

Special Issue: Decolonizing and Indigenizing the “Religion and Science” Discourse

A Life Scientist’s Review of Chilisa’s Indigenous Research Methodologies

INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

By Bagele Chilisa. 2nd ed., Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2020
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Chilisa has significantly updated her popular textbook on Indigenous research methodologies, which first appeared eight years prior to the publication of this second edition. This textbook is intended to be used by advanced undergraduate, master’s, and beginning early doctoral students in education, social, and behavioral sciences. The book’s format is very well-structured; each chapter includes overview, learning objectives, case examples, key points, summary, and suggested readings. Most of the highly theoretical chapters include very helpful tables and diagrams as well. This makes it very easy for students to review each chapter by looking at the tables and diagrams that summarize a lot of the written text.

In terms of content, the current second edition has fourteen chapters, while the first edition has ten chapters. Since Chilisa does not group the fourteen chapters into sections, I would group them into three sections: Chapters One-Five cover the theoretical building blocks, Chapters Six-Eight cover recent advances in indigenous research methodologies, and Chapters Nine-Fourteen cover applications of indigenous methodologies. I divide them in this manner because Chapters Six-Eight are the three new chapters that are added in this second edition.

Chapter One provides working definitions of essential terms in the field, such as indigenous, colonial, imperial, post-colonial, and decolonization. Chapter Two, for me, is the most important theoretical introduction to the differences between indigenous and Western paradigms (positivist, interpretive, transformative, and pragmatist) with regard to their respective assumptions on the nature of reality, knowledge, and values (46–47 presents a summary table). Chapter Three presents examples of how academic research is colonial in nature and that postcolonial and critical race theory can help us decolonize the old paradigms in constructing our own indigenous paradigm.

Chapter Four talks about the dynamics of competition between competing paradigms and how colonial paradigms often presume priority, dismissing indigenous ways of knowing. Chapter Five provides the synthetic theoretical framework for an indigenous paradigm based on the core idea of relationality in reframing ontology, epistemology, and axiology (the nature of reality, knowledge, and values presented first in Chapter Two). These first five chapters provide the theoretical ground-clearing exercise, as well as the theoretical reconstruction of what Chilisa proposes as indigenous research methodologies.

Chapter 6 is a new chapter reflecting recent studies on evaluation methodologies in Africa, Canada, Asia, Australia, and other postcolonial areas. Chapter Seven is another creative synthetic construction of indigenous methodology via mixed methods research. As opposed to understanding mixed methods research as mixing conventional qualitative and quantitative research, Chilisa proposes mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods with indigenous paradigms. This new chapter 7 in the second edition can be seen as a novel expansion of what is presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 8 then flows naturally from Chapter 7 as the concrete application of the mixed methods research in an indigenous paradigm with respect to research data evaluation. Chilisa highlights the importance of relationships between researcher and subjects in making mixed methods research work in the indigenous framework.

Chapter Nine provides concrete examples of how stories, folklores, proverbs, and songs are valuable not only as data sources, but also as data interpretation and analysis. Chapter ten rehashes the basics introduced in Chapter Two with more clarity—what Chilisa sees as the relationship between the indigenous research methodology with the natures of reality, knowledge, and values (ontology, epistemology, and axiology). Chapter Eleven provides a set of concrete guidelines on how to conduct a postcolonial indigenous interview. Chapter Twelve introduces two types of participatory action research methodologies: one with an emphasis on participants as coresearchers and one with an emphasis on transformation. Chapter thirteen presents an introduction to indigenous feminist methodologies in comparison to Western feminist paradigms. Finally, Chapter Fourteen enforces the importance of building partnerships and

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integrating knowledge systems in planning and performing postcolonial indigenous research programs.

Having provided a brief summary of the textbook, mainly in terms of structure and basic framework, I now bring up some ideas that I found to be useful in my field of research, theology and science. Being trained mostly as a scientist in the United States, I find it very challenging to implement Chilisa's framework(s) in the biological sciences. This is perfectly understandable because Chilisa herself has stated that these indigenous research methodologies are for the social sciences. With that said, there are important keys for reflection that I want to raise.

First, in terms of placing science into one of Chilisa's Western paradigms, the paradigm of positivist/postpositivist would be the closest. The positivist/postpositivist paradigm has some ontological assumptions: materialism and critical realism, where one reality is knowable within probability. It also has the epistemological assumption that the scientific method is value-free and knowledge is objective. Though science claims to be value-free, it still does have the axiological assumption in its purpose, which is to discover laws that are generalizable and govern the universe. Thus to decolonize science, we must question these ontological, epistemological, and axiological bases of science.

Second, though the nuts and bolts of experimental science largely depend on machines and instruments that render the gender and race of their experimenter irrelevant, there is still room to assess the underlying purpose for designing such machines. There are still important reasons for designing and performing certain experiments. In my field, as a cancer researcher, experiments are performed to investigate the nature of living things, comparing normal cells to cancer cells genetically, epigenetically, etc. But it does operate under certain ontological materialist presupposition, because anything nonmaterial is not observable and thus outside the scope of science. Digging into this ontological presupposition, the topic of evolution arises in the science and religion discourse. Debates have gone on for centuries over creationism versus evolution.

But Chilisa is pointing out that the purpose of experiments should not be just to discover the fundamental nature of things because that is the positivist telos. An indigenous paradigm telos would look at who will benefit from the results of such experiments. I think this is where the science and religion discourse is and should be heading toward.

Third, the field of theology and science within the Western Christian tradition can be traced back to apologetics, which relies on evidence. Finding some common bridge between theology and science is the very approach of the kind of liberal theology that engages with science. The dialog between theology and science sought to start with some common ground, which Chilisa would probably label as a common ontological presupposition. But Chilisa would remind us that oftentimes it is a Western, colonial ontological common ground, which excludes religions and sciences in the non-Western world. This also presumes a theological preoccupation with ontological categories and metaphysical truths in the science and religion discourse over pragmatic, transformative concerns. It is thus important for theologians to start considering theology not as a system of theological propositions that need to be compared to science as a system of scientific propositions. But it is time to begin to think of theology as a pragmatic tool of transformation. When both science and theology are both oriented to pragmatism and transformation, they will also find common grounds. Unlike the common ground of ontological presuppositions that tend to be universalizing and thus colonizing, common grounds of purpose are as varied as the problems that exist in the real world.

Last but not least, the mixed methods research paradigm that is integrated to indigenous paradigm should be an inspiration to the religion and science discourse as well. Mixed methods methodologies in science and religion often take place precisely as Chilisa has mentioned—on the line between quantitative (science), and qualitative (religion) methods. But both still operate within the Western paradigms. It is necessary then to integrate these into indigenous worldviews and needs as well.