicted as centered in culture, context and values, surrounded by five perspectives that each direct

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<sup>4</sup> Scheurich & Young (1997) define epistemological racism as follows: "Epistemological racism means that our current range of research epistemologies—positivism to postmodernisms/poststructuralisms—arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race, that these epistemologies logically reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures), and that this has negative results for people of color in general and scholars of color in particular." (p. 8)

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Kelly D. Lane, MSW, Syracuse, NY for converting my doodle into this attractive graphic.

attention to a different type of evidence that may support (justify) or undermine (threaten) validity. The slides that follow briefly illustrate countervailing arguments anchored in each perspective and lay the theoretical foundation for the second piece I want to share with you today. My intention is to move fairly quickly through the theory slides to give you an overview of the origins of the key concepts, then revisit nine core elements, configured as a conceptual checklist.

**Methodological justifications** of multicultural validity direct attention to the choices of epistemology and method (design, tools and procedures). Here, arguments of validity are tied to the design choices and implementation strategies of a study. Examples here include familiar concerns such as sampling, framing questions, and validating measurement tools. **Methodological threats** to validity reside in choices of framework, method and procedures that are not responsive to context, expanding the traditional lists of validity threats to include construct invalidity of cultural variables (e.g., inappropriate use of race as a proxy variable), language non-equivalence, or imposition of a dominant epistemology on Indigenous values. **Experiential justifications** argue validity from the perspective of the life experiences of program participants or other stakeholders. When experience is reflected upon and incorporated in designing a study and interpreting the subsequent data, validity is supported. For example, validity is strengthened when local citizens or program participants contribute their wisdom to the evaluation process, including interpreting data from the realities of the people they represent. Evaluators' reflecting on their own cultural location and assumptions also supports experience-based arguments of validity. When evaluation is disconnected from cultural location and experience is excluded or devalued, validity is threatened. Examples of **Experiential threats** include invalidation, minimization, or exclusion of lived experience, cultural ignorance or misinformation, and lack of awareness of one's own cultural location as an evaluator and citizen. **Relational justifications** focus on relationships among evaluation participants and places. Validity is supported by relationships of trust and respect. These include relations to place as well as to people. Respecting local norms and authority, establishing meaningful roles and collaborations, and taking time to build relationships all support validity from this perspective. **Relational threats** are behaviors and attitudes that create barriers to honesty and create atmospheres of mistrust. These might include entering a community or an organization inappropriately, disrespecting preferred strategies of communication or lines of authority, and rushing the evaluation agenda. Invoking **theoretical justifications** of multicultural validity leads to scrutiny of theoretical foundations. When theory—be it evaluation theory, program theory, social science theory, measurement theory—is congruent with cultural context, validity is strengthened. **Threats** arise when theoretical perspectives are imposed on cultural contexts for which they are poorly suited. This is particularly true of majority

perspectives imposed uncritically on culturally-specific settings or concerns. Culturally-connected bias may enter through basic social science research or through the translation of research into program applications. **Consequential justifications** examine the impacts or sequelae of evaluation to support validity claims. When evaluation promotes equity and social justice, when it returns value to the community, and when histories of colonization and exclusion are addressed, validity is supported. Evaluation consequences can hold a mirror up to our prior understandings, helping us reflect on their validity. When consequences are ignored or disregarded, validity is **threatened** by the absence of potentially valuable impact information. Ignoring consequences short-circuits metaevaluation, opening the door to the possibility of unrecognized (and unintended) negative consequences such as oppression, exploitation or disempowerment flowing from the evaluation.

As Figure 1 depicts, validity arguments employ multiple justifications, and these justifications interact and build upon (or oppose) one another; they are not independent. Threats and justifications combine in a sort of force field analysis that produces an overall determination of validity.

#### **Working Toward Multicultural Validity: A Culture Checklist<sup>6</sup>.**

This framework of multicultural validity is particularly useful for analyzing validity arguments and deconstructing the bases on which validity is justified. Like many theoretical frameworks, it may be cumbersome to apply in daily practice where the tasks are more pragmatic than analytic. A device is needed to make the ideas accessible and useful without the detailed theoretical analysis. **A Culture Checklist**, in the spirit of Scriven's Key Evaluation Checklist, is proposed as such a device (See Table 1).

A Culture Checklist emulates the succinct simplicity of the 1991 edition of the KEC (Scriven, 1991). The 1991 version is taken as the "model" format, because it reflects core considerations while remaining more accessible than subsequent elaborations. My emphasis is on distilling the justifications of multicultural validity into an accessible list of key considerations that will sharpen evaluators' attention to and appreciation of culture.

A Culture Checklist seeks to support multicultural validity by suggesting a manageable number of core concepts that evaluators should keep checking on as they move through the procedural steps of evaluation. Like the elements of the KEC, these are proposed as necessary considerations (in Scriven's

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this is deliberately titled *A Culture Checklist*, not *The Culture Checklist*. A singular, authoritative stance is antithetical to the intent of this effort. Like the Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation (AEA, 2011), this checklist was grounded in primarily U.S. experience and scholarship, so the same caveat applies.

words, not *desiderata* but “*necessitata*—items that *must* be checked in order to avoid invalidity in the evaluation” 1991, p. 204); however, this is neither an exhaustive or definitive list. The nine elements proposed are grounded in multicultural validity and hold promise to improve our attention to culture in the practice of assessment and evaluation. The checklist is not procedurally specific; it is neither a stepwise cookbook nor a procedural “toolbox” (Katrina Bledsoe, personal communication, April 22, 2013). It is not a “do’s-and-taboos” checklist (Symonette, 2004, p. 101). Rather, it directs evaluators to *consider these things* and let their work reflect these understandings. For any given evaluation, a contextually-specific list may also be required. The checklist is not sequential; elements may be considered in any order.

**History.** History is specific to the context of each evaluation. It includes the local history of the evaluand, and of evaluation in relation to this evaluand. It includes both the histories of individuals and of the cultures with which they identify. Historical knowledge of cultural traditions and heritage surround current understandings of the evaluand. It is especially important to understand the histories of migration and of oppression that may have been experienced (intersecting Power, discussed below) as well as resilience and strength that have been demonstrated. Histories of the community, tribe, neighborhood or organization that holds the evaluand and the story of how the evaluand came into existence are particularly relevant context pieces in appreciating cultures. When and how did the evaluand come into existence and how has it evolved and changed? How have cultural identifications evolved over time? History informs relationship, and understanding history from more than a single perspective supports plasticity. Placing both the evaluand and the evaluation in historical context is rooted in experiential and relational justifications of validity.

**Location.** This element refers to the where the evaluand and evaluation are situated, geographically and culturally. As highlighted previously, culture should be considered as plural, not singular. An individual or an institution may simultaneously identify with or be defined by many cultural dimensions—e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, social class, nationhood, immigration status. The salience of each dimension shifts with events and experience. Location both complicates and resists classification. When location intersects power, some of these identifications carry privilege, others prejudice. A culturally competent stance requires evaluators to be aware of their own cultural identifications and appreciate the identifications of others. Location also includes attention to physical context; how does the physical space of the evaluand and surrounding community look, smell and sound? Spiritual or other special meaning may be attached to physical location. Location can also refer

to the structure of organizations and systems—for example, the location of the evaluation in relation to the evaluand (see Relationship). Theoretical and methodological justifications of validity turn attention to location by grounding epistemology, theory, and methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation within cultural contexts. Location challenges evaluators to examine where they stand to do their work.

**Power.** Explicit attention to power is required to avoid perpetuating or exacerbating patterns of inequity and prejudice. It is important to examine who exercises power to define meaning and set standards—particularly with respect to patterns of marginalization and privilege (Pon, 2009). If power goes unnamed and is read as neutral, systems of oppression (such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, Islamaphobia, ableism) go unchallenged. The AEA Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation (AEA, 2011) explicitly names recognizing the dynamics of power as essential to culturally competent evaluation practice. Power may be particularly visible in how the parameters of inquiry are defined and in decisions about roles and participation (see Voice). Power is also visible in the determinations of merit and worth and the consequences of those determinations for the evaluand and its community (see Return). Relational, methodological and consequential justifications of validity require attention to power.

**Voice.** Voice draws attention to whose values and perspectives are incorporated in the evaluation and whose are excluded or marginalized (see Power). It includes the accuracy and clarity with which diverse perspectives are represented. Voice also calls attention to language and communication styles and strategies that may facilitate or restrict clear communication. This element includes respect for oral traditions and cultural norms regarding direct and indirect communication as well as issues of privacy and literacy (AEA, 2011). Language reveals imbedded cultural assumptions or bias (see Power). This element cues the evaluation to welcome new participants or audiences and employ culturally appropriate communication strategies, including gesture, movement, and ceremony. Voice also pertains to accessible strategies for clear oral, visual, and written communication of findings that portray perspectives authentically. It includes attention to accurate translation, when necessary, that meets high professional standards (Frierson, Hood, Hughes & Thomas, 2010). Voice is a far-reaching element; all five justifications of multicultural validity include attention to voice.

**Relationship.** This element is multifaceted, including, but extending beyond, the dynamics of relationships among people. It recognizes connections to people, places and the Universe, in varying

degrees of emphasis, depending on context. Deriving from relational justifications of validity, it includes interpersonal dynamics of trust, honesty, and respect for people and the environment. It addresses communication that is genuine. This element prompts evaluators to avoid exclusion based upon language or ability (see Power and Voice) and to broaden relationships to support validity (e.g., working through intermediaries or bringing in respected community persons to guide interactions and insure that they are consistent with respectful protocol). This element speaks to the relationship between the desired outcomes or criteria of merit in evaluation and the lived experience of persons participating in or impacted by the program. It refers to how the interpretation and synthesis of information into evaluative conclusions relates to the real lives of impactees. It includes the relationship (a continuum of proximity vs. distance) of the evaluation to the evaluand and how the evaluator role is defined in relation to the evaluand and the community. It draws attention to relationships that support use of findings and giving back to the community (see Return). Relationship is grounded in consequential, methodological, relational and experiential justifications of multicultural validity.

**Time.** Culture influences the conceptualization of time, and this too must be considered in evaluation. Social problems are understood within a particular time frame, as are approaches to their treatment or solution. The evaluation must seek to respect and reflect the cycles and rhythm of time as it is understood and treated in a given context. This may include something as concrete as deadlines or as philosophical as taking a seven generation approach to understanding program impact. It includes the pace at which one moves through an evaluation and the time required to support connections—before, during, and after an evaluation (see Relationship). It also includes consideration of evaluation impact in multiple time frames (see Return). Time is particularly relevant to the methodological and experiential justifications of multicultural validity.

**Return.** This element focuses on what the evaluation gives back to the community. As the KEC itself points out (Scriven, 2013), a simple ROI (return on investment) is insufficient. Return directs attention to ways in which the community's needs are served by the evaluation process or results and/or by the actions of evaluators outside of their evaluator roles. How does the evaluation contribute to the well-being of individuals or collective groups or support their goals? This element scrutinizes the evaluation's attention to public welfare. In what ways does it leave the program or community stronger than it was prior to the evaluation? Evaluations that extract data without returning benefit to participants are exploitive. This element draws attention to the balance of benefit versus harm or disruption created by the evaluation. Whose interests were furthered and whose were ignored, compromised or harmed in

this evaluation? Return includes attention to human and social capital and to positive or negative impact on social justice. Have policies or practices that perpetuate inequity been identified (see Power)? The social consequences of evaluation—intended or unintended—must be included in the overall determination of “good evaluation.” Consequential justifications of multicultural validity require considerations of return, reciprocity, and reinvestment.

**Plasticity.** The final two checkpoints draw explicitly upon the work of Ridley et al. (1994) on cultural sensitivity and speak directly to the fact that validity demands a stance of cultural competence (AEA, 2011) above and beyond any set of step-wise procedures. Plasticity requires us to take seriously the possibility that we’ve not yet arrived at the best understanding, be it of the context, of the evaluand, or of the evaluation itself. It challenges us to rethink cognitive commitments, some of which may be premature (Langer, 1989). Plasticity reminds one to stay open to new ideas and possibilities, to unlearning as well as learning. It is not simply flexibility, such as one could achieve through “stretching exercises” (Janesick, 2011), however valuable they may be; it is about a willingness to **be** molded, acted upon, by the context that surrounds you. It is important always to stay open to the possibility that something has been missed (Davidson, 2005) and to consider alternative, even opposing, viewpoints and interpretations. Plasticity reminds us to avoid rigid categories; be skeptical of apparent dichotomies. Both methodological and relational justifications of multicultural validity require plasticity.

**Reflexivity.** The final element addresses self-reflection and the application of principles of cultural competence to the scrutiny of our own persons, our evaluative practice, and our knowledge base. Steier (1991) describes reflexivity as “bending back on itself” (p. 2); in this case it refers to understanding our role in the inferences and evaluative determinations at which we arrive. This involves both personal self-scrutiny and systematic scrutiny of the evaluation process. Personally, evaluators must engage in self-examination and maintain a high degree of self-awareness to practice with cultural competence (AEA, 2011). Scrutiny of the evaluation process is recognized as a component of metaevaluation, which may be done formatively or summatively, internally or externally (Scriven, 2013).<sup>7</sup> It includes a critical examination of our own knowledge base (Sakamoto, 2007). Reflexivity supports all five justifications of multicultural validity.

### **Closing Comments on Culture, Checklists and Validity.**

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<sup>7</sup> See Yarbrough et al. (2011) for standards that address internal and external metaevaluation.



A Culture Checklist supports evaluators' ability to attend actively to aspects of cultural experience that surround assessment and evaluation. Ridley et al. (1994) use the term *active-selective attention* to refer to the act of "tuning in" to stimuli that had long been "tuned out" of one's awareness. They note that this requires focused energy and skill; I am suggesting that it also requires cues or reminders. A checklist as envisioned by Scriven is well-suited to that purpose. The iterative and non-sequential format, in which understanding one checkpoint will modify how other checkpoints are understood parallels the reciprocal relationships among multiple cultural identifications (Kirkhart, 2010). One is not restricted by fixed rules or categories but is able to explore connections/relationships among elements in a web-like manner. It is a format that supports application of theory, which in turn leads to modification and refinement. As Scriven (2013) points out in relations to the KEC, it is a format that is accessible to persons not trained in assessment and evaluation; therefore, it supports inclusion.

Repositioning validity to center it in culture requires more than a checklist alone. It requires modeling, mentoring and practice applying these ideas in diverse contexts. It requires motivation to engage in work that is often difficult and time consuming (Ridley et al., 1994). Application of a Culture Checklist will likely suggest additional elements or modify current ones. While it was developed in the context of program evaluation, its utility may extend to other areas of practice. In this way, culturally responsive and responsible evaluation and assessment can be advanced by repositioning validity.

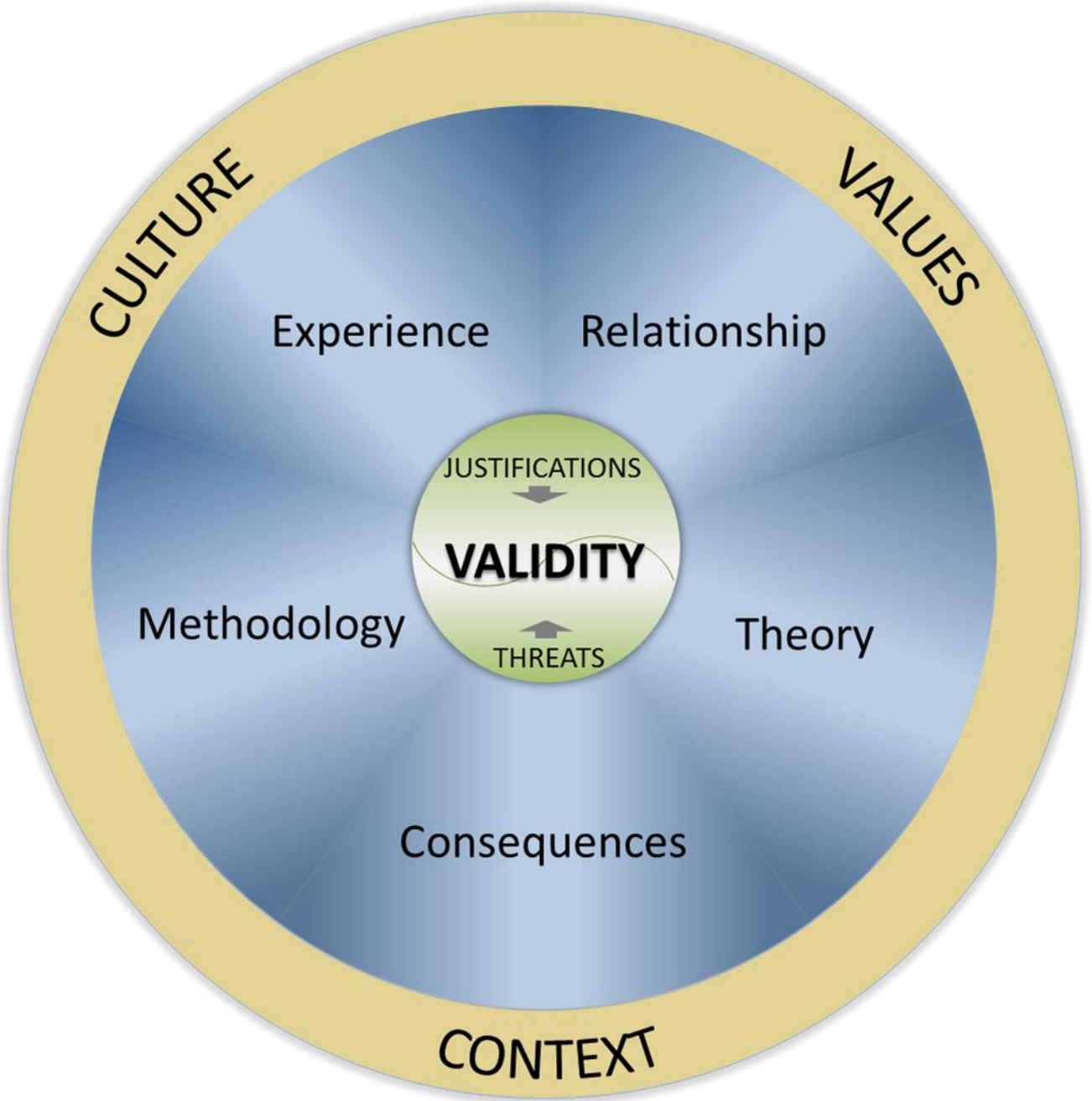


Figure 1. Validity, centered in culture, showing sources of justification and/or threat.

Table 1

*A Culture Checklist*

Nine considerations to improve the multicultural validity of evaluation:	
<b>History</b>	History of place, people, program (or other evaluand), and evaluation's role. Knowledge of cultural heritages and traditions, including their evolution over time.
<b>Location</b>	Recognizes multiple cultural intersections at individual, organizational, and systems levels. Cultural contexts and affiliations of evaluators and evaluand. Geographic anchors of culture in place.
<b>Power</b>	Understanding how privilege is attached to some cultural signifiers; prejudice to others. Attention to equity and social justice; avoid perpetuating discrimination, disparity, or condescension.
<b>Voice</b>	Addresses whose perspectives are amplified and whose are silenced. Maps inclusion and exclusion or marginalization. Includes use of language, jargon, and communicative strategies.
<b>Relationship</b>	Connections among the evaluation, evaluand and community. Relating evaluation to place, time and Universe. Maintaining accountability to community with respect and responsibility.
<b>Time</b>	Calling attention to rhythm, pace and scheduling, to time both preceding and following evaluation. Directs attention to longer impacts and implications—positive or negative.
<b>Return</b>	Attention to how the evaluation or the persons who conduct it return benefit to the evaluand and the surrounding community, both during and after the evaluation process.
<b>Plasticity</b>	The ability to <i>BE</i> molded, to receive new information, reorganize and change in response to new experiences, and evolve new ideas. Applies both to evaluators and to their designs, process and products.
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Apply the principles of evaluation to one's own person and work. Self-scrutiny and reflective practice. Underscores the importance of metaevaluation.

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