

**Session 1630:**

**MAKING REALITY COUNT: SIX ONTOLOGICAL STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION**

**SUMMARY:**

Despite the efforts of many within the evaluation field, there remains an implicit euro-western distrust of others' ability to reason and subsequently many non-western voices remain silenced, their lights unable to shine beyond their immediate surroundings. This distrust threatens the ability of western-trained evaluators working in non-western settings—who serve as knowledge couriers between euro-western funders and non-western communities—to do their work ethically and responsibly. As evaluators, Ontologically Integrative Evaluation (OIE)—introduced at AEA 2019—provides a tool for evaluators to progress along the path of colonizer to converted (Freire, 1970/2018) and assists in the professionalization of this journey. With its focus on constant ontological interrogation, OIE supports the “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 2018, p. 66) and as such advocates for the shining of all lights within the evaluation landscape. However, to accomplish this goal, the foundational tenets of evaluation must themselves be evaluated. In doing so, we find that many of our standards maintain an implicit bias for western modes of thought and understanding and thus fail to provide the necessary framework upon which to construct a truly liberatory evaluation discourse.

Addressing this concern, I ground OIE upon six foundational tenets which collectively challenge us to reflect upon our own location within the evaluation landscape and create spaces for others' lights to shine. Embracing ontological authenticity, fluidity, validity, synthesis, justice and vocation challenges us to reconsider our entire approach to evaluation and our

determination of an evaluation's merit, worth, and value. Building upon Lincoln & Guba's (2000) notion of *ontological authenticity*, I extend its reach to include the growth and sophistication of not only participants and stakeholders, but evaluators as well. In addition to this reframing, I introduce four new standards for evaluation against which evaluation can be measured: ontological fluidity, validity, synthesis, and justice. *Ontological fluidity* contextualizes ontological commitment, recognizing that a change in context may lead to a change in beliefs and subsequent shift in ontology, thus freeing an evaluator to explore new ontologies throughout the evaluation process. Combining multicultural validity and PAR's emphasis on interactional forms of verification, *ontological validity* is the accurate and trustworthy representation of diverse realities as experienced across actors engaged with and impacted by an evaluation. As a validity measure, ontological validity requires that the evaluation explicitly address ontological convergence and divergence as encountered between and among evaluators and stakeholders. *Ontological synthesis* extends Freire's concept of cultural synthesis, emphasizing the integration of concepts to advance reciprocal learning and shared creation of new knowledge and integrating seemingly disparate ontologies such that each is mutually affirmed, challenged, and transformed. Extending the concept of cultural justice, I propose *ontological justice* as the impartial treatment of differing ontological views such that an individual's/group's ontology is acknowledged and affirmed and conflicts between ontologies lead to ontological synthesis rather than ontological oppression. Taken together, these foundational principles enable evaluators to participate in the act of becoming more fully human (Freire, 1970/2018), i.e. our collective *ontological vocation*.