

Book Review: Indigenous Research Methodologies

by blog admin

February 11, 2013

Responding to increased emphasis in the classroom and the field on exposing students to diverse epistemologies, methods, and methodologies, **Bagele Chilisa's Indigenous Research Methodologies** aims to provide tools for situating research in a larger historical, cultural, and global context. With case studies from around the world, the book seeks to demonstrate the specific methodologies that are commensurate with the transformative paradigm of research and the historical and cultural traditions of third-world and indigenous peoples. **Meike de Goede** finds the book is a welcome contribution to the available teaching materials on methodology.



Indigenous Research Methodologies. Bagele Chilisa. Sage. 2012.

Find this book

Postcolonial, subaltern, and post-structural critique – which emphasises the power relations between the west and the non-west in international policy as well as in knowledge production about the developing world – has in recent years become more and more influential in international studies. However, translating this often abstract critique into concrete research methodologies is a difficult task. Reading [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak](#) for the first time as a student made me despair. Although I was deeply intrigued by her work, I was confronted with the problem of how to translate her critique into practical, applicable research methodologies. [Bagele Chilisa's Indigenous Research Methodologies](#) is a welcome contribution, offering an accessible and practical methodology handbook for students and researchers interested in applying postcolonial critique to research methodology.



Indigenous
Research
Methodologies

Bagele Chilisa



Chilisa, a Professor at the University of Botswana, develops a “postcolonial indigenous research paradigm” that emphasises indigenous knowledge systems and forms of knowledge production, and how social science researchers can meaningfully engage with these. The book proposes a research paradigm that aims to make intelligible for academic research the historical and cultural traditions and knowledge systems of non-western societies and traditional peoples. It thus develops a critique of academic research dominated by western ways of understanding the world, and develops a perspective that emphasises diversity in knowledge production. Ultimately, it is about the decolonisation of research as knowledge production. Chilisa proposes an activist paradigm, aimed at emancipation of the “colonized other” in systems of knowledge production, and to find ways to integrate indigenous knowledge methods and techniques into the “global knowledge economy” (p. 289).

amazon

Google

The book engages with important questions, such as how to break the vicious cycle of power in the process of knowledge production. How can we access and include indigenous research methods knowledge systems? And how can we ‘indigenize’ conventional research? Drawing on her own research on reproductive health and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa, as well as secondary material from research on indigenous communities in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, Chilisa makes abstract critique concrete. Throughout the book, she translates problems and issues that have been outlined by postcolonial critique into opportunities for exciting and innovative research.

The book possesses the structure of a conventional methodology book. Whereas the first five chapters are more theoretical, engaging with postcolonial critique and the need for postcolonial indigenous research,

as well as epistemology, ontology, axiology and ethics, the last five chapters are more practical, focussing on concrete research methods. In these chapters the author provides tools to assist in conducting culturally sensitive research, to decolonize the interview technique, and to successfully conduct participatory interviews. For example, the author discusses the construction of life stories as an alternative interview technique (p. 208), as well as approaches that engage with the wisdom of elders that is locally respected but not part of knowledge in the Western sense (p.211). She also challenges the researcher to engage with material such as songs, storytelling, and proverbs. In these chapters on research techniques, the relation between the researcher and the researched is central. Chilisa argues not just for participatory research, but goes an important step further by proposing a more ethical relationship based on partnership. This is fundamental for a postcolonial indigenous research paradigm.

Although Chilisa has intended her book for academic students and researchers as well as practitioners, these readers might be put off by the style of the book, which is hardly suitable for tertiary education and experienced scholars. The chapters all have learning objectives, questions for discussion for “before you start reading”, as well as exercises, summaries and bullet pointed lists of what one should have understood from the chapter. The flip side of this school-ish style is that the text is indeed very accessible. Chilisa thus makes postcolonial research accessible to students who are not yet familiar with postcolonial critique, which can only be applauded.

However, what this reviewer feels the book is really missing is a good discussion of issues related to the positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the researched. Although the relationship between the researcher and the researched is a central theme in the book, Chilisa ignores the issues arising when western researchers (often white, perhaps coming from the former colonial power, possibly young and/or female) engage in research of non-western communities. Chilisa herself is from Botswana, and her research focuses on communities in Botswana and the Southern African region. The book is written with the assumption that non-Western researchers conduct research on their own communities, or on communities they can culturally connect with. As such, the book serves an important emancipatory purpose. However, western researchers that conduct research on non-western communities using postcolonial indigenous research methods will evidently be confronted with obstacles. How to establish the ethical research relationship Chilisa proposes when the researcher is such an obvious outsider? Particularly when framing the research in postcolonial critique, such issues cannot be ignored.

Also, designing suitable postcolonial indigenous research methodologies requires in-depth – if not insider’s – knowledge and understanding of the community concerned. This is an evident obstacle for non-autochthonous researchers, particular at early career level when the researcher is (relatively) new to the community or society she or he is researching. Although Chilisa emphasises partnerships between the researcher and the researched, as well as institutional partnerships with local academic institutions, I am not convinced that this solves these fundamental issues.

Nevertheless, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* is a welcome contribution to the available teaching materials on methodology. Although it discusses complex theory, the book is written in an accessible style that may inspire students and researchers interested looking for innovative research methods.

Meike de Goede completed her PhD in International Relations at the [University of St Andrews](#). Her research focuses on the interaction between local agencies and liberal peace building in Africa. She previously studied History at Leiden University, and Peace and Conflict Studies and Human Rights at Utrecht University. She currently lives in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, where she works in democratisation and development. [Read more reviews by Meike.](#)