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It has been almost two years since the Practice Guides on Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity were published. Since then, evaluators continue their commitment to advance racial equity through their practice as evident in the number of pre-conference workshops at the 2022 American Evaluation Association conference (almost one-third of total workshops), activities and publications by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, and the growing network of culturally responsible equitable evaluation practitioners.

Since the practice guides’ release, Community Science, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, conducted many workshops and webinars about the information in the guides. Questions were collected as part of the registration and during the events. The questions shed light on the challenges we still face in supporting and doing evaluation in service of equity. In general, people are still working to get concrete about how to implement such evaluations and overcome the resistance — intentional or not — to engaging in courageous conversations about racial equity and shifting current practices in evaluation, community engagement, strategy development, and grantmaking.

The questions reaffirm that evaluators alone cannot advance the practice of doing evaluation in service of racial equity. The guides discuss the importance of recognizing this point. The larger systemic issues at play contribute to racial inequity, and social injustice requires all of us in philanthropy, government, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors to work differently.

Community Science compiled common questions from evaluators, funders, executive directors, and program staff, organized them into themes, and attempted to answer them in this tool kit. Some questions cannot be answered easily because the solutions aren’t the evaluation profession and evaluators’ responsibility alone. For instance, questions about the distribution of wealth, role of philanthropy in closing the wealth gap, levers of change to prioritize public and philanthropic investments in communities of color, ways to manage and disrupt power differences between foundations and organizations that receive funding, use of power and narratives to center equity and justice in philanthropy, and building leadership that isn’t resistant to racial equity. There were also questions about shifting power, engaging communities, creating space in federal agencies for discussions about community engagement and racial equity, and changing mindsets and behaviors of leadership.

In addition, there were questions we can only answer through a broader dialogue with social scientists from different disciplines with various philosophical approaches to research and evaluation (e.g., is community-based participatory research equitable, how to stop relying on pre- and post-outcome data).

This tool kit isn’t intended to repeat the original practice guides. It compiles new information in slide decks, tip sheets, and blogs. Some of the blogs have been written by Daniela Pineda and her colleagues at RTI International in support of the Practice Guides. This tool kit also doesn’t contain all the answers. We invite you to take the guidance farther and share your experiences. This tool kit, in our humble opinion, is merely another way to approach evaluation in service of racial equity and a starting place for people interested in this work.
Frequently Asked Questions About Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

People who attended Community Science's workshops and webinars about Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity raised questions about how evaluators can reflect on their own mental models, biases, and preferred evaluation practices and how these could affect the way they design and implement evaluations, and how evaluators can engage community and work toward equity across all aspects of evaluation design. Here, we address the questions that repeatedly arose. The tip sheets, slide decks, and blogs in the tool kit that accompany the Practice Guide Series on Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity offer additional information to answer these questions.

We know, as evaluators, that funders want us to examine the data and highlight their desired successes. How do we deal with this, which can create bias in our design and findings?

Be clear about your “why” — why you are doing evaluation and why evaluation is critical for informing progress toward racial equity. Being grounded in your purpose can help you maintain your integrity and adhere to the principles of good evaluation. You might want to engage the funder in a dialogue about why they only want to highlight the successes, what they can learn from what didn’t work, and how their decisions will be affected by focusing only on the wins. At best, you could suggest an internal memo to highlight the shortcomings in addition to the external-facing report to highlight the successes.

As an evaluator, how can I manage clients’ expectations about my ability to practice evaluation in service of racial equity?

The most important thing is to be honest about your ability. Equally important is managing clients’ expectations about what an evaluation in service of racial equity is and the conditions necessary to practice it.

How do we incorporate racial equity into our practice when that isn’t what our clients are focusing on, and they don’t want to discuss it?

Understand the resistance. Also, perhaps not everyone in the organization is unwilling to discuss racial equity. See the Tip Sheet on Ways to Overcome Resistance to the Idea and Practice of Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity in this tool kit.

How can we use a systems lens and still be realistic about the outcomes?

We know that sustainable systems change takes time. Foundations often want systems change, but the grant period and amount aren’t usually sufficient to bring about the change envisioned. Evaluators can help foundations “work backwards” to determine feasible and realistic outcomes with useful tools like the theory of change and logic model. Keep in mind that capacity building of grantees and community partners will likely be necessary along the way to collect and use the data needed to improve their strategy and activities — and meet the funder’s reporting expectations. See the Slide Deck on A Racial Equity Lens from the Get-go in this tool kit. Another useful resource is “Local Empowerment Through Rapid Results” by Nadim Matta and Peter Morgan, published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Summer 2011, which describes activities and immediate, short-term outcomes that can be expected in efforts to achieve sustainable social change and scale.
Evaluation that furthers racial equity must be asset-based and committed to collective improvement yet much of this sector is deficit-focused. People disaggregate outcomes by race and describe that as an effort to advance equity. Evaluation products may further inequality by emphasizing the difference between groups without sufficient context. Evaluation also tends to not highlight bright spots and explain what’s working in institutions or among subgroups achieving high outcomes. What can we do about this?

Decisionmakers must shift their mindset from deficit- to asset-based, though we have the responsibility of pointing out the deficit-focus. Our implicit biases about communities of color and others that have been historically excluded normalize their deficits. We can ensure that evaluation and learning questions aren’t solely focused on the problem and improving the capacities of organizations and communities, but on strengths and what is already working. Evaluators can also emphasize in findings and recommendations the norms, behaviors, relationships, and other conditions that facilitate a community’s ability to progress toward its desired outcomes.

How can evaluators balance expectations for rigor (in the traditional, positivist sense) with the imperative to elevate context and other ways of knowing?

Rigor is about being principled, methodical, transparent, and honest. Context and other ways of knowing are not vague or superfluous variables. On the contrary, their critical variables in evaluations to explain what happened, so long as information about them is collected and analyzed systematically.

What evaluation tools are the most critical to master to serve movements for equity?

Evaluation can be most useful to movements for equity by collaborating with movement leaders to 1) identify what they need to know to strengthen and support the movement; 2) review the outcomes and measures to make sure they’re supportive of the movement and equity; and 3) determine how the findings should be reported and communicated for use by leaders. The most important way to serve movements for equity is to ensure the planning process for the entire evaluation (i.e., theory of change development, stakeholder engagement, data collection, analyses, interpretation, reporting, and use of findings to strengthen the movement) is conducted in collaboration with movement leaders.

How do we balance institutionalized scientific values with communities’ perspectives when designing our interventions and evaluations?

Community members know what’s happening in their lives and community and what change looks like. Without their participation and knowledge, it’s easy to develop measures of progress that are irrelevant and consequently, inaccurate, rendering the evaluation invalid and not helpful. There is increasing acceptance that community engagement is crucial in evaluation, not only those in service of racial equity, but it will take more than just evaluators to advocate for the importance to equal any other methodological matter. See the section on community engagement for more detailed information and tips.
We want to include community voice in the evaluation process, however sometimes we have short time frames and small budgets that make it challenging.

Community engagement should be treated as important as any other methodological issue, such as construct development and validity. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case. As such, evaluators can attempt to negotiate a higher budget and longer time frame or decide for themselves how important community engagement is to the quality of their evaluation. They’ll have to weigh possible trade-offs that can still yield a good evaluation in service of racial equity. Areas of potential trade-off could be shorter and fewer reports in order to increase the compensation for community members’ time or fewer interviews to allow for more time in the beginning of the evaluation to build relationships. A smaller number of interviews may be acceptable because of data saturation in qualitative research. Evaluators can follow up with more interviews if an issue needs further exploration. See also the Tip Sheet for How to Respond to Scenarios about Engaging Community in Evaluation in this tool kit.

How can we build trust with communities which do not trust evaluation for reasons such as 1) being treated inequitably for so long, 2) the close relationship of evaluators with funders, and 3) evaluations being tied to funding decisions?

This is a challenge that cannot be quickly or easily overcome due to deep institutional practices that have contributed to the mistrust. We can start by being honest, transparent, and direct about our evaluator role and the extent of our influence on the funder and grantmaking process. We can also consider what we can “give back” to the community that is within our role and not overpromise. The reality is that evaluators who practice evaluation in service of racial equity will have to go a little beyond their scope of work to appreciate community voice and ensure fairness in their practice.

How do we shift power dynamics (e.g., between funders, communities and evaluators)?

The power dynamic can only shift so much because funders have the monies communities want to be able to address challenges, improve community conditions, and effect systems change. Nevertheless, here are some ways to disrupt the status quo. Funders must 1) be transparent and direct about their expectations about outcomes from the start and not change them in the middle of the initiative; 2) work with the communities they support to think through what sustainability looks like from the start and not six months before the end of the initiative; 3) be clear about what they can and cannot do at the policy level to advocate for the issues of concern to the communities; and 4) acknowledge the power they have and what aspects of that they are willing and not willing to give up.

How can we help facilitate a shared understanding and analysis of community in our organizations? For example, in philanthropy, “community” is simply groups of grantees or other nonprofits; however, some movement leaders have been explicit that communities include government entities, bodegas, etc. When funders find out “community” is not synonymous with grantees, it can create tension between funders and grantees as the former focus on elevating “community.”

Be explicit with funders from the start about what “community” means and refers to. This discussion is covered in the practice guide, Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity: Deepen Community Engagement. One of the resources included in this tool kit, a Slide Deck on Community Engagement in Evaluations in Service of Racial Equity: What, When, and How, addresses this question.
How do we reach the “community” when we are working with grantees who aren’t necessarily part of the community that we want to elevate? How do we address tensions that might arise with grantees in this process?

Query the funder and the grantees’ assumptions about how they view and understand the “community” they intend to serve, support, and collaborate with. As the evaluator, team up with a partner steeped in facilitating difficult conversations, because deeply entrenched beliefs, norms, and behaviors will likely have to be made explicit, discussed, and perhaps shifted. Power differences must also be discussed. This isn’t something that can be addressed quickly or easily through a single event or meeting, but a strategy and process that need to be designed thoughtfully and put in place for a period of time.

How do we determine what is fair compensation for community involvement?

Ask a handful of people who work with the community, community leaders, and community members about what type of compensation is considered fair and relevant for their time. There might be trade-offs to consider about the design if the budget is not sufficient to cover the compensation. See also the Tip Sheet for How to Respond to Scenarios about Engaging Community in Evaluation and the Blog on Getting Out of Our Own Way: Navigating Organizational Barriers to Engage Communities in Research in this tool kit.

How can we create inclusive spaces of learning where both grantees and communities can wield their own power to co-design inquiry frameworks?

This is not the evaluator’s responsibility alone, especially if there’s an intermediary or technical assistance partner involved. Nevertheless, here are some ideas. Frequently, the learning agenda is developed by the funder, technical assistance partner, or evaluator based on “lessons learned” data from grantees. This approach means that grantees may have struggled for one year to overcome a challenge and the topic finally got on the agenda after the evaluator completed data analysis and summarized the “lessons learned.” If the learning agenda is to be co-created, funders, technical assistance providers, and evaluators should intentionally ask grantees and communities from the start what they need to be successful and effective in their work. The grantees’ answers become the basis for the agenda. Peer sharing and technical assistance should also be added. Finally, a “learning committee” that includes grantees and community members could be established early on to guide the agenda and creation of inclusive learning spaces.

What questions can we ask grantees to understand the extent of their community engagement?

Questions could include:

- How does your project or program include or incorporate the norms, values, and beliefs of the people and communities you serve?
- How does the context (e.g., history, geographic location, size of community) shape and affect your approach and outcomes?
- What role do the people who lead and are trusted by the communities you serve have in your project or program?
How We Think and Practice Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

Practice Guide Series on Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity
A Tool Kit for Practitioners

JANUARY 2024
Questions to Ask Yourself About How You Are Practicing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

Evaluation at its best generates knowledge, and knowledge — when made accessible to people who have been oppressed — contributes to their ability to make change. In the evaluation profession, we have started considering the role of evaluation in creating a more equitable and just world, contesting the canons of science, and existing as part of a larger movement for racial equity and social justice.

To do this, we must change the way we think and practice evaluation. We need to transform how we work to mobilize the power of information and high-impact strategies in the fight for racial equity by using a systems lens and fiercely challenging our own biases, mental models, and narratives.

Our role as evaluators in these efforts starts with our ideas of how the world works, behaviors, relationships, and our implicit biases. Becoming aware of and addressing our biases won’t happen overnight and there is no single or simple tool to help. It is hard work, a continuous process and a self-reflection journey that can sometimes be uncomfortable.

These biases activate when we develop evaluation questions, design approaches, analyze data, present conclusions, and provide recommendations. They affect how we use evaluation to help people who fund, design, and implement solutions that aim to contribute to equitable outcomes for communities of color.

No matter how well-intentioned or committed to racial equity you think you are, it helps to continuously work to become:

**Accountable.** Be intentional about your practices to:
- Understand the struggles faced by people of color, immigrants, refugees, and low-income families and appreciate their strengths.
- Challenge underlying systems that seek to maintain the status quo.
- Know when to act as bridge builder, activist, or disrupter.
- Correct misperceptions and help make new connections as this work can cause discomfort for privileged and White people who are not aware or informed of the injustice experienced by these groups of people.

** Courageous.** This work can mean:
- Expressing an unpopular view about racism or other forms of oppression.
- Risking unfiltered and misinformed responses to your views on social or other media.
- Losing a relationship, or even our job, if you believe a particular solution or approach could do more harm than good to racial equity.

**Curious.** Keep learning by:
- Not taking anything at face value.
- Asking why.
- Doing our homework.
- Keeping the larger systems in mind.
As you affirm and reaffirm these commitments, you’ll find that the lens you use for evaluative thinking will start to change. It takes practice to apply the lens until it becomes natural and habitual. You won’t always get it right — no one does. Remember to do your best and keep learning. You’ll get better.

Here are some questions to repeatedly ask yourself in every engagement you agree to:

☐ How open am I to examining my own mental models and how to change them?

☐ How much time and effort am I willing to invest in learning about different ways to look at the problem and solution, talking to the people who are impacted, and developing a community of trusted peers who can help me see my blind spots?

☐ To what extent do I believe that the histories of different racial and ethnic groups in this country are interrelated and, as a result, racial inequity has an impact on everyone?

☐ To what extent do I believe that addressing racial inequity in my work makes me less scientifically rigorous?

☐ To what extent do I believe that as an evaluator, I am not independent of — but an integral part of — the problem and the solution to calling out unfairness and injustice?

☐ How likely am I to ignore research and evaluation findings that do not fully support my preconceived notions about a particular racial group?

☐ How do I determine which information is real? Which information or evidence am I more likely to believe? Which trend would I be curious enough about to further investigate and why?

☐ How might my preference about which information to use to make my case cloud my framing of evaluation questions and decisions about which methodology to use?

☐ Where do I think my responsibility begins and ends as the evaluator, if there is a beginning and an end? How would I balance what I know and don’t know, and what I am hired to do and not do?

Use this space to add other questions you find yourself asking or invite a trusted colleague to brainstorm additional questions to ask about your worldviews, assumptions, and narratives you believe in.
Resistance is a normal response to change, perceived risk or lack of safety, or cognitive dissonance with one’s values and beliefs. So why are we surprised when resistant behaviors happen in evaluation?

Evaluation in service of racial equity is a practice — not an aside, a checklist, or something you do only if the funder asks. To conduct an evaluation in service of equity, we must engage in a real dialogue about:

- The myths of evaluation that stand in our way;
- Our own biases;
- Our understanding about systems that perpetuate racial inequity and poor community engagement; and
- Our actions as evaluators to help create healthy, just, and equitable communities.

This tip sheet focuses on our actions as evaluators with guidance on how to respond to resistance.
How do you know what resistance looks like in your evaluation process?

First, let’s review the definition of resistance according to the Webster’s dictionary:

The refusal to accept something; The attempt to prevent something by action or argument; A symptom of fear, confusion, mistrust, lack of information, misunderstandings, unanswered questions, no felt need for change, an unclear end goal, etc.

Now, think of a time when you felt someone was resistant to an idea or action your team was trying to implement organizationally. How did you respond? How did your other team members respond? You or your team members might have felt hurt, frustrated, or angry at the person resisting, and these feelings can result in a fight or flight response. This often results in enemification or isolating the source (Kahane, 2017). Neither helps facilitate your evaluation in service of racial equity.

So, now what?

Pause and self-assess.

It’s important to differentiate what is happening and one’s perceptions of what is happening when these initial reactions and emotions begin to surface.

Here’s a “check yourself” self-assessment, adapted from nonviolent communication techniques (Rosenberg, 2003):

Get grounded

What is actually happening in this moment? Using the definition above, when you feel someone is resistant to an idea or action, can you:

- Describe what you are observing without judgment or assessment. It is important to describe what people are doing, not whether you like it or not. Think about what you or others are saying or doing and be aware of the impact of your behaviors or actions in the moment. For example, would you describe the behavior as “the program director is manipulative and gets away with not doing equity efforts” or “the program director has not shared information on their equity efforts in the last three leadership meetings.”

INSIGHT

Combining your observations and evaluation of the moment to inform your response to resistance will affect how others receive your intended message. If others hear your message as criticism, they may resist whatever action you are trying to achieve (yes, even if the intention is for social justice), or comply with your request in the moment but resent you or the evaluation process.
Name what you are feeling:

What am I feeling in relation to my interaction or what I observed? Using the same example, can you:

Describe what you are feeling in the moment. You could feel frustrated, irritated, or annoyed. The point is to separate what you are feeling from what you think others are feeling or might be thinking. This can be hard to do. For example, “I feel that you should know why equity is critical by now” rather than “I feel discouraged or disappointed.”

Check yourself:

What do I need at this moment to skillfully engage?

Continuing with the example, think about what you need that is connected to the feelings you identified. Do a quick self-assessment to understand if you are ready to engage in a difficult or uncomfortable interaction with a person that may or may not have the same values, beliefs, or approach to equity. For example, will you say “I feel annoyed that information about equity efforts is not shared with me. I need updates to be able to track the organization’s progress on its goals,” or “I feel impatient. I need a moment before we continue our conversation. Can we regroup tomorrow?”

Wait, I thought responding to resistance was about the other person?

This initial self-assessment helps ground yourself in what is actually happening, rather than a judgment or assumption about why a person may be resistant — particularly in equity efforts, when equity is often associated with doing what is morally right and just. When a person is perceived as “not supportive” of equity, they can easily become the “enemy.” It’s easy to judge people who don’t act in harmony with our values and describe them as “someone from a certain group, city, or school, of course, they aren’t for equity...” or “they’re just prejudiced.” This act of labeling people places the emphasis on who is on which team, rather than what issue we are trying to address and for whom. This can pivot the focus of your evaluation away from a system lens to address equity to a posture of convincing an individual or group why equity is important rather than understanding their context.

Now, we can map how to respond to acts of resistance.
Part 2

How to map responses to acts of resistance?

You can be proactive and anticipate potential resistance and how people might react rather than wait to respond in the moment. The goal is to communicate in a non-alienating and non-judgmental way from a state of compassion. Note, this doesn’t mean you have to agree with the person. Rather, you create space for understanding, dialogue, and eventually, the opportunity to create common action or behavior change. We apply similar steps to the “pause and reflect” actions in Part 1, this time through the lens of the person expressing resistant behaviors.

Part of planning how to respond requires understanding the social context in which the evaluation process and engagement is taking place. This includes considering potential sources that may stimulate resistant behavior, and most importantly, knowing why you’re engaging with this person or group.

Take a moment to think about the different people you may engage in your evaluation process. In the diagram below, write the names of people that you may directly or indirectly need to work with or at least have their buy-in.

Understand the social context: Take a moment to think about the different people you may engage in your evaluation process. In the diagram below, write the names of people that you may directly or indirectly need to work with or at least have their buy-in.

Drivers

Champions

Supporters

Influencers and Cultural Weavers

Derailers
Get grounded

Be clear about what is actually happening and identify the potential needs of the different people engaged.

The goal is to identify and describe what type of resistance is happening in the moment. This description can help you understand the source of the resistant behavior, which can then help inform how to respond to the needs of the person to get to a point where they can engage in the process. Using the following table, what types of resistance are you encountering?

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Cause of the behavior</th>
<th>Tips for how to respond</th>
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<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Threat response and threat activate fear in the brain</td>
<td>Encourage people to externalize their thoughts so they can find a more realistic and balanced perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fear manifests itself in 4 different behaviors: fight, flight, freeze, or freak-out</td>
<td>One-to-one conversations or conversations in group environments can help people externalize</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Threat they want to “fight” to eliminate</td>
<td>Resist the urge to “fight” back to avoid heightening the tension</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The change can cause them to lose control or feel unfairly treated</td>
<td>Understand the potential threat your proposed change may present for people</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An attempt to reassert lost autonomy</td>
<td>Address early and directly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attached</td>
<td>Strong sense of ownership for existing practices or processes</td>
<td>Ignite a fresh reflection on the root problem you’re trying to address</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strong emotional ties to or passionate about the “values” involved, may associate with their success</td>
<td>Return the focus to purpose, define the current need, and reflect on current real data that is different than the past</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The brain can’t hold two conflicting views at the same time (anchoring bias, confirmation bias), making it difficult to see the need for change or to have a positive response to a replacement process</td>
<td>Create a new neural network around a solution to provide the basics to form a new picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>The brain is constantly trying to make sense of situations and leans toward known patterns</td>
<td>Be conscious of the conflicts at play by recognizing what is on the person’s plate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are gaps where there are no definite facts</td>
<td>Consider how your message fits in the flow of information fighting for attention</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use positive attention grabbers: appeal to a deeper purpose in which the person also believes, build a personal connection so the person wants to work with you, and focus on positive outcomes that genuinely help the person</td>
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### Ways to Overcome Resistance to the Idea and Practice of Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

Now that you’ve identified the type of resistance, the source of the resistant behaviors, and strategies for how to respond, the next step is to determine how often you need to engage with all the people listed in your relationship map.

The diagram here provides a framework to determine how often to communicate with the person or groups that may be resistant at different points of the evaluation. For example, a person in leadership who expresses little interest in the evaluation is someone to ‘stay connected’ with through frequent check-ins and input requests.

Using the names of the different people on your map, consider the role and influence each may have on the evaluation’s strategy, implementation, or culture.

It’s impossible to talk to everyone at the same intensity level. The intention is to determine the frequency of communication based on role and influence to help prioritize who and how you respond to resistance. This also helps track how you focus the evaluation process — are you busy trying to convince people why equity is important or are you applying a system lens to advance equity in the organization or community?

### Determine the needed frequency of communication

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Cause of the behavior</th>
<th>Tips for how to respond</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed</td>
<td>- Change is like the last grain of sand toppling the dune with already fast pace, series of changes; busy schedules; and other perceived stressors</td>
<td>- Be conscious of the conflicts at play by recognizing what is on the person’s plate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Consider how your message fits in the flow of information fighting for attention</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Use positive attention grabbers: appeal to a deeper purpose in which the person also believes, build a personal connection so the person wants to work with you, and focus on positive outcomes that genuinely help the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Entrepreneur</td>
<td>- Desire for attention and power</td>
<td>- Know when to pause or disengage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Unknown factors</td>
<td>- Scope the importance of the relationship in the context of the work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Gauge what depth of interaction might be needed to reach the ultimate goal — advancing equity</td>
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**Stay Connected**
Frequent check-ins and requests for input

**Monitor**
Consistent communication about vision and expected behaviors

**Stay Engaged**
Organize and build capacity

**Manage Closely**
Help keep focus on the ultimate goal - equity!
Put it all together  Below is a template to map how you can respond to resistance as it emerges throughout the process. And it will. Remember, it’s normal for people to resist or question change.

### Leader

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**References**

Doing Research and Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity is an Act of Courageous Optimism

The Courageous Choices of Researchers and Evaluators

We don’t typically think of researchers and evaluators as courageous actors who make tough choices in the day-to-day decisions in their work. The popular stereotypes have us sitting in front of computers typing away, or in white lab coats, wearing goggles and looking into a Petri dish. These images, along with dominant narratives about science being objective and neutral, distract from the reality of the work. The fact is that as human beings conducting research—an inherently social endeavor—we all bring our biases and subjectivity as we conduct research and evaluations. We know that objectivity is an illusion that reifies the notion that researchers and evaluators can deliver an unbiased truth about the world.

In our experience as researchers and evaluators, we make multiple decisions that have a bearing on what evidence is developed, how we make sense of data, and how we create narratives about social phenomena. Being able to note the social nature of research in our practice is important. Our work is better when we are self-aware and build in strategies to ensure that our research and evaluation practices do not reproduce inequities, that they mitigate biases, and that we reflect on the practical implications of the findings.

Redefining Research and Evaluation for Racial Equity

Embracing this more complex view of researchers/evaluators is necessary to use research and evaluation as tools to advance racial equity and social justice. To say that research and evaluation can and should be tools used to advance racial equity takes courage. This statement chips away at the illusion of objectivity that implicitly and explicitly links objectivity to rigor and notions of “good” research/evaluation. Acknowledging that social context and personal experience color
how we do research requires us to dig deeper than being aware of the possible misuse of research, for example, to further a political agenda. We need to do the work of uncovering our deeply held beliefs about how the world works and be attentive to how those beliefs might show up in our own framing of research questions, methodological approaches, or decisions about disseminating findings.

When we assert that research and evaluation can themselves be tools for advancing racial equity and social justice, we are going against deeply held orthodoxies about what research and evaluation ought to be. We know this, and we believe that part of the changing how research is done is about making these shifts in our practice more visible as a way to normalize new practices.

We are optimistic about our ability to evolve our practices and the role that researchers and evaluators can play in using science to improve the human condition. This includes advancing racial equity and social justice. Many of us can and are already balancing these tensions—the belief that we can move to practices in ways that do not reproduce inequities in the research process, while still adhering to a more-nuanced, expanded definition of rigor—one that factors in context, learning, and applicability.

And we also know that we cannot and should not “go it alone.”
Who is best equipped to do equitable evaluation?

Racial Equity and Evaluation

The national racial reckoning that began in 2020 and the executive order on equity have continued to shape and transform social norms and policies across the United States. The work of evaluation practitioners is no exception. Many of us working as evaluation and research partners in the social sector have experienced a shift in the field, with more colleagues and partners explicitly embracing, endorsing, and exploring what it means to practice evaluation in service of racial equity. While this was already a dynamic topic of conversation prior to 2020, we see that colleagues are now more comfortable being explicit in their focus on race.

While these discussions remain focused on race and structural racism as a pressing social issue of primary concern, we are seeing shifts in discussions about who is best qualified or positioned to carry out evaluations that center equity, and who can best apply an equity lens.

The Role of Identity in Equity-Centered Evaluation

There are many, among practitioners/evaluators, who will assume that it is always better to have a person of color as the evaluator and/or learning partner in equity-centered work. There are various reasons for this belief. Some we have heard and discussed with colleagues firsthand include:

- People of color will have more credibility when studying communities that are marginalized because they understand what it is like to be minoritized and marginalized
- People of color should be in the evaluator role because they should be in the position of power and influence on redress and to confront historical and present-day structural inequities
- People of color are more qualified to center equity in evaluation because they are anti-racist
It is encouraging to see more organizations seek support from evaluators explicitly asking potential partners to endorse a framework and demonstrate the racial and ethnic diversity of the teams bidding on a project or proposal. And yes, we do still have experiences where a team may ask for a person of color to be part of their project because they think that it looks better, or it is what the client needs to see. Unfortunately, in many of those situations the focus on equity is purely performative or superficial.

Moreover, identifying as a person of color does not guarantee that you will bring an anti-racist perspective or that you are better able to do equity work. This idea does not serve the field as it unnecessarily leaves out the potential and much-needed support from white colleagues and practitioners who play a critical role in transforming the field, so that practicing evaluation in service of racial equity becomes the more normalized standard rather than something we are doing right now because it is ‘in.’ It also dampens the shared sense of accountability, potentially minimizing the collective work needed from both people of color and white practitioners to advance racial equity and social justice.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that representation does not matter. Indeed, it is very important to continue to build out the pipeline of evaluators and researchers who have historically been excluded and underrepresented in the evaluation field. We also acknowledge the tokenizing experiences that may exist as a result of some organizations hiring a person of color to simply check a box without valuing their whole person. And while we know that you do not have to be a person of color to practice evaluation in service of racial equity, we must also stay mindful about how critical it is that we all interrogate our biases when deciding on who is the best person to be your evaluator partner and/or if you have the skills to carry out the work.

Shared Accountability in Advancing Equity-Centered Evaluation

Advancing equity and anti-racism requires the effort and accountability of people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. The process of creating sustainable change in a complex world necessitates collaboration, synergy, and consolidation across differences. In challenging biases about who will be the best fit to advance equity work, it is helpful to view the accountability of doing evaluations in service of racial equity as shared. How can you improve your own practice to model equitable evaluation? And how can you partner with other evaluators along the process?

The journey towards equity is a lifelong mission. Conducting evaluation in the service of equity is an ongoing and iterative practice for all hands involved in the work. As a practice, it both allows and requires us to continually refine and improve our work. Practicing evaluation in service of racial equity is a skill that can be learned and continually honed over time. As Dr. Huilan Krenn of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation reminds us “...practicing equitable evaluation is not, cannot, and should not be only for evaluators of color. As a group of professionals, we all bear the responsibility and obligation to do so.”

We agree and believe that it bears repeating that this is everyone’s work. Conducting evaluation in service of racial equity entails applying these skills throughout the evaluation process. We can begin incorporating them early, starting with our personal worldviews and biases.
Self-Reflection of Evaluators

In line with TRUE’s framework for equity-centered research, evaluators need to do deep self-work—identifying their biases and assumptions, identifying the privileges and disadvantages that society affords one due to aspects of one’s social identity, and understanding how one’s personal background impacts the way they relate to the communities of interest. By being honest with ourselves and transparent with others, we position our lens to view people first with empathy. We learn that while everyone deserves justice and equity, not everyone starts at the same place and not everyone is given a fair chance due to infrastructures of historical oppression.

Knowledge of Past and Current Systems of Oppression

Conducting evaluation in service of racial equity also requires that evaluators build out their knowledge of historical oppression and systemic inequity and bring that lens to their practice. This applies to all of us, regardless of race and ethnicity. By learning about your communities’ history, you demonstrate a willingness to defer to their lived experiences as a source of knowledge rather than coming in solely with an understanding about the community based on research evidence. This is not to undermine research but to pivot what we view as one way of knowing (e.g., “evidence”) with multiple sources of knowledge generated from lived experiences embedded in communities’ history, values, and culture. With this growing source of knowledge, we also learn how to view social issues as rooted in systems rather than in individuals.

Another skill relates to relationship-building with practices that center values of trust in evaluations done with communities, particularly with communities of color. Building equity needs to begin with building meaningful relationships with communities. Many evaluators are likely well versed in collaborative evaluation models; however, evaluators engender strong, reliable, and trustworthy relationships in service of racial equity.

While there is some evidence on how shared identities with communities of interest can facilitate relationship building in research this is not always the case. Everyone, regardless of race and ethnicity, has a shared responsibility to ensure the relationships generated with communities are not harmful and, at the very least, mutually beneficial in the broader scope. Some conflicts are to be expected, and these need to be viewed as opportunities for compromise. But overall, all evaluators need to view relationships with communities as a core part of the work. This can only start when we are willing to unlearn boundaries of evaluation as being objective and value-free, and instead place the heart of communities at the forefront.

We must be ongoing learners, working through our equity journeys and meeting others where they are in theirs. Whether you are a person of color or not, working on those skills can help you improve your evaluation design as you are better able to: 1) incorporate the perspectives of multiple communities, including communities of color, in the consideration of designs, impacts, and outcomes of a decision-making process, 2) consider the impacts of the evaluation on multiple communities, including communities of color, 3) and rethink what types of technical analysis are most appropriate, and turning a critical lens to the assumptions and perspectives we bring to interpretation of data and ultimately the stories we tell in our work.
Community engagement is a loaded word. It could mean anything from gathering input from community organizations or community residents to deferring to community leadership in decisionmaking. The questions frequently asked by evaluation officers in foundations are:

- How should we engage community when we don’t frequently have the chance to work directly with community members and our program colleagues are the ones with the relationships?
- How do we determine the relationships we need to develop?
- How much community engagement is sufficient?
- Are the relationships we develop supposed to be ongoing, in perpetuity?

This slide deck begins to explore these questions and provides some recommendations for how evaluation officers in foundations can conceptualize community and community engagement, and determine the purpose of building relationships with community leaders.
The importance of engaging community shows up everywhere in evaluation, learning, and continuous improvement processes.

- In the planning stage, you need to hear from people who have been historically excluded and who experience disparities in health, education, housing, and other well-being outcomes to understand, from their perspectives, their encounters with the institutions and systems that are supposed to serve and support them.

- In the design stage, you want to ask community members the markers or signals of progress and positive outcomes.

- In the implementation stage, you must make sure that the data are collected through methods that attend to community members' cultures, languages, and contexts.

- In the reflection and learning stage, you want to invite community members to co-interpret and reflect on the findings and their implications.
Community Engagement isn’t a difficult process, but it does require intentionality, thoughtfulness, and careful planning. If not done properly and treated with care, it can do more harm than good. Here are 12 questions you should ask yourself as you plan to engage community in evaluation.

### Community Engagement: What’s the process?

1. Why is the foundation engaging community?
2. Who is the community that the foundation wants to engage? (grantees and/or other community of interest)
3. What is in the community members’ self-interest to do it? What’s the power dynamic at play?
4. What are the relationships that can be used to engage the community in the most appropriate way? Who is being invited and by whom? What’s the risk for tokenism? What’s the power dynamic at play?
5. Who are you, your demographic background, and position in relation to the community members? What’s the power dynamic you must be mindful of?
6. Where/what is the venue for the engagement? Is it historically and culturally appropriate?
7. What barriers to participation must be intentionally removed?
8. Who is asking the questions and facilitating the exchange?
9. What and how is information being shared, delivered, and exchanged? Are the methods culturally appropriate?
10. Where is there potential for tension and conflict and how to be prepared?
11. How do you bring closure to the engagement?
12. How should you continue the relationship and relationship building process? Should you or someone else do this?

You can start by asking, why is the foundation engaging community and who is the community it’s trying to engage? Then, you consider what’s in it for community members and what power dynamics are at play? What existing relationships can be leveraged to initiate contact and relationship building? In the middle of this, you also should consider your own demographic background, position, and other considerations in relation to the people you want to engage.

The next set of questions focuses more on the logistics of engagement — what is the venue for the engagement, what are the barriers to participation that must be intentionally removed, who is asking the questions and facilitating exchanges between the foundation and the community, and what is the information being exchanged? Are all these methods appropriate for the cultures of the people you want to engage? You must also be prepared for potential tension or conflict between individuals, and perhaps who they represent. The last two steps are concerned with bringing closure to the engagement, and whether and how you might continue the relationship and relationship building process?

We’re going to dive into each question and step, but first, let’s pause and ask, which of the 12 things do you think you do well? How about the foundation you work for or with, which of these 12 things do you think it does well?
Checklist for Planning
Community Engagement Process

- Why is the foundation engaging community?
- Who is the community that the foundation wants to engage? (grantees or other community of interest)
- What is in the community members’ self-interest to do it? What’s the power dynamic at play?
- What are the relationships that can be used to engage the community in the most appropriate way? Who is being invited and by whom? What’s the risk for tokenism? What’s the power dynamic at play?
- Who are you — your demographic background and position — in relation to the community members? What’s the power dynamic you must be mindful of?
- Where and what is the venue for the engagement? Is it historically and culturally appropriate?
- What barriers to participation must be intentionally removed?
- Who is asking the questions and facilitating the exchange?
- What and how is information being shared, delivered, and exchanged? Are the methods culturally appropriate?
- Where is there potential for tension and conflict and how can you be prepared?
- How do you bring closure to the engagement?
- How should you continue the relationship building process? Should you or someone else do this?
In evaluations in service of racial equity, the primary goal for the foundation to engage community — through evaluation and learning — is to co-produce useful information to support the community’s influence, advocacy, and shifting of power (see Practice Guide on Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity: Deepening Community Engagement).

To fulfill this goal, the foundation can engage community to do one or more of the following:

- Generate data that is useful to all parties and create ownership of the data;
- Amplify the voices of those who are typically and historically excluded and let those voices help educate the foundation board and staff;
- Develop relationships in order to identify new organizations and emerging priorities to fund;
- Connect information to people’s daily lives to ensure that the information is relevant and not produced by or reflective of “ivory tower” thinking;
- Understand what constitutes “change,” “progress,” and “success” to inform metrics and set realistic expectations; and
- Contextualize data to learn what’s behind it, especially if the data are quantitative in nature.

Why else do you think your foundation wants to engage community?
You can add new boxes to the slide.
On this slide, one of the purposes of engaging community is to be able to contextualize data through the eyes of community members who experience disparities and inequity. It’s crucial that you share the data in easily digestible ways. One helpful method is to set up “data stations” where at each, someone can provide an overview of the data and solicit feedback from community members. Another method is to invite community members to a meal, visualize the data on placemats, and assign a person to facilitate a discussion over food. Examples of questions you can ask include:

- What do the trends tell you? What is surprising or not surprising to you about the trends?
- What do you think might have affected the trends?
- What would the trends look like ideally?
- What do you think needs to change in the way things currently work to change the trends?

Another purpose for engaging community is to make sure that the information you collect is relevant, useful, and connected to people’s lives. For instance, if you want to make transportation more accessible, affordable, and equitable, you want to know about community members’ experience with how they can safely and inexpensively get to their jobs, healthcare facilities, grocery stores, and other resources, and not just analyze secondary data about type of transportation and commuting time.
A third reason for engaging community is to hear directly from community members and amplify their voices, especially of those who have been historically dismissed, diminished, and excluded. You can use their stories, with their permission of course, to educate the foundation’s board and leadership and make the case for more responsive and impactful grant strategies.

A fourth and a common reason, is to understand what “change,” “progress,” and “success” mean and look like from the perspectives of those who have been historically excluded. Frequently, evaluators work closely with program staff to identify indicators and measures of change, from the foundation’s viewpoint in response to their trustees’ expectations. These expectations are likely unreasonable because the individuals don’t likely have direct experience with the problem they’re attempting to solve nor can they fully understand the forces that shape people’s daily lives. As such, asking community members what type of change they’re likely to see, hear about, and experience can help the foundation be more targeted in its strategies, understand the complexities involved, and manage expectations.

An equally important purpose for engaging community is to ensure that the evaluation and learning generate data and insights that are useful to everyone, including community members, and help everyone feel that the data are theirs to use, not only for the funder or only to fulfill a funder’s requirement. This means that part of your task is to build community members’ knowledge and skills about data collection, analysis, and use — not to become data scientists, but to have enough proficiency to ensure that the data are not used to misrepresent their community and do harm.

Last but not least, the foundation might want to engage the community and develop new relationships to identify new organizations and emerging priorities to fund. Through an intentional process, the foundation can learn more about the social networks and sources of support for communities. Through these relationships, staff can better understand — firsthand — the strengths and concerns of community members. This curiosity on the foundation’s part demonstrates a strength-based approach and generates knowledge about the informal and formal community leadership and networks.
Who is the Community that You as Evaluation Officer and the Foundation Want to Engage?

- Foundation's program and other staff
- Grantees
- Other communities of interest
  - Don't assume that people who share similar racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status, place of residence, and other attributes belong to the same community
  - Community exists inside relationships that:
    - Ensure the basic needs of members are met
    - Promote the identity, culture, and language of members
    - Define members' social boundaries by providing opportunities for them to interact only with one other
    - Provide connection to heritage and roots
    - Become an avenue for helping members understand their environment

The reasons for why you want to engage community will determine who in the community you want to connect with. If you define community as a network of relationships bounded by a common interest, goal, or identity, there could be many "communities" you might want to engage — again, depending on the purpose of the engagement.

As the evaluation officer, one community could be the foundation's program and other staff. Often, you will need to collaborate with your colleagues responsible for programming, communications, operations, and more. Another obvious community are grantees who might be part of a larger initiative. There are also other communities that you may want to connect with that may be defined by geographic location, profession or trade, demographic attribute, heritage, etc.
Let’s pause and think about the community or communities you are planning to engage or are engaging.

- Why are you engaging them?
- Are you connecting with the appropriate people in the community?
- Do you need to adjust your community engagement plan and tactics?
People will often decide to engage with you (the evaluation officer) and help you if you already have a relationship with them. If you don’t, it’s worth it to find out why people might want to engage with you, the foundation, and one another.

You must be attentive to the power differences at play

For instance, as the evaluator officer, you might be motivated to reach out to community members to enhance your report to the board, to ensure the programs you’re evaluating center equity, and to encourage grantees to collect the needed data. Program staff might be interested in collaborating to see if you can gather information about potential partners and emerging priorities as part of the evaluation. Grantees want to comply with the foundation’s requirements in hopes to receive more funding or deepen relationships with program officers and you to strengthen their position with the foundation. Members of other communities might have similar self-interests.

As part of the process of understanding and leveraging everyone’s self-interests, you must be attentive to the power differences at play. You, as a representative of the foundation, will always hold a position of power because you’re perceived as associated with resources and decisions that can affect the grantee’s funding. There might even be power differences among grantees or the communities of interest that you should try to understand and prepare for as part of the engagement process.
For example, in a project to decrease community members’ opposition to undocumented day laborers, the invitation from the funder to participate in a series of community meetings had to be brokered by legal advocates trusted by the day laborers. Also, the funder asked the day laborers to bring their friends so they could feel confident in numbers compared to the number of white resident leaders.

Be careful, nevertheless, of the risk for tokenism when you decide to who invite and how. There are no clear solutions other than to check your reason (or the foundation’s) for inviting a particular person to be part of the community engagement process.
Engagement can occur in-person or virtually. If virtual, there are several considerations to keep in mind:

- Participants should be familiar with the platform you intend to use;
- Activities should occur during times that are convenient for the participants and not the foundation (remember that some people cannot take time off during the day to participate);
- Effective facilitation is necessary;
- Permission should be sought when using the camera and recording meetings;
- Small and large group discussions should be used to engage the participants; and
- There should be clear follow-up and next steps.

In-person engagement is not that different. It’s crucial in this format to consider the history and cultural appropriateness of the meeting place. Some places may carry negative histories for certain populations.

There are also barriers to participation that need to be intentionally removed, including whether participants have broadband access to attend virtual activities, have traditional or non-traditional working hours, have children they need to send to or pick up from school, lack a camera for virtual meetings, require translation and interpretation assistance, need childcare during the meetings, require transportation to attend, and risk feeling discomfort or unsafe due to the venue or discussion. The foundation can provide resources and assistance to remove these barriers, from providing stipends or gift cards to covering childcare and transportation costs to securing translators and interpreters.
Who is Facilitating the Exchange? What and How is Information Being Shared, Delivered, and Exchanged?

**Who is facilitating the dialogue?**
- Ensure that the demographic attributes of the community are reflected in the facilitators’ backgrounds
- Ensure that the facilitators have the skills to build rapport and handle difficult conversations
- Have a protocol for yourself and other facilitators or support staff about how to pivot or handle an uncomfortable moment
  - Call for a break
  - Pull someone aside
  - Pause and be transparent about the “moment” (e.g., acknowledge the discomfort)

**What and how are information being shared, delivered, and exchanged?**
- Check if you are being extractive and consider what information you’d share in return
- Use different tools, including a slide deck and flip charts
- Consider different options to engage people, including small group discussions and written notes

Effective facilitation — thoughtful, inclusive, and intentional — is essential for any community engagement activity or process. There are a few considerations to ensure effective facilitation, including making sure that the facilitators have experiences that are relatable to participating community members and are skilled in building rapport and handling difficult conversations. As the person responsible for community engagement, you might also want to co-create a protocol with them for handling uncomfortable moments.

Before, during, and after a meeting, information is most likely being shared, delivered, and exchanged. While it sounds simple, it’s important that you think about this process, including whether you are being extractive by taking information from community members and not giving any information in return, and whether you need different formats in response to people with different learning styles.
Disagreement, tension, and even conflict is inevitable in any human interaction and you need to be prepared for it. There aren't any quick or easy answers, but you might want to do your homework ahead of time and find out if there are any historical or current divisions in the community you are trying to engage. For instance, if you are engaging a community of program officers, there could be disagreements about program strategies, or if you are engaging a community of grantees, there might be tension between grantees that are grassroots organizations and those that are large established intermediaries. You might also want to check if any of the community members applied for a grant from the foundation before and were declined. Another way to prepare is to work through potential scenarios with your facilitator and agree on how you could respond to tension or conflict in real time.

**How to Be Prepared for Tension and Conflict?**

**Do your homework:**
- Find out if there are divisions in the community and among the groups of people you are engaging—historical and current
- Check to see if any of the participants applied for a grant from the foundation before and were declined
- Identify the large established organizations and small grassroots organizations that will be sharing the space and their history of collaboration and competition
- Go through potential scenarios with the facilitator and agree on how to respond in real time should the scenario occur

Finally, you want to be clear about the next steps and provide community members with some sort of summary or communication to bring closure to the engagement. At this point, you also want to weigh the extent to which you should continue the relationship building process, for what purpose, and who might “own” the relationship from thereon. Not every engagement or relationship needs to continue in perpetuity — it’s about the purpose of the engagement and relationship.

**How to Bring Closure to the Engagement and Continue the Relationship Building Process**

**Closure**
- Share summary of events
- Integrate information into future documentation

**Continue relationship building process**
- Be clear about the purpose of continuing the relationship building process
- Consider who could “own” the relationship — you or someone else
Consider everything that was just shared about engaging community with the goal of co-producing useful information to support a community’s influence, advocacy, and shifting of power.

- What are your key takeaways?
- What additional resources and capacities might you need?
- What conditions facilitate or challenge your ability to engage community?

Community engagement is a process, and it won't always go smoothly. Take the time to reflect after each event or process and consider how you can continuously get better at engaging community to influence, advocate, and shift power by using evaluation.

Most of us agree that we should engage community members in evaluation. Typically, we ask community members to inform the theory of change, logic model, and measures of success, and to help interpret the findings. So, what would we do differently if committed to evaluations in service of racial equity?

We would be deliberate about sharing information that can contribute to community members’ ability to influence decisions that affect their access to resources and opportunities and their treatment by those in power. We would work to ensure that the community members’ interests and priorities are at the forefront of funders, organizations, and policymakers’ agendas. This is meaningful community engagement — responsible, responsive, and genuine engagement without tokenizing community members — and it goes beyond how community engagement is typically practiced in evaluation. And, this is hard. We’ll probably not get it right the first, second, or third time, but we must keep trying.

We know that these objections and challenges come up time and again when we work to engage community, and we have to overcome them:

The Value-free Debate. We are sidelined by debates inside and outside the evaluation profession about whether evaluation should be value-free and impartial, or whether evaluation should intentionally promote racial equity through its methodologies, as if they are mutually exclusive. This debate creates a false dichotomy, wasting precious time that we can use to hone the practice of evaluation that is in service of racial equity and scientifically rigorous.

The “We Aren’t Community Organizers” Rebuke. We don’t work on the frontlines of community change, but we can help build community capacity to use data to drive the change community leaders want to see. We can help people who direct nonprofits, advocate for social justice, and lead community change — who are not immersed in the practice of evaluation — about what they can expect from evaluations that are in service of racial equity, and not be confused about rhetoric, philosophies, and the like. Simply put, they need to know what an evaluation could look like that supports and strengthens their work to achieve racial equity.

What is another objection or challenge? How can you address it?
Evaluators working in service of racial equity have to operationalize what it means to engage in a way that moves the community toward developing the power to influence decisions that affect their lives. Here are some questions that we can ask as part of the engagement process throughout the evaluation.1

Getting started. As we begin engaging our evaluation, we can ask community members:

- What do you want to learn from the evaluation to help you advocate for systems, policies, and practices that help to ensure your community has fair access to resources and opportunities?
- What does change and success look or feel like that will signal progress toward racial equity?
- How do you want your story to be told to ensure no harm is done to your community, and more importantly, to help change narratives about your community?
- What experiences have you had, if any, with past evaluations and what was helpful or not?
- What is meaningful involvement to you that doesn’t look or feel like tokenism?
- What can get in the way of your involvement?
- (Jot down other questions you can ask)

Planning. As you continue to plan the evaluation, you can ask community members:

- Are we still adhering to the agreements? Which ones have we been less successful in adhering to? Why do you think that is the case? What agreements might we need to change?
- Are there any emerging opportunities and challenges affecting your community that the evaluation could help you tackle? Is there any data the evaluation can provide to assist you?
- Where can the evaluation and we, as the evaluator, do better to support the community and the pursuit of racial equity?
- Aside from the evaluation, is the initiative supporting the community as intended? Why or why not?
- (Jot down other questions you can ask)
Implementation. When you move into implementation, you want to keep asking:

- Do the findings help you and your community advocate for more equitable policies, systems, and practices, and reduce disparities? Why or why not?
- What is the story to be told? Who should tell it and who should hear it?
- Which parts need to be framed carefully to prevent negative consequences for the community?
- Which parts of the story can be shared publicly, and which can’t? Who decides this and when?
- What reports or evaluation products could generate support for your advocacy for racial equity?
- What needs to be improved in the evaluation?
- (Jot down other questions you can ask)

We acknowledge that evaluators’ capacity to ask and answer these questions are shaped in part by the:

- Amount of resources available for community engagement;
- Length of time for the engagement process;
- Mindsets and behaviors of funders, organizations doing the work, evaluators, and others about the function of evaluation beyond collecting, analyzing, and reporting data;
- Facilitation skills of the evaluator; and
- Willingness of the funder or the organization leading the work to share the power of decision-making with community leaders.

Despite the real challenges and guardrails that come up for us as evaluators, it’s time for us to shift our focus to how we practice evaluation in a way that facilitates racial equity, learn from our experiences, and keep pushing the practice forward.
How to Respond to Scenarios about Engaging Community in Evaluation

Overview

The Practice Guide *Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity: Deepen Community Engagement* provides suggestions on how to incorporate and align the core value of authentic community engagement into evaluation practice, as one critical path toward racial equity. However, community engagement often sounds easier than it actually is, and we can get “stuck” at various stages. Evaluators raised questions related to challenges they face when attempting to apply the suggestions in the guide. Those prompted this tip sheet which provides a set of common scenarios and related questions that evaluators have faced when engaging community along with tangible ways to help get “unstuck.”
The practice guide explains that a necessary role for evaluators working in service of racial equity is to ensure they take the time to learn about the community they’re studying with the rationale that, “If we, as evaluators, are learning about a community as we should be, we can articulate things about the community that we didn’t know before. We should also find our assumptions about the community being challenged by our new knowledge.” Getting to know the community is a foundational step in doing evaluation work that centers community engagement — where “community members most affected by the work that is being funded and evaluated are involved in the evaluation” and their “interests and priorities are in the forefront of funders’, organizations’, and policymakers’ agendas,” according to the guide. Getting to know the community, furthermore, can orient evaluators and program implementers to an asset-based perspective which acknowledges that there is a lot to learn from and with community, rather than a perspective that assumes the community only has needs which can be solved by benefitting from a particular strategy or program (Hood, Campbell, & Baker, 2023).

Evaluation budgets must allow and account for community engagement if funders and evaluators are committed to it as a critical path toward doing evaluation in service of racial equity. Activities to get to know the community are not usually part of traditional evaluation budgets. Changing the way we’re contracted and how evaluations are practiced in service of racial equity is not the evaluators’ responsibility alone. Funders and organizations who are part of the ecosystem of grantmaking, implementation, capacity-building, research and evaluation, and advocacy must also be willing to change the way they contract, grant, implement, and practice.

**Decide what’s right and comfortable for you.**

Community engagement should be treated as important as other methodological matters, such as validity and reliability. It shouldn’t be compromised or traded-off with another methodological matter. Until funders recognize this and are willing to allocate resources to it as part of the process, evaluators are limited in how much they can do within existing budgets and how much they’re willing to do beyond what’s minimally expected to ensure a rigorous evaluation.
Educate funders

Evaluators have a responsibility to educate funders about the importance of allocating the proper amount of time and resources for community engagement. We can do the following:

Explain why time spent getting to know the community matters:

To have real community input that informs the theory of change, outcomes and indicators, and measures of progress, evaluators need to understand who the community is and how it’s structured and organized.

- This understanding will help evaluators identify who in the community can accurately describe the context within which the initiative or program is taking place, check the assumptions underlying the initiative, ground the evaluation in reality, co-design the evaluation, and ensure it generates insights that can shift power to the community.
- Accurate information will increase the likelihood that the initiative or program’s progress (or lack thereof) will be evaluated and measured appropriately.

Work with the funder to determine how best to compensate community members for participating:

A key component of true partnership with the community includes fair and appropriate compensation to community members for their time. Too often, community members’ time is seen as being offered for free, which devalues them as equal partners.

- There is no agreement in the literature about the “right” amount of compensation for adult or youth participants.
- It is not enough for funders and evaluators to determine what the compensation would be for the community. A key step is to find out what the community members themselves regard as fair for what they are being asked to do, and also what they value as compensation — a gift card, cash, donation, pro bono service, etc.
- It would be better to reduce the number of participants and pay each one of them fairly rather than have a large sample size and pay each only a small and token compensation.

Be prepared to describe the trade-offs if the budget or timeline don’t suffice:

Evaluation budgets and timelines are typically not sufficient to support the full extent of community engagement.

- A systematic analysis of the gain, risk, and loss of not engaging the community to the full extent can be helpful to conduct, share, and negotiate with the funder.
- Community engagement activities shouldn’t be scaled back to allow for the full extent of data collection. Instead, consider how to reduce data collection to be able to still meaningfully engage the community. For example, being able to offer fair compensation to a smaller number of participants can help participants feel valued and engaged.
Scenerio 2

I have reached out to the community leaders we’re supposed to contact as part of the evaluation. But I haven’t heard from them. I don’t really have relationships with these leaders, but if I tell them it’s part of the evaluation of Foundation X’s initiative to build community capacity, including an infrastructure for policy advocacy and other efforts to effect systems change, why am I not hearing back?

Spend time building relationships and here are some ways to help you do that.

- Be thoughtful about planning time in interviews, focus groups, and site visits to build rapport and share information about who you are and why you’re interested in the evaluation topic.
- Have a conversation with the participants using a semi-structured guide rather than reading from questionnaire or form, do your homework to understand the person you’re engaging, and be curious about the their interests and viewpoints — they aren’t “subjects.”
- Meet people where they’re physically comfortable and it’s convenient for them, not for you.
- Identify and team up with people who already have relationships to assist you.
- If a relationship is built, natural connections, interests, and other concerns will emerge so that over time, the relationship becomes less transactional.

Evaluators may believe they’re doing everything possible to reach the communities they want to work with. However, it could be the words and communication style that result in little response (as opposed to lack of interest). According to the guide, “Evaluators have a tendency to use jargon and mystify evaluation by using technical concepts and terms to describe scientific rigor and the methods they use.”
Consider the language evaluators use in outreach efforts:

- How much of the communication used to invite community leaders and other stakeholders to participate uses language and jargon that people who haven't made a profession out of evaluation or community engagement would understand? Some terms that have become part of the jargon used by funders, evaluators, and other community and systems change practitioners include “power,” “capacity building,” “empowerment,” “mixed methods,” “technical assistance,” “bring to the table,” and “lived experiences,” among others.

- Although these terms are routinely used in the evaluation profession and need no explanation in these circles, the same may not be true for those outside of this context. For example, immigrants and refugees from authoritarian governments may associate the word “power” with the military or dictatorship. Similarly, people in community may have no idea what “technical assistance” or “mixed methods” mean. If the people with whom you want to partner don’t see your messaging as engaging and relevant or if they have to puzzle over what you’re offering and asking of them, you miss an opportunity to pique their interest and thus get a response.

- What can you do?
  - Define terms to make them more tangible to the communities you’re working with. They can be talked about in ways that are relevant to how the community might use them. Imagine explaining to somebody who has nothing to do with your profession.
    - “Capacity building” could be talked about in terms of the knowledge, skills, resources, and relationships needed to achieve their goals. “Technical assistance” could be explained as the support offered to help the organization or community acquire or enhance the knowledge, skills, expertise, and resources needed to solve their problems. “Power” could be translated to their ability to get what they want and to make decisions that affect their lives.
    - Consider the cultures and experiences of the people you’re working with. What words are relevant, resonant, and meaningful? What words could have negative connotations or be offensive in another culture or context?
Tip Sheet

Scenario 3

People tend not to like evaluators, I know that. But I have a job to do. What can I do differently to show that the evaluation can be beneficial to the community? I’m also uncomfortable about how the community members I’ve spoken to seem to associate me with the foundation. They keep telling me that they hope the evaluation will show how important their work is and persuade the foundation to renew their grant.

One of the first steps is to recognize communities’ past experiences with evaluators. Ask community leaders and community members in your first interaction, “When you think of evaluation, what comes to mind,” “When have you had a positive or negative experience with evaluation and evaluators,” and “What do you wish the evaluator did differently.” Listen, really listen, and make sure you don’t repeat the behaviors that were disingenuous, disrespectful, and harmful.

The reality is that evaluators do have a relationship with funders and often funding decisions are tied to evaluation findings. While evaluators can do their best to be good partners to communities, a range of circumstances and decisions outside of their control can affect relationships with community leaders and others participating in evaluations. According to the practice guide, it’s important for you to “be mindful about who you are working for or contracted by because your affiliation with the funder or organization can affect people’s perceptions and assumptions about you. If community members are skeptical about the funder or organization, you have to explore why they feel this way and be honest with the funder or organization about what you learned. You also must be careful not to replicate the funder or organization’s practices that contribute to the community members’ skepticism, be transparent with community members about the purpose of the evaluation, and ensure that community members are meaningfully engaged in the evaluation. While evaluators are not responsible for repairing the relationship between the funder or organization and community members, they are responsible for ensuring that the evaluation provides information that could improve the relationship and more important, not do further harm.”
Communities often have deeply entrenched challenges that funders aren’t prepared to address.

Manage upstream

Funders often respond in one of two ways: 1) overpromise or 2) stay silent on the issues. Evaluators can raise this tension during the development or revision of the theory of change and logic model by querying the funder’s assumptions and helping to clearly articulate what the grant initiative or program can and cannot do, and what the funder is prepared to do and not do. For example, if maternal health equity is the funder’s goal and to achieve this goal requires expanded Medicaid coverage for new mothers, is the funder prepared to advocate at the state level and support advocacy efforts to change the policy? The funder’s answer will determine if this outcome appears on the theory of change and logic model, and how grantees and partners respond to the appearance or absence for this outcome.

Create transparency

As with most trusting relationships, transparency is an important element of partnerships with communities.

On page 16 of the practice guide, there are aspects of the evaluation that are important for transparency (e.g., clear process for decisionmaking, clear expectations about roles and timelines, compensation for community participants’ time). Additional important areas for transparency includes the decisions that you’re able or unable to influence about the criteria for grant renewal, the evaluation design and budget constraints, and the timeline and what might be driving it.

Sometimes funders, evaluators, and other decisionmakers can make the mistake of assuming that the organizations and community leaders with whom they work aren’t able to understand, accept, and deal with the constraints and complexities of philanthropy, research, and evaluation. This assumption can come across to grantees and partners as condescending. Funders may also mistakenly associate clarity with being prescriptive and wielding their power. On the contrary, the lack of clear instructions creates incorrect expectations about goals, objectives, and outcomes. We, through the use of the theory of change, logic model, and measurement framework, have the opportunity to hold funders and others to the highest level of clarity, which also means transparency.
It’s common for us to receive feedback that participating in evaluation activities isn’t a top priority for program implementers and community participants, and instead tends to be burdensome and get in the way of their actual priorities. This is usually because evaluators tend to think about their and the funders’ information needs and not those of program implementers and community participants. Here are some ideas for how to shift the benefits from the evaluation to the community partners:

- Be clear what actually benefits community partners and make sure evaluators can deliver.
- We can offer free technical assistance (e.g., workshop, webinar) about data collection and use, review data collection instruments for the community partner, or help with interpreting and communicating findings.
- We can identify resources that community partners might find useful (e.g., promising practices, sources of knowledge they sought).
- Ask community partners what they want to know to be successful so that the evaluation helps generate information they can use to advocate for themselves.
- Work with the funder to determine how we can help grantees complete their progress reports as one of the data collection activities.

Reference

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What Evaluators Mean When They Talk About ‘Lived Experience’

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AUTHORS
Annapurna Ghosh
Managing Associate, Community Science

Danielle Gilmore
Senior Analyst, Community Science

Recently, my colleague asked, “what is all this with ‘lived experience’ lately?” I was unsure how to answer because this term had already become a buzzword in my mind. I thought I knew what it meant, but then I couldn’t quite define it when asked so directly.

Here are a few of the definitions I found when I went looking:

- Lived experience is a depiction of a person’s experiences and decisions, as well as the knowledge gained from these experiences and choices.
- Lived experience is the things that someone has experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have.
- Lived experience belongs to people who have gained knowledge through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events, rather than through assumptions and constructs from other people, research, or media. (Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). Oxford: A dictionary of media and communication (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.)

These definitions started to give the term back its meaning for me — knowledge from direct, first-hand involvement experiences, not simply what someone has heard about or studied.

Over the last few years, I have seen an increase in funders asking for “lived experience” as part of project designs. For example, the federal agency of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states, “Persons with lived experience and/or their family members should be closely involved in designing and carrying out all data and program evaluation activities.”

Rightfully so. For too long, research and public health programs have been designed by people who do not actually have the direct experience of living with specific health conditions or needing the services that programs intend to deliver to be helpful (people in the so-called ivory tower).
As an evaluator who is moving my practice towards evaluation in service of racial equity, I have had to acknowledge that I should not be the one driving the questions to determine the progress or success of a program, but that information should come from those affected by the issue, program, or designed service. After all, progress and success matter most to them.

Nevertheless, my colleague’s comment helped me hit pause on my understanding of “lived experience” and explore what I know and don’t know. The overarching questions that arose are:

- How do we know when we have effectively involved people with lived experience in our evaluations?
- How do we know we are meeting the intended outcomes to engaging people with lived experience?

There are implications when thinking of incorporating people with lived experience and although there are things that we are not always thinking about in practice, there are resources we can consult and put into practice. Those who study phenomenology and evaluators following Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Community Based Participatory Evaluation as well as other frameworks may be able to apply tenets and principles from these frameworks to answer the specific concerns and deeper questions I have posed here.

**It Needs To Be Meaningful**

Although my colleague had heard the term “lived experience” many times, it was not easy for her to understand its meaning and relevance, even though there were people in her field asking her to incorporate people with lived experience into her work. It may be because the term has characteristics of being a buzzword. A buzzword is defined as a word or phrase, often an item of jargon, which is fashionable at a particular time or in a particular context.

Incorporating the expertise that comes from a person’s lived experience into evaluation questions and data collection methods seems to be progressive in terms of moving power from evaluators to the people who have more direct experience with the subject of study. Undoubtedly, some people have a grounded, intelligent, and earnest sense of what it means to include “lived experience” in their evaluations.

On the other hand, the term is often used with little explanation to the point where name dropping “lived experience” can elevate the description of a research or evaluation study because there is a sense that doing so is positive and desirable.

If the term becomes overly used with little understanding among those who adopt it, it runs the risk of becoming a fashionable buzzword. Soon we could find ourselves incorporating lived experience without really thinking about or understanding how to do so meaningfully because we don’t have a substantive, operational framework to guide us. It may become another checkbox among many other checkboxes in evaluation. In addition to a loss of meaningful application, checkboxes contribute to making things sound and look easier than they are. For example, engaging people with lived experience, a form of community engagement, would be undermined if there was not an understanding among people in power that this is not simply done, but rather involves the task of giving up some of their own power.
Buzzwords come and go. People follow them with little attachment when the next trendy word appears. Is “lived experience” in vogue or here to stay? If incorporating people’s lived experience is important to evaluation, let’s be intentional about centering its use in a meaningful way and not let it become a buzzword.

It Must Be Specific

Evaluators need definitions. We inherently measure the extent to which things are happening as intended, and thus need defining criteria.

Defining lived experience by saying it is about people with direct experience is not enough to know how to use it in practice in a way that indicates who, what, when, and how much. In order to have meaningful use and buy-in of lived experience, we need a clearer definition in order to operationalize it and measure its success.

This definition is appealing. People who have gained knowledge through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events, rather than through assumptions and constructs from other people, research, or media. (Chandler & Munday, 2011)

But it could also essentially be applied to all people who have had experience. This would be all people.

There is work to do. To start, it would be beneficial to identify the type of lived experience. For example:

- What specifically does the experience need to be about?
- If it is related to a study of substance use treatment, is the lived experience that we are looking for from people seeking treatment or undergoing treatment? Furthermore, among that group, is it the specific lived experience of people of color experiencing discrimination by healthcare providers, who have no access to care, and who experience ongoing trauma due to racism?
- Would the lived experience include family members of people who have helped individuals try to access care and navigate treatment?
- Would it include treatment providers?
- Does the experience need to have occurred in the past, or can it be an everyday experience?
- Could it be a one-time experience, or does it need to have occurred multiple times?
- Is it an experience that would have to occur for some time, and if so what length of time counts?

Once there is more clarity in the defining factors, we need to ask to what extent there is a collective understanding of the working definition. A collective understanding will ensure greater transparency and consistency in how lived experience is incorporated into evaluation activities and its successes measured.

It Must Consider Gain and Harm

When asking people with direct experience to be informants to those who are designing evaluations, we need to ask:

- Who stands to gain?
- Who is at risk of being harmed?
It is noble of evaluators to acknowledge that they should not be the sole determiners of evaluation design and that people with more direct experience with the topic have expertise.

However, enthusiastically inviting people with lived experience to participate on the evaluation team or in an advisory capacity may not play out as well as intended. Examining the structures in which evaluations are conducted is a necessary first step. Evaluation teams are often made up of people employed to conduct evaluations. If people with relevant lived experience are requested to participate, planning their involvement needs to consider that those people are not necessarily paid to do this work, and it very well may be in addition or in opposition to the work they do or to their daily activities. However important to them, involvement may also mean loss of income and/or time for other planned activities.

Furthermore, the context and structures in which the participation takes place must be considered. For example, if individuals with lived experience were invited to participate, we must ask:

- Would it be feasible for them to get to the setting where the employed evaluators are?
- Would they be able to be off work or find childcare during that time?
- Would they be comfortable and feel safe?
- Would they risk any harm or being retraumatized—physical, psychological, or legal—given the location, space, or others involved? What safeguards have been put into practice to minimize these risks?

Evaluators need to think about what is said and the language used.

- Is the language full of jargon that would exclude, and perhaps tax, those unfamiliar and thus limit the expression of their lived experience expertise and full participation?
- Does the language that relates to the area of lived experience convey respect, i.e., have the evaluators done their work to ensure they are using appropriate and person-centered language that will not harm the individuals?
- Has the evaluation team checked their own biases and mental models around this particular type of lived experience?
- Have those who are invited to share their lived experience aware of potential discomfort and have they had a chance to set boundaries on the topics discussed?
- Does the evaluation consider potential translation and interpretation services for participants who are more comfortable expressing themselves in a different language?

With the positive intention of gaining diverse perspectives, evaluators may overlook the systems that people with lived experience have interacted with and how those play a role in their well-being. For example, if an evaluator puts together an evaluation advisory committee made up of people from various parts of the system related to mental illness, they also need to consider the potential experiences these people may have had with each other. A person with experience of untreated mental illness may have had challenging and harmful experiences with treatment providers and law enforcement. Evaluators ought to be intentional and informed when they bring people together in service of their evaluations so that they are not the creators of undue discomfort and power differentials for their own gain.
SAMHSA has created “Participation Guidelines for Individuals with Lived Experience and Family” in which they describe the need for informed consent to be provided to people with lived experience prior to their participation.

Evaluators can incorporate people with lived experience into their evaluations. However, if it is the evaluator who gains while those with lived experience risk harm, this effort tokenizes people with lived experience, and we can do better by considering reciprocity.

**It Is More Than A Number**

In evaluation, we look at amounts, both in process and outcome measurements. Incorporating people with lived experience into evaluation activities could be measured in terms of how it is implemented using process measures, and what it led to using outcome measures.

Process measures might include how many people with lived experience were involved. However, it is unclear if any factors have been developed to determine what number would be considered successful. It may be a particular proportion of the evaluation group. On the other hand, a successful number might be a minimum number, no matter the size of the evaluation group. Evaluators can ask:

- How much representation from people of lived experience is needed to be considered meaningful input?
- In terms of the rest of the evaluation team accepting the validity of their expertise, what number of people would be considered sufficient?
- Given the variation in how people experience things and the range of perspectives among those with the lived experience, what factors for that particular lived experience need to be taken into consideration in order to determine the appropriate number to be able to be most representative of that variation?

While determining this number, we also need to acknowledge that a power imbalance may exist within the evaluation team in situations when most people do not have the particular lived experience. Those who bring their lived experience expertise may be questioned, judged, and even discredited by traditional evaluators or other stakeholders. When interacting with historically disenfranchised and excluded populations it is important to establish trust and put checks and balances in place to address any power differentials. People who traditionally have not had power often do not know what to do when it is finally passed to them. This may call for building capacity among the community of people with the lived experience.

Outcome measures, similarly, need careful consideration beyond the numbers. The experience of participation in the evaluation activities as well as the outcome identified by the persons with the lived experience ought to be part of the measurement strategy. Quantitative and qualitative methods may contribute to understanding what the

**It is Not a Commodity**

Ideally, evaluators are intentional and thoughtful about the people with lived experience who would be appropriate to engage in their current evaluation and would approach these individuals accordingly. In reality, however, convenience factors and existing relationships with people with lived experience often dictate participation. For example, evaluation teams that are under time pressure to
get their project started might employ structures used in the past to describe the activities, recruit, and set up meetings. This may result in limiting the pool of people who might participate in the evaluation, leading us to question if the people with lived experience who can and do participate in evaluation activities may be different from those who cannot. The people who do participate may, in fact, have common characteristics that make it easier for them to engage. For example, they may be a subset of people who find it easier to take time out of the day when evaluation planning meetings or data collection events occur and can also more easily access the location or web platform used for the meeting. Furthermore, it may be for some common reason they are known to the evaluation team and/or their network of contacts. How might these individuals with common characteristics play a role in influencing the evaluation compared to the individuals who may not share these characteristics?

Rather than approaching the engagement of lived experience as if it is a generic commodity to fill slots where individual differences do not matter, evaluators can be thoughtful and intentional when they plan their evaluations in order for a variety of people (i.e., a diverse sample) with the particular lived experience to be able to participate, leading to richer and more nuanced input. For example, evaluators can create budgets and timelines which make possible a wider outreach period, rather than relying on known contacts. They can also increase accessibility and feasibility to attend by varying the time and location of activities, as well as considering factors of the meeting set-up such as the technology required, the language in which it is conducted, and accessibility supports provided.

**It Is Not A One-time Thing**

If there is an impetus to create structures in which people with lived experience have a continued and consistent voice in evaluation designs, evaluators need to think about longer-term sustained involvement and relationship. Sustained involvement is needed to potentially make changes in theories of change, measures of success, and data collection methods. There are examples of evaluators setting up a committee or advisory panel including people with lived experience for the purpose of meeting their particular evaluation goals and then dissolving the group once the evaluation is completed. This leaves the person with the lived experience in a place not too different from where they began in terms of the power they have to be able to have ongoing input. Furthermore, it also damages trust and can lead to difficulty of re-engagement. In these cases, the information they provide is used for one purpose. It is transactional. It is not transformative for them or others like them beyond the life of the evaluation project.

Given that many evaluators work under the constructs and timelines of grant-funded or contracted work, they may feel limited in their ability to influence how the people with lived experience can have continued involvement. However, evaluators can potentially use their role in developing work plans and budgets to explore making time and dedicating resources to setting up initial infrastructures for input that can be sustained beyond the project’s time frame, while educating funders about what it takes to engage people with lived experience in a meaningful way.
Initial Recommendations

- Spend time determining why you are incorporating people with lived experience into your evaluations. What is the goal, and what are the benefits to the evaluation and to those people? Let’s not let it become another checkbox if lived experience truly has value.

- Develop an operational definition for lived experience. Your definition may not be perfect but start somewhere and refine your definition using a continual learning process.

- Do your homework to better understand the person with lived experience on the topic you are exploring. This will help you create a supportive, appropriate, and effective environment for their participation.

- Plan for and conduct intentional recruitment and outreach to people with the lived experience that is relevant to the work you are doing. Often the same individuals are engaged over and over, and there is a need to prevent burnout or exploitation among those people.

- Establish agreements for engaging people with lived experience that define processes, practices, and language to be used.

- Apply your evaluation skills to understand what works well and what does not. Interview the individuals who have been serving as “people with lived experience” to discover what they identify as challenges, facilitators, and opportunities related to the issues you are evaluating and related to their engagement in the design and implementation of the evaluation.

Moving from evaluation dominated by people who have no direct (and sometimes no indirect) experience of the topic they are studying to acknowledging that expertise lies among people who have great insight and knowledge because of their experience with the topic is undeniably a step in the right direction.

However, let’s not be shy about looking at ourselves and reflecting on our own mental models, experiences, and personal and professional goals as we seek to make this shift.

References


The Power of Purpose: Understanding what Motivates Community Partners’ Participation in Evaluation and Research

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations to Engage in Research for Racial Equity

RTI’s Transformative Research Unit for Equity’s (TRUE) framework for equity-centered research and the Kellogg Foundation’s recent practice guides describe how engaging communities is a core practice of doing evaluation in service of racial equity. However, when we engage communities, researchers and evaluators tend to reap the benefits without much forethought given to the mutual benefits that could advantage communities and/or partners. Historically, unethical practices in research that minimize attention to social justice and community benefits have also led to distrust from communities of color, largely affecting their willingness to engage in research. This then begs the question: why would communities want to engage with research and what motivates them to continue engaging?

Generally, there are two orientations to motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic.

- Intrinsic motivation: doing something for inherent satisfaction rather than a reward or consequence.
- Extrinsic motivation: doing something for the purpose of attaining some concrete outcome with instrumental value.

Both are equally important to consider when planning to engage community members in research because each one plays a role in driving behavior. If we want stronger engagements that can lead to partnerships with community members in the longer term, then we need to think about both types of motivations for incentives.

Our understanding of what motivates community members to engage with research leverages our practical experiences and empirical evidence based
The Power of Purpose: Understanding what Motivates Community Partners’ Participation in Evaluation and Research

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AUTHORS
Daniela Pineda
Senior Director, Center for Equity and Social Justice Research

Tatiana E. Bustos
Equity Hub Researcher and Facilitator, RTI International

on community interviews asking what motivates participation. It’s also grounded in our principle to work on developing mutually beneficial partnerships that balance knowledge generation with community priorities and tangible benefits. We share some of those community perspectives with examples that can guide evaluations in service of racial equity.

Intrinsic Motivations: “because I am passionate about health equity.”

When we asked community members about their motivations to participate in research that was focused on health equity, many of them talked about a personal desire to serve that was fulfilling, especially if it meant advancing goals for equity and mitigating disparities in their community. For instance, community members in our research center were able to identify inconsistencies in the language that was used in our reports and in survey development. They were tired of hearing researchers talk about their community negatively. They advocated for asset-based language in our findings to challenge deficit-based narratives framed around their community. This shaped how we communicated about our research and informed how we engaged community members in co-designing products.

Thus, we have found that community members’ motivations to engage in research that is in service of advancing equity can be an extended connection to their values and passion for social justice. Communities are thinking about what is possible if they engage in this work and the mutual benefits for the communities that they in turn are connected to.

Intrinsic motivations that promote meaningful engagement can also be embedded throughout the research process. For example, in a four-year long research project, our team prioritized building genuine relationships with community members. We made sure to open space to invite feedback about how we could work better together and what was needed to continue engaging community members in the work. Some of us were engaging with the community in other ways, like going to the farmer’s market or supporting community classes through volunteering. We were successful because community members valued our overall practice to come to the table listening first and our shared commitment to serve. Our intrinsic values were in alignment.

Community members hear and experience our investment in the community, and as a result we develop deep, trusting relationships. If researchers and evaluators can demonstrate a dedication and intention to build relationships with community members beyond transactional interactions bound by a research project, then community members may feel more encouraged to participate and engage with them long term. This is because there is a mutual investment in time and effort to form trust-based relationships.

RTI’s Equity Centered Framework principles for research practice require transformation of the researchers to engage inclusively by upending inherent biases and explicitly managing power dynamics so that at a minimum, the research or evaluation does no harm and ideally is strengthened by meaningful participation of community members. We believe that as researchers and evaluators, we can lead by example by seeking to develop respectful, mutually
beneficial relationships with community members that reflect values of equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, transformation, and liberation. This is not always simple.

**Reconsidering Extrinsic Motivations: “to help the community and in the long term help myself”**

When researchers and evaluators think about extrinsic motivations, we oftentimes consider how community participation can be motivated by compensation. But, if we shift our lens toward valuing community engagement with mutual benefits, we find other options that can be mutually beneficial and enticing. For example, we have used incentives that prioritize capacity building through professional development training for community members to qualitatively code interview data in collaboration with our research team. Here, community members were equipped to provide qualitative interpretations based on their expertise to ensure meaningfulness of our findings. This eventually led to multiple publications with shared authorship and an award, contributing to their career development.

Practicing evaluation in service of racial equity encourages researchers to extend beyond monetary incentives to focus on other benefits such as building skills or increasing knowledge, receiving technical support, and/or career development opportunities.

Community members are also more motivated to participate in research if they believe that their engagement will lead to concrete outcomes. In our project focused on health equity, we found that community members were motivated by the opportunity to potentially gain access to resources like data management systems or evidence-informed instruments. Some were motivated to generate something in partnership that leveraged both forms of expertise (from the researcher and community member) because it helped foster an outcome that was more meaningful and responsive to communities.

In a different project focused on collaborative networks of nonprofits, we offered community members the option to donate their monetary incentives to a nonprofit organization of their choice in their community. This is another example of a concrete outcome that showed exactly where community members’ contributions could go to motivate them to participate throughout the pandemic.

The common thread across all these experiences is that we made sure our incentives were meaningful and mutually beneficial for both the researchers/evaluators and community members to increase motivation to engage in our work. Researchers and evaluators should reconsider how extrinsic forms of incentives are designed and implemented.

*We recommend shifting your focus to embed incentives to motivate community members that attend to values, mutual benefits, and capacity building for more meaningful participation of community members*
Doing Evaluations in Service of Racial Equity and Maintaining Relationships

As agents of social change, we must move our practices beyond the status quo. Meaningful engagement that focuses on trust and relationship building is key to community participation. But we also need to move away from the bounds of research to center equity. We need to focus on how the research or evaluation will not harm, but benefit communities. Our cost and benefit analyses when deciding to undertake a project should privilege community perspective if our work is to advance racial equity. How can we engage communities beyond grant funding and maintain those longer-term relationships? One consideration is to think about developing infrastructures that embed community participation as part of how systems normally function. For example, creating a community review board during the proposal phase to embed community members’ input on language and design. This establishes a standardized infrastructure that requires community relationships throughout the proposal development process.
Getting Out of Our Own Way: Navigating Organizational Barriers to Engage Communities in Research

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AUTHORS
Daniela Pineda
Senior Director, Center for Equity and Social Justice Research

Tatiana E. Bustos
Equity Capacity Building Hub Researcher and Facilitator, RTI International

Increasingly, government and private organizations that commission research are calling for greater inclusion of historically excluded and disadvantaged communities with the intent to make science more inclusive and to drive equity for all. While the idea of engaging communities in research has a long tradition in the social sciences, the view that engagement of community-based organizations (CBOs) and/or individuals with lived experience as critical to understanding the problem and identifying viable solutions is resonating more broadly. This makes sense as it makes for better research.

It remains difficult to do, even when there is a demonstrated commitment to be more inclusive in our research. Part of the reason why is because many of our own research organizations are not set up to build long term, trust-based partnerships with CBOs and other non-researchers with the intention to have them be active participants in the research process. In our practice we must navigate both technical and adaptive challenges as we seek to build long-term partnerships.

Moving Beyond Informing to Involve Communities in Collaboration

It is often the case that many organizations are used to informing or consulting communities when a decision has already been made as opposed to involving them from the beginning or checking to see if the new collaboration is of any interest. At times, we find ourselves searching for CBOs under time-constrained circumstances and with a list of requests. Conducting research in a way that advances equity requires that we rethink about who is involved in the research process as much as it is about the content of the research (e.g., focus on disparities). This involves holding a long-term view of what type of partnerships we and our organization need to cultivate to reach our desired impact. On a basic level, we want to avoid approaching new partnerships under the strains of transactional exchanges and instead move to create mutually beneficial partnerships.
How might researchers navigate challenges?

There is not a single path to doing this well. But we have found that focusing on developing mutual respect for partners’ expertise, priorities, and life circumstances goes a long way in building a foundation for long-lasting relationships.

**Equitable Compensation for Collaborating Communities**

The value we place in our community partners’ engagement is reflected in how we compensate their contributions. Research that centers equity should incorporate compensation that is of value to communities, mutually beneficial, and designed keeping cultural context in mind. In our work we have done this by allocating funds for community compensation in grant proposals and having discussions with potential clients up front about the reality of the work that goes into community engagement processes that justifies compensation for community partners’ time. This is a good practice in both research and evaluations. The Kellogg Foundations’ recent practice guides for doing evaluation in service of racial equity offer concrete ways to think about deepening your community engagement. They emphasize the importance of being intentional in building this check point in our practice. When there is a solicitation that does not require a community engagement component, we still conduct our due diligence by asking the question if and where having community input may benefit the research process. There are times when we have explicitly built community engagement into a solution because it strengthens the approach. We are able to identify these opportunities because this is a concrete way to center equity in our research, by asking who else needs to be included and what points of view are privileged in the research. This goes for both qualitative and quantitative research.

We recommend that you do not wait for a solicitation to explicitly call for community engagement. Instead, build that assessment into your process so that this becomes part of how you work. Ultimately, this will resonate for some potential clients and not for others, but doing the assessment is a way to embed a concrete checkpoint for equity in your research process with the potential to strength your proposed solution.
Technical operational barriers will start to come up in the granular, day-to-day details. For instance, during an evaluation of a local implementation of the WIC program, we secured community compensation options for our WIC participants. Usually, we would hand participants the physical gift cards in person, but organizational policies prohibited any in-person interaction. Our only option was to send gift cards via email. With input from our participants, we came to find that many do not have email addresses or feel comfortable sharing personal details to receive the gift card (like their home address). We had to work through this barrier in collaboration with our participants to find alternate ways to compensate. Our focus was on ensuring we had allocated resources to compensate participants, but not accounting for the form of delivery would have precluded some participants from receiving compensation. We eventually found an alternative to mail gift cards to a location of their choice. We also successfully advocated to revise the organizational policy to allow for mailing gift cards. In this evaluation, we were able to check our assumptions and change course because we had worked on building connections.

In other circumstances, organizations may have broader policies with their compensation models. For instance, we had the option to hire community navigators as part time employees for an evaluation with a county. We learned that our navigators shared hesitancy and strong concerns regarding the implications of becoming a government employee, even temporarily. Moving from honorariums to temporary contractors in our agency meant that they would lose the ability to freely advocate for their communities. While we initially assumed this would be received as a great opportunity, we later realized that a better strategy was to use the funds to increase honorariums. This was more aligned with the navigators’ participation goals.

We recommend that you check in with your partners about what compensation would be meaningful to them to check your assumptions and find a solution that is mutually beneficial, faster.

(Un)expected Accommodations for Community Research

We have also faced technical challenges related to accommodations, including other costs for community participation such as travel time, transportation, and childcare. We know that organizations may not be able to provide high quality and timely accommodations even when there are financial resources available. For example, we supported a set of community partnerships as part of a place-based initiative focused on building community protective factors and improving local early care and education programs. The initiative sought to involve more parents in taking an active role in using their voice to inform state and county policymakers of barriers they face in their communities. Our colleagues worked diligently to support parents by hosting meetings after the 8-5 workday, providing childcare on site, and providing translation services for meetings when many of the parents did not speak English.

Even in this well-planned, well-resourced initiative we still were surprised. For instance, we planned a learning day where parents would travel to meet with state policymakers as part of a broader state effort focused on early care and education. We knew that getting parents to commit to travel would be challenging simply because many parents could not afford to take a day away from work (even a weekend) as many worked six or seven days a week. Parents who had young children had to either bring them along or make alternative
childcare arrangements. Even still, we found parents who committed to attend. Then we moved to figuring out logistics, and it was here where we almost had to cancel the event. In the process of securing transportation, we found out that the organizational liability for staff travel did not extend to community partners participating in activities like the learning day. While seemingly a small detail, our colleagues in the contracts and business operations departments had to step in to figure out a solution or we would have to turn parents away in the next 36 hours. This was a critical decision point for the organizational leadership. Our leadership agreed to pay to temporarily extend the liability insurance to cover all participants. They took the risk because this work was part of a bigger shift for the organization to work more closely with communities. This experience served to teach us an additional layer of accommodations and problem solving that informed how we resourced accommodations.

A research practice that centers equity calls us to carefully consider the financial, ethnical, and logistical implications of the requests we make of any partners, with a particular focus on financial and time demands for community participation.

We recommend that in deciding how to do community engagement in your work, you limit non-reimbursed costs and if applicable, build in compensation for travel time into the budget. You should also consider if your organization should be the one to directly provide the accommodation and/or if perhaps there are existing CBOs that you can support by contracting with them to deliver the support.

**The Future of Equity-Centered Research**

It takes time to develop new policies and even more time to have the accompanying ways of working seep into the organizational culture. While organizational barriers come in all shapes and sizes, we encourage you to keep an eye on ways to make your research practice more inclusive by looking for opportunities to engage community knowledge, priorities, and perspectives. We should continue to be strategic in planning for accommodations and developing alternate strategies. With restrictions of current practices in place, we should look for opportunities to update organizational policies that no longer serve us and support practices that center equity and demonstrate respect for a wide variety of experts and expertise.
The practice guide series, *Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity*, is designed to help you exercise your own agency to better use your expertise to achieve racial equity and improve the services you provide your clients and the communities they support. The second guide in the series, *Diagnose Biases and Systems*, addresses implicit biases that influence evaluation practice and evaluators' understanding of systems and the use of a systems lens.

We learned from the questions asked and feedback shared during webinars, workshops, and other forms of engagement, that both evaluators and funders struggle to bring attention to policies, practices, relationships, and narratives that could — inadvertently or intentionally — harm communities that have historically been disadvantaged and excluded because of their racial and ethnic makeup. They identified two frequent challenges:

- How to identify and explain areas of racial inequity in a theory of change and logic model and without simply labeling it as “racial inequity and injustice reduced,” “more racial equity,” or “racially equitable outcomes”?
- How to introduce racial equity into a theory of change and logic model if the strategy or program is not about racial equity?

This slide deck addresses these two challenges.
Let’s start with the term “racial equity.” We see the word “equity” in front of everything — “data equity,” “education equity,” “health equity,” “economic equity,” and more. Typically, the use of the word implies that it has to do with racism. We all agree that we need “equity”— yet, we are not always clear about for whom, for what, how to get there, how to know when we are there, what to do with the road blocks encountered, and what resources are needed to support getting there!

Therefore, it’s really important that we take the time — before we design, implement, or evaluate anything — to understand what we mean by equity, and in particular racial equity.

We have racial equity when people, regardless of their race first and foremost, gender, sexual identity, disability, socioeconomic status, any other demographic characteristic, and place of residence have:

- **Fair access** to the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential;
- The **conditions** to be able to take advantage of these resources and opportunities; and the
- **Rights** to them and are free from any discrimination to obtain them as respected by institutions and the law.
Let’s explain what racial equity means in different situations

We will make progress toward racial equity when....

- Low-income Black families can purchase healthy and fresh food within walking distance from their homes and without having to take two buses for over an hour, at prices that are affordable to them.
- Teachers don’t think twice about the intelligence and capabilities of Black and Native American students and help them access pipeline programs that increase their chances to have a career of their choosing.
- Black and Brown families can purchase homes in neighborhoods where they feel safe and their children can play, go to quality schools, and have the same opportunities as any other child to academic, recreational, health, and other resources they need to thrive.

We should always strive for racial equity as far as people's lives are concerned — be it education, health, jobs, transportation, housing, food access, or some other condition that affects people’s well-being. Why? Because it doesn’t matter our race and ethnicity; racial disparities and inequity affect us all, our communities, and our nation. There are many books and stories that illustrate this point, so let’s spend some time clarifying and specifying what racial equity means in different situations.

It doesn’t matter our race and ethnicity; racial disparities and inequity affect us all

Here are some examples of what it means to eat and live healthy:

- Low-income Black families can purchase healthy and fresh food within walking distance from their homes and without having to take two buses for over an hour, at prices that are affordable to them. This is all about fair access and the ability to take advantage of the access — part of the definition of racial equity.
- Teachers don’t think twice about the intelligence and capabilities of Black and Native American students and help them access pipeline programs that increase their chances to have a career of their choosing. This is all about not discriminating against certain people and helping them gain access to resources and opportunities so that they can reach their full potential.
- Black and Brown families can purchase homes in neighborhoods where they feel safe and their children can play, go to quality schools, and have the same opportunities as any other child to academic, recreational, health, and other resources they need to thrive. This is all about not discriminating against certain people, repairing the harm caused by redlining, and helping Black and Brown families access the resources and opportunities they need to live full lives.
Here’s a quick exercise. Think about your strategy, program, or initiative that you are funding or implementing that you say is to help eliminate racial and ethnic disparities and achieve racial equity.

**Complete this sentence:** Through this strategy, program, or initiative, we will achieve racial equity by [explain what it is without using the words racial equity, equity, or equitable].

Note an important point here. The idea is not to gloss over or discount racial equity — on the contrary, it’s to be super specific and clear about what inequity you are trying to correct.

**SLIDE: Two Helpful Tools**

Now that you’ve operationalized racial equity in your strategy, program, or initiative, let’s take a look at your theory of change and use of a systems lens to ensure the theory explicitly deals with racial equity.

The theory of change is essentially the reasoning for why you think a change will happen in a particular way. It’s usually based on past research, evaluations, and your experience. The logic model transforms the theory of change into a visual that identifies what you will do specifically to make that change happen and what difference you expect to see immediately, in the short-term, say about three to five years, and in the long-term. One thing we recommend while developing the logic model is identifying where you have some control over the difference you hope to see and where you have little to no control because there are other influences. This is especially true when planning systemic changes that will lead to more racial equity. Drawing boundaries for where you have control and where you don’t can help manage expectations of your own and of those you’re accountable to, and identify relationships you might leverage to be more impactful.

If you want more information about how to develop a theory of change, please refer to the Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation, available on the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s website.

A systems lens helps make the root causes of the problem you are trying to solve with your strategy, program, or initiative more explicit. We talk through this lens after we go over a basic theory of change.
Go deeper by applying a systems lens

Based on past research and evaluation findings, you learned that a major contributing factor to education disparities and lack of equity is low proficiency in math and reading by third grade. You read that if children can read and do math by third grade, they’re more likely to advance to the higher grades and graduate. You also know from your experience that two conditions can further support children in their learning and academic achievement: an inclusive school environment and high-quality instruction.

To ensure math and reading proficiency and a positive, supportive environment, you posit that three things are necessary: a supportive learning climate at home, strong relationships between teachers and parents, and teachers’ adherence to the curriculum and standards for instruction. However, these three things don’t happen naturally. You’ll need to 1) increase the capacity of parents to get involved in their children’s schooling with the help of community organizations that support families and children; and 2) support school districts to create and implement a quality improvement plan. Your foundation can provide funding, use your influence to facilitate community and school partnerships, and work with experts to offer technical assistance and capacity building support to districts. This theory of change works in general, but let’s step back and apply a systems lens. First, what is a systems lens?
We use a tree metaphor for the systems lens. It seems fitting since the roots represent the root causes and the leaves — which you can see — represent the symptoms of those causes. Symptoms are the disparities that are apparent to us. We can observe with our own eyes, people share with us how they experience the symptoms every day, and the data show disparities between groups. **Be clear about who is experiencing the disparity — analyze existing data and speak to people who are affected.**

Examine the patterns and trends that link the symptoms over time. It helps to understand the literature about the disparities you are trying to eliminate — the contributing factors, consequences, and solutions. This can help you ask relevant questions about the symptoms and dig deeper into the root causes. Based on conversations with people who experience the disparities, you can gain insights into other related experiences that contribute to the negative outcomes. **Be mindful that people have multiple social identities** depending on their race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and more. These multiple identities determine how they experience the world. For instance, an African American boy experiences the education system differently from an African American girl, and an English-speaking Mexican American girl will likely have a different experience than a Salvadoran girl with limited English proficiency.

People’s behaviors are often not the reason for disparities in education, wealth, health, and more. Disparities occur because of the way institutions — that are part of our systems — are organized and connected (or not) to one another, and the way policies are designed and implemented to cause differential treatment of people. The linkages, or the lack thereof, among institutions and the policies...
they establish maintain the status quo that produces the patterns and trends that link the symptoms. **Listen carefully to what people say about their experiences** related to a particular condition like education or health and identify the systems at play.

As you break down the systems that maintain or attempt to change the status quo, repeatedly ask and understand why conditions are the way they are, who's tried to change them, how they tried, who should be trying harder to change them, why and how they succeeded or not, and what needs to be done differently to ensure the people experiencing the disparities can live to their full potential.

Systems are not established and don't operate in a vacuum. They're directed by people who make decisions and shape relationships and policies. These people have their own ideas about the issues their organizations deal with, why they keep happening, and what causes them. They may also be influenced by common narratives about the people who experience the issues and that their organizations and agencies serve. Sometimes these things explicitly impact their decisions, sometimes implicitly. Query why individuals make the decisions they do or support the policies they help enforce. Ask why they perceive certain groups the way they do. Be curious about the reasons for their perceptions about certain groups of people and the situations they find themselves in. Connect any such perceptions to decisions made about policies, programs, and other interventions that facilitate or hinder solutions to ensure fair access to resources and opportunities to achieve optimal health for communities of color.
In this slide, we apply a systems lens to make explicit the underlying and sometimes, unspoken, assumptions about why you think this hypothetical initiative will help reduce education disparities and promote education equity. Please note that the intent is not to provide answers, but to give an idea of the types of questions you want to ask in applying a systems lens.

Let’s start by clarifying who we think are experiencing the disparities. If we are vague, we risk creating strategies that are too general and inconsiderate of the specific and unique situations of certain groups. For example, a strategy designed for Black parents will look different from one for immigrant parents from West Africa.

Then we want to query what other conditions and outcomes are related to reading and math proficiency by third grade, for instance, the number of seats available and accessible in the state to provide children a head start before they enter kindergarten and then elementary school. The policies related to early childhood education may be a root cause to understand how they could affect the initiative’s outcomes.

There’s an assumption that parents aren’t involved and need help in building their ability to do so. Is this the only reason, their skills? What policies, procedures, and practices might be preventing involvement? Perhaps the department of education and school district don’t have an adequate language access plan to translate for parents with limited English proficiency? What about the adherence to the curriculum? Is the focus on teachers’ behaviors or is there something about the school culture at play, for instance, overemphasis on compliance and not enough on adaptation to the student population’s needs?

You get the idea. A systems lens can help you systematically query each aspect of the theory of change. It’s a starting point to help ensure that what you’re doing is clearly focused on racial equity by addressing the root causes and mental models, not only the symptoms.
Parents should have a leadership role

First, you noticed that the biggest gap exists for Black and Latino children. Now, you can explicitly call that out. Then you determined that it takes more than stronger parent-teacher relations to ensure that schools are inclusive and high-quality — parents should have a leadership role. Black and Latino parents need to be represented on the school board because the current members are primarily White and don’t understand the experiences of Black and Latino families. That can and should now be part of the theory of change and the initiative’s strategy.

Then, you learned that information isn’t being translated properly or consistently to engage parents with limited English proficiency. Also, parents complained that they only hear from the schools and are asked to meet with teachers when their children aren’t performing or are misbehaving. Therefore, part of the theory of change should be to specifically eliminate these issues, which means developing and implementing language access plans and culturally appropriate parent engagement plans.

Finally, the original theory of change implied that Black and Latino parents needed to change. They’re responsible for creating a learning climate at home that helps to improve their children’s performance. This revised theory of change eliminates the focus on parent behaviors and instead, focuses on creating the conditions and systemic changes that will help to improve children’s performance.

The dotted blue line shows where you might have more influence over the process and outcomes and where you likely will not.
Shifting the theory of change from where it was originally to be more focused explicitly on racial equity is important because from the theory of change, these other things are created: grantmaking activities, evaluation plan (including the evaluation questions), logic model, and measurement framework, capacity building plan, and a learning and strategy improvement agenda. If the theory of change isn’t focused on the root causes of the disparities, then these elements also won’t have an explicit focus on racial equity.
This is a list of questions that you can ask to get started applying a systems lens. As you ponder each question and gather information to answer, think about the implications on the design, barriers to be overcome, and what you can do to design, conduct, and support an evaluation in service of racial equity.

### A Resource for You: Initial Questions to Ask

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to facilitate your application of the systems lens</th>
<th>How can you go about answering these questions?</th>
<th>What Implications will the answers have for evaluation design?</th>
<th>What barriers have to be overcome?</th>
<th>What can you do to contribute to doing an evaluation in service of racial equity?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Symptoms: What racial disparities can you observe?</td>
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<td>Here we’re looking for what’s beyond the obvious. Dig deeper. Ask yourself:</td>
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<td>• What do you already know and what don’t you know that you need to know?</td>
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<td>• What’s happening that matters here?</td>
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<td>• What needs to change?</td>
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<td>Patterns and Trends: What links many symptoms over time?</td>
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<td>Be curious about why symptoms keep recurring. Ask yourself:</td>
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<td>• What’s contributing across multiple disparities and multiple populations?</td>
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<td>• Which groups in the community lose access, opportunity, and control and where do they lose it?</td>
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<td>• Who has power? How is it exercised?</td>
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<td>• How does it all matter?</td>
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<td>• What needs to change?</td>
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<td>Systems of organized entities, relationships, policies and practices: What’s holding the systems together?</td>
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<td>Think broadly and deeply here about incentives and disincentives, power and privilege, and the role they all play as part of the causal chain. Ask yourself:</td>
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<td>• What’s helping to maintain the status quo?</td>
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<td>• What holds the parts of the system in place?</td>
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<td>• Who benefits? Who doesn’t?</td>
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<td>• How are things incentivized and disincentivized? For whom?</td>
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<td>• What needs to change?</td>
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<td>Mental Models and Narratives: What frames are implicitly “baked in” and shape decision-making?</td>
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<td>Challenge yourself to think about the assumptions that have been operating behind the scenes for a long time and are now embedded in decision-making. Ask yourself:</td>
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<td>• What do we instinctively accept and never question?</td>
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<td>• Who has access, opportunity, and control to protect?</td>
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<td>• How do they benefit?</td>
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<td>• How and when did these assumptions become common? Why is this important?</td>
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<td>• What needs to change?</td>
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You have to practice the skill of asking why and understanding how systems work and affect the outcomes you seek. You cannot rush through this part of the work. You will encounter different perspectives, some that you won’t agree with or that are contradictory. You may need to pause and take time to understand, teach, learn, and even facilitate the different perspectives. It won’t be perfect and you’ll sometimes feel frustrated because the final decisionmaker (if it's not you) may want something completely different. The point is that you keep trying and doing your best to sharpen the focus on racial equity.
Measurement is necessary in monitoring and evaluation. What do culture, context, and ecosystem have to do with measurement? Well, a good measure must be responsive to real life problems and issues and appropriate for the cultures involved. As such, the development of measures cannot be separated from the beliefs, behaviors, and values of the people involved and their circumstances, surroundings, and environments. Also, the organizations that work with and serve different populations do not operate in a vacuum. They affect and are affected by the cultures of the people and the context in which they live and work. This presentation will review what a measure is and questions to ask to ensure that culture, context, and ecosystem are being considered.
What Is a Measure?

- Measure is the size, amount, or concrete description of the concept underlying what you want to know and learn (construct).
- Examples of measures could be a gauge, appraisal, scale, or test.

What exactly is a measure? A measure can be the size, amount, or description of what you want to know and learn about, otherwise called the construct. Essentially, it can be a quantitative metric or a qualitative description.

Now that you know what a measure is and what it’s for, what do you think you need to develop the best possible measure?
What Constitutes a Good Measure?

- Important, relevant, and responsive
- Sensitive
- Scientifi cally sound and appropriate for the cultures involved
- Feasible and practical

There are essentially four things you want to look for in a measure.

The measure must be responsive to real life problems and issues.

Whatever you want to learn from the measure must be important, relevant to you and the decisions you have to make, and also to the people affected by the evaluation. This means, without a doubt, that the measure must be responsive to real life problems and issues.

For instance, measures of healthcare access include having insurance, having a primary source of care, challenges when seeking care, and receiving care when needed. Evaluations in service of racial equity would view these measures with a slightly different lens. These evaluations would examine the trends based on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and place of residence to bring attention to the disparities in healthcare access, and then attempt to understand the systemic barriers associated with the social determinants of health contributing to the disparities (e.g., transportation to services, ability to take time off for appointments).

The measure must be sensitive enough to detect the smallest amount of change possible and the amount of variation in the concept you’re measuring. For instance, if measuring changes in someone’s height, do you use inches or millimeters? If you want to capture the slightest change, millimeters are better because they’re smaller than inches. Also, that choice allows you to capture the variation of possible changes. Let’s use the measure of having a primary source of healthcare. You could ask if people have a primary source of care and the number of times they visit that source or the emergency room per month instead of over the period of six months or one year.

The measure must also be scientifically sound and appropriate for the cultures involved. There are two dimensions to this, validity and reliability. Validity means that the measure measures what it’s supposed to measure. Face validity means that on the surface, without any further study, it looks suitable for the concept or construct you want to know about. Face validity is more informal and subjective. For example,
you don’t want a set of questions that ask about someone’s health conditions when you really want to know about their access to healthcare. Content validity means that it covers all relevant aspects of the concept you want to measure, and this concept is observable. Take for example, the measure for receiving care when needed. The measure you use must cover all the ways in which someone could receive care, from telehealth to in-person visits from a variety of healthcare professionals.

Construct validity is similar to content validity except it refers to whether the measure is truly representative of a concept or construct that cannot be directly observed, such as biases experienced by people when receiving care. The measure of bias needs to be able to capture the range of perceptions and experiences that suggest someone was treated with disrespect because of their race or ethnicity.

Finally, multicultural validity means that the concept you want to learn about considers differences across cultures, and the measure is responsive to those differences. For instance, the measure for healthcare access should consider the availability of healthcare coverage and linguistically appropriate services for people with different income levels and who have limited or no proficiency in English.

Lastly, the most practical of all the qualities of a good measure, you must be able to collect the data you need for that measure. If you have a low budget, you need a measure for which there is existing data so that you don’t have to collect new data. If you must collect new data, it must be affordable to do so, and with minimal training and burden on the respondents. You can have a highly validated and reliable measure, but if it costs too much to collect the data or if it is too challenging to identify and recruit the respondents needed, you might as well find a different option.

The last things needed for developing the best possible measure are a well-articulated, meaningful, and clearly operationalized theory of change and logic model that illustrate the immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes and the communities that are supposed to experience the outcomes.
What’s the solution?

1. Make sure that you have a clear theory of change and logic model as mentioned before.
2. Try using this statement so that you can identify the difference you want to make because that difference is the outcome: If we were successful, in one year (or two, three, etc.), we will experience, observe, hear, or feel [the difference you hope to make].
3. When you get to outcome measures, this is usually where you must check to see if there are existing and validated measures. Most importantly, you need to understand the population, place, and context where the measure was validated and if there is multicultural validity.
Another common pitfall is that the outcomes are too lofty or take too long to achieve (e.g., reduction of health disparities, health equity).

**What’s the solution?**

1. You can apply a timeline to the logic model. What is the outcome you expect in one year and then two or three, and five years or beyond? Applying a timeline forces people to be more realistic about what to expect and when.

2. If the outcome is reduced disparities or equity, you could ask the funder and other participants to define the outcome in terms of “access to opportunities and resources.” This can help them be specific about the outcomes they wish to see related to reduced disparities and equity.

3. It’s not unusual to have to revisit a logic model after applying a timeline because the outcomes may not be sufficiently defined or realistic within a grant initiative’s performance period.

The last, but not least, common pitfall is the number and range of factors contributing to the outcome.

**What’s the solution?**

1. You want to examine the factors and identify and distinguish factors that have to do with your organization’s performance, factors that have to do with implementation, and factors that are contextual.

2. You can then determine, by engaging the people who are implementing the effort and people who are affected by the effort, what they think are the most critical contributing factors.

3. By doing this, you can help to focus your data collection on those factors only.
We have discussed what a measure is, what constitutes a good measure, and the types of measures. What do culture, ecosystem, and context have to do with good measurement? First, let's define these three things.

**Culture**
Culture is sometimes used interchangeably with race and ethnicity, gender, and other types of identities. They are not the same thing. Culture is a set of behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that a group of people learn, accept, and pass along to another group of people or to the next generation.

**Context**
Context refers to the circumstances, surroundings, and environments that form and influence a situation.

**Ecosystem**
Ecosystem refers to a system of interconnected organizations and institutions, typically in a particular locale, but could also be at the national level. Their interconnectedness affects and is affected by culture and context.

These elements — culture, context, and ecosystem — are critical in developing measures in evaluations in service of racial equity because they shape the extent to which communities that have been historically excluded have access to the resources and opportunities needed to reach their full potential.
**Considerations of Culture, Context & Ecosystem**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For a good measure, ask:</th>
<th>For a good measure that considers culture, ecosystem &amp; context, ask:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ What is the construct or concept you want to know and learn about?</td>
<td>✓ How might the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that a group of people learn, accept, and pass along, change the construct or concept?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ What is the indicator and measure?</td>
<td>✓ Which aspect of the indicator and measure is and isn’t generalizable to different cultures, contexts, and ecosystems? Pause! What assumptions might you be making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Does a validated and reliable measure already exist?</td>
<td>✓ With which cultural group and what context was the measure validated? Are they similar to the context and the group that is participating in the evaluation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Whose input is needed?</td>
<td>✓ What are culturally appropriate and responsive ways to get the input and from whom? (i.e., familiar and comfortable to the participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ How will you collect the data? From whom or what? And when?</td>
<td>✓ What are culturally appropriate methods for collecting the data?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ What type of decision or action will the data inform?</td>
<td>✓ What is happening in the context and ecosystem that should be considered in the interpretation of the data and the findings?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the left are questions you’d typically ask to develop a measure. These, however, are void of any culture and context, and do not consider the related ecosystem at play. On the right are additional questions to ask to ensure it reflects the four qualities of a good measure — relevant and responsive, sensitive, scientifically sound and appropriate for the cultures involved, and feasible and practical.

**Exercise**

You are CEO of a community planning organization. Your organization exists to ensure that all public spaces in the county are inclusive and equitable and support a high sense of community in the region.

Using the questions listed above on the right as a guide and considering culture, context, and ecosystem, what are examples of good measures for monitoring and evaluating your organization’s goal?
To increase equity, evaluators need to be able to identify where disparities and inequities exist. Evaluators also need to have the data to identify more specifically in which populations and in what contexts disparities and inequities show up. (See Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity: Diagnose Biases and Systems, pp. 25-26, for more information.)

The ability to disaggregate process and outcome data by demographic variables is important for doing evaluation in service of racial equity because it highlights differences between groups (i.e., disparities), making it critical to understand the why. However, the act of data disaggregation does not imply equitable evaluation. Demographic data help us understand the characteristics of the people who are part of the community and the evaluation, and provide information to answer outcome questions such as:

- “Do program outcomes differ between white and Black clients?”
- “Going deeper, do Black clients in different zip codes experience different program outcomes?” (Edmonds, Minson, & Hariharan, 2021).

To obtain accurate demographic information about the community of interest, the data collection tool must be both reliable and valid. At the same time, the tool and approach to data collection need to be acceptable and appropriate to the community members so that the people in the community are willing to provide their information and no harm comes to the community or efforts to make progress in equity. An example of potential harm may be in cases where the data collection tool does not have an option to express a breadth of identities, which can result in making people feel like they aren’t seen or don’t belong, consequently leading to unintended disengagement and disempowerment.

Ultimately, we need demographic data in a form that identifies where disparities exist and informs where efforts should focus to address the systemic inequities contributing to the disparities. Simultaneously, the more inclusive, respectful, and appropriate the tools and approaches are to demographic data collection, the more likely it is that people will continue to provide the information.

There are currently earnest efforts among evaluators and other people who collect data in both — improving demographic data collection tools and gaining buy-in to demographic data collection.

A one-size-fits-all approach to identifying tools and processes to collect demographic data doesn’t seem to work, as there are various factors to consider. At the same time, these factors need not stymie data collection to advance racial equity. Here are a few tips to facilitate our thinking about what data to collect and how.
What Demographic Data and Why?

Sometimes we collect a set of demographic data (age, gender, race, sexual identity, disability status), but only plan to use limited information. Given that demographic data collection can feel burdensome to collectors as well as those asked to contribute, evaluators must get clear on why they’re collecting the data. This will help 1) determine which demographic data to collect, and 2) provide a rationale for the data collection to the people being asked to provide the data. What can help us get clear?

- Start by increasing the understanding of the issue being studied or evaluated. Talk to community participants and review prior studies to understand the potential relationship between demographic variables and the issue. If there’s a potential relationship with age, for example, include age in the data collection. If, however, it’s unclear what demographic data is needed, then the evaluator must decide if it’s worth being broad in the variables to be collected.

- If the evaluator, funder, or any other decision-maker doesn’t know why they want the data, it may be best not to collect it.

How Do You Collect Demographic Data?

There are a variety of survey questions that attempt to capture demographic data. Some have been around for a long time and been used in large and longitudinal studies, including demographic categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau. It’s tempting to keep using these questions because the categories are broad and straightforward, and using them may facilitate comparisons between newly collected and existing data. However, the categories can also seem outdated in terms of acknowledging who was centered when creating them (i.e., often White, cisgender, able-bodied males). Today, there are many evaluators responding to what people in the community are saying about how they identify and what’s appropriate and respectful by reviewing and revising how they ask demographic questions.

The thought put into revising demographic data collection has yielded more question and response options from which we can choose, but how do we choose? There are ways to design demographic data collection tools to be appropriate, inclusive, and respectful while still yielding data that gives you needed information in evaluations in service of racial equity. Here are a few factors for consideration:
As a first step, learn about the population from whom data will be collected and their preferences for words they use to describe themselves. Second, determine the questions and pilot test the data collection tool and strategy.

Evaluators will often stick to prior ways of asking questions. With that in mind, between steps one and two, consider the following:

Will the data collected be compared to other data sets that include demographic data?

If no, this means the data collection tool can include different options for demographic categories. Make the questions as meaningful to the evaluation as possible instead of trying to match the data to another data set.

If yes, consider if it’s appropriate to collect the data using the same questions and demographic categories in the comparison data set.

- Would using this tool answer the evaluation questions?
- Is using this tool respectful and inclusive of the population from whom demographic data are being collected?

If the existing tool is not suitable, here are some options:

1. Consider collecting the data in another way and then crosswalk the demographic categories to those in the existing tool. Is it possible to make the data set interoperable with the other set? Create the crosswalk with knowledge gained about the community and from pilot testing, and do it before starting data collection. Here is an example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Survey Question</th>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Demographic Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Survey Question</th>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Demographic Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Use the response options from the existing data set as a higher-level categorization and create your own subgroups. For example, for the Asian American category, you can add Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese. The number of subgroups will depend on 1) the relationship between race and ethnicity and the issue of interest and 2) the types of subgroups within the community of interest. It’s important to balance inclusion with manageability and usefulness of the data if it’s a national survey. This way, you can choose to use the more detailed data or roll it up into the categorizations from your reference data set.

3. Another example comes from situations where you’re trying to understand the experience of people from Arab countries and North Africa. In the U.S., this identity falls under “White.” (Note: Efforts are underway to establish a Middle East/North African reporting category in the U.S. Census.) However, this masks the different experiences one might have if they are White from European ancestry versus White from Arab and North African countries. You could consider using the same approach as used with “Asian” where different identities of “White” can be selected so that you can differentiate the nuances of Arab and North African identities.

Collecting demographic data is an essential part of doing evaluation in service of racial equity. Don’t make a choice about the tool to use based on “this is the way it has always been done it, so it must be the best way.” Instead, challenge yourself to design a data collection tool you know will be better!

**How Do You Get the Data?**

Data sets often have missing information for demographic variables, and evaluators must use what’s available when disaggregating the data. One reason for missing data is that many people don’t want to disclose their demographic data for reasons such as wanting to maintain privacy, not wanting to risk their data being used to negatively portray them, and not wanting to risk harm to themselves by providing information that could potentially be linked to them. To gain demographic data in service of equity, evaluators must first pay attention to the particular concerns people may have around disclosing demographic information depending on the community they’re part of, and secondly modify data collection according to what they learn.

For example, would asking for location data risk people’s privacy or safety? People who are criminalized for substance use or for performing an abortion may be at risk depending on the laws, policies, and social climate in their area. People who are trying to stay safe from perpetrators of violence may have well-founded reasons for not wanting to disclose their location. People who are employed by companies with regulations around what employees can and cannot do may risk their job by disclosing certain information. For instance, disclosure of their race or ethnicity might enable the employer to identify them because of the small number of employees of that group.

Strategies for learning about potential risks in designing data collection instruments and protocols include:

- Understand the systems that have effects on the community and community members, and how publicizing data about one aspect of the system might have repercussions on other aspects of the system.
- Get to know the history and experiences of people in the community. How have they been portrayed? How have their data has been used? They may have seen their data used in ways that harm or don’t benefit them, and thus they don’t want to share information.
- Consult an institutional review board (IRB). Given their role in protecting participants, they can advise on the ways to minimize unintended harm.

Thorough and thoughtful consideration of the potential harms and misuse of data ahead of time reduces the likelihood of missing demographic data.
Strengths and Limitations of Existing Resources

**Resource**

Harvard ORARC Tip Sheet: Inclusive Demographic Data Collection

**Go to this when you need...**
Examples of question and response options to collect demographic data.

**Limitations include...**
Race and ethnicity response options provided are limited. It doesn't go into more detail for what might be considered “Asian.” Also doesn't include people from the Middle East in a more visible way.

**Resource**

Urban Institute Centering Racial Equity in Measurement and Evaluation (See step 3)
https://www.urban.org/research/publication/centering-racial-equity-measurement-and-evaluation

**Go to this when you need...**
Probes to generate ideas on how to improve racial, equity, and inclusion in measurement and evaluation. The document includes a step-by-step, “Update Data Collection Language and Collection Processes.”

**Limitations include...**
Provides suggestions for what to look out for, but doesn't provide as much in terms of concrete guidelines or what would be not acceptable vs. acceptable processes.

**Resource**

More Than Numbers: A Guide Toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Data Collection

**Go to this when you need...**
Clear and concrete conversation starters, guidance, and example language to improve processes of collecting demographic information and design of collection tools.

**Limitations include...**
 Doesn't provide pros and cons to consider in decision-making about demographic data collection.
Tip Sheet

**Green 2.0 Tracking Diversity Guide to Best Practices in Demographic Data Collection**

**Go to this when you need...**
Concrete examples of “traditional” ways of collecting demographic data and how to improve them to be more inclusive of a range of identities. The site provides the actual improved question and response options.

**Limitations include...**
Doesn’t provide guidance on how to use the data collected in the improved format. For example, what to do with the open-ended text responses. The sample survey doesn’t include all tips provided, like an introduction to the survey and consent.

**NWIT Guide**
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1E_CSANwQqbkjEGZ7woNbGZ093IXufAf4Cp9I8qSDFak/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1E_CSANwQqbkjEGZ7woNbGZ093IXufAf4Cp9I8qSDFak/edit)

**Go to this when you need...**
Specific language for introducing demographic data collection, and specific questions and response options along with why to use one versus the other. Race related questions are extensive and include rarely seen options.

**Limitations include...**
Doesn’t provide guidance on how to use the data collected in the described ways. For example, open-ended text responses and closed ended options using skip logic.

**We All Count – 4 Approaches to Multiple Race Questions**
[https://weallcount.com/2022/10/27/4-approaches-to-multiple-race-questions/](https://weallcount.com/2022/10/27/4-approaches-to-multiple-race-questions/)

**Go to this when you need...**
Interesting and constructive ways of understanding identities of more than one race and how to ask questions in a way that aligns with the intention of the data collection.

**Limitations include...**
Doesn’t show examples of how questions would look in a data collection tool.

**Other Resource**
- We All Count discussion forum on Resources for Developing Inclusive Demographic Survey Questions
  [https://community.weallcount.com/t/resources-for-developing-inclusive-demographic-survey/questions/486/1](https://community.weallcount.com/t/resources-for-developing-inclusive-demographic-survey/questions/486/1)
- NAMI Core Demographic Questions Explained
  [https://www.nami.org/getmedia/5adbaa46-26ff-4704-b9ac-f5c01ad3f8ed/Explaining-Questions-Core-Demographic-Questions-Explainer-Field](https://www.nami.org/getmedia/5adbaa46-26ff-4704-b9ac-f5c01ad3f8ed/Explaining-Questions-Core-Demographic-Questions-Explainer-Field)
- 2020 United States Census
Evaluation, broadly, is used to generate shared knowledge about a program or intervention. Oftentimes, evaluation is more narrowly focused on assessing the merit of an intervention, determining the level of funding or support for an intervention, reviewing assumptions on which an intervention is based, and holding leaders and organizations accountable to the communities they serve.

**Historic Limitations to Program Evaluation**

Program evaluation typically refers to being able to answer the question “What specific outputs and outcomes did an intervention produce?” This assumes that the intervention or program being measured can be readily described, has distinct boundaries, has a well understood link between cause and effect, and that observed changes can be easily attributed to a specific source. Yet, the reality is far from straightforward, particularly when dealing with place-based economic development interventions.

Place-based work is complex. It involves many partners and is influenced by a variety of factors including local context, individual personalities, economic and political shifts, multiple—sometimes overlapping—programs and strategies, and goals that can change over time. Evaluating place-based work in service of equity requires thoughtful planning, targeting your activities, and understanding how systems interact with one another. In other words, it involves understanding that the context in which the work unfolds is just as important as clarifying how your coalitions’ work or program is going to make a difference.
Evaluation Considerations for Place-Based Development

Strategically focusing your place-based evaluation efforts can help to ensure the knowledge gathered about your place-based program(s) or intervention(s) serves community and program goals. The following three considerations can help focus and inform your evaluation strategy:

1. Make sure your measurement and evaluation activities map to your key learning questions. Identifying key learning questions to guide your measurement and evaluation activities will ensure that each activity is serving the goals of your target population and project. Good learning questions will ensure that you are focused on the most important learning priorities. When possible, we recommend that you look for ways to build in community participation in the evaluation process. This can look different depending on the local circumstances. It is critical to take time to understand why community members agree to partner with you. One way to do this is to form a community advisory board or include community stakeholders in the design of the evaluation or learning activities. To center equity from the start, consider who is involved in defining success and what perspectives are represented in the work.

2. Focus on understanding the systems at work in your community. Document the physical boundaries and their origins, the key players in the region, the dynamics of power and history that underlie them, and the levers regional partners can employ to shape narratives and decisions. To do this, you can make use of a variety of tools to map the connections between actors, entities, etc. A variety of methods (e.g., social network analysis, outcome mapping) can be applied to get a better understanding the relationships between actors, institutions, and events that influence your work.

3. Focus on documenting your work. Recognize that place-based work is dynamic, responsive to regional needs, and subject to change. Whether you are designing a new program or forming a regional coalition, it is very important to have a planful approach to documenting your work. Comprehensive documentation of your program’s progression serves two vital purposes: ensuring long-term sustainability of your program and providing rich historical context for potential evaluations. As some place-based initiatives take years, or even decades, it’s possible that many people will work on them at different times. Documenting your work will help coalition members communicate over time about what has been done, what changes were made, why, and who was involved. Further, having detailed information about how your program is being conducted will give you data points to choose from, should you later evaluate the program. Additionally, when you can collaborate with community stakeholders to guide the documentation process you are also likely supporting local capacity building to document and share impact.

Recognizing Types of Changes in Place-Based Development

When choosing what you will measure over time as part of your program or in preparation for an evaluation, consider keeping track of changes in the socio-economic and political environment, key systems, power structures, and specific groups of people affected by these factors. Traditionally, evaluations in place-
Equitable Evaluation Practices for Place-Based Development

October 3, 2023

AUTHORS
Daniela Pineda
Senior Director, Center for Equity and Social Justice Research
Sara Lawrence
Director, Economic Development

Based development have been largely shaped by federal or state reporting requirements that ask for jobs created or retained, or economic impacts accrued in a geographic area. These indicators tell limited and incomplete stories about outcomes of programs and interventions. They also fall short in relaying how efforts impact some populations and communities more negatively or positively compared to other populations and communities. With more complete understanding it is also possible to decipher who or what organizations have the power and influence to make key place-based development decisions. When considering what changes you will track over time, consider first what type of change you expect to see as a result of your efforts. This may help you choose which types of change are important for your organization to prioritize in monitoring and evaluation. You can also consider how time factors into what you expect success will look like.

Stachowiack et al. [2018] shared a helpful typology for characterizing changes in complex, place-based efforts that can help to organize your plans for what and how you will go about documenting changes and impact. They are described as:

- **Early changes**: shifts in the policy and decision-making environment that lay the foundation for systems and policy changes such as increased partnership quality, increased collaboration among partners, and increased awareness of an issue.

- **Systems changes**: changes to institutions (or the formation of new institutions) that can affect the target region, population, or issue. These organizational changes may be formalized and likely to stay, or more informal experiments that could lay the groundwork for future formalized changes. Also consider tracking changes that happen within a single organization, multiple organizations with a common purpose, or multiple organizations with multiple purposes.

- **Population changes**: changes within the target population of the coalition or initiative which may be within geographic areas, specific systems, or have specific needs.

We have proposed helpful ways to approach equitable evaluation practices. Some of these approaches may be included in a formal evaluation, and we appreciate that it is unlikely that a single evaluation will be comprehensive enough to cover the multiple dimensions we reviewed. However, we also know that evaluation practices that advance racial and geographic equity are not the norm and thus we need to be intentional in embedding inclusive and participatory approaches that center communities and populations that have historically been excluded from knowledge production activities such as evaluation.

Evaluation as a practice that centers equity has the potential to strengthen our understanding of place-based development work. The tools it can bring to bear help us to understand systems, identify root causes of problems, and understand regional context and community priorities. All of these things are necessary to build better regions for transformative and equitable development.
Picture this scenario: A state agency has allocated funds to create a health-related communication initiative to raise awareness about vaccinations and increase uptake among marginalized communities. A lot of money was spent on creating an extensive website, printing materials, logo, and catchlines. However, once implemented in the community, the campaign had the opposite result. An evaluation after the launch and delivery of the materials found that community members couldn’t read in the language the materials were printed in, nor did they have the ability to access the website’s resources appropriately. The initiative had unintentionally excluded the very same marginalized communities it was trying to reach.

This is a real-world example that illustrates the unintentional consequences of ignoring culturally appropriate language and failing to engage community members in a process to inform our work. If we want our efforts to benefit communities, we need to reexamine how we are conceiving inclusion and the role that plays in our evaluation practice.

Historically, evaluation as a field has only recently begun to focus on language justice. Much like the researcher’s positionality, language is not neutral and power dynamics related to language are always at play. As researchers, evaluators, and practitioners, we may not always have language at the forefront of our thinking. It is likely that many of us who do not live with a disability may even take for granted the language and accommodations we see in our everyday settings.

“Being mindful of language in evaluations reflects the cultural competencies needed to ensure evaluations do not reproduce inequities in their use of language.”

Equity centered evaluations must be responsive to the diverse needs of cultural communities and other identities, which often involves tailoring to one’s language or language needs. As evaluators hold power in the evaluation process,
we have a responsibility to mitigate these power dynamics as much as possible so we can foster authentic connections with community partners and others whom we want to benefit from our work.

We view language as essential to justice and equity and refer to its embodiment in evaluation as language justice. Language justice refers to “the right everyone has to communicate in the language in which one feels most comfortable” with key tenets in transformational thinking to empower action and challenging dominant language narratives to advance social justice.

**Getting Started with Language Justice**

Embedding a language justice approach to the process of evaluation can happen in many ways. No task is too small, and your team can start making changes for more inclusive language now. Below, we provide recommendations on where to begin and questions to guide your decision-making.

**During Your Planning**

You know enough about your participants to create an inclusion criterion and screen them for participation in the actual study. Now, you have an obligation to learn more about the languages spoken in their communities. During the planning phase of your evaluation, it’s important to take the first step to understand the context you’re working in. Understanding the context of language is often overlooked in evaluations. What is the history of languages in this community? Are there any language groups that have been excluded in your topic area? What languages do these communities feel most comfortable in? Does your evaluation reflect those needs? What else can we do to center the perspectives of non-English speakers? Always try to challenge your viewpoints of “English as a dominant language” and instead encourage a willingness to learn more about the diverse contexts of communities you want to impact.

Some agencies, like federal and state government entities for example, may have policies in place for language access and accommodations. Make this your starting point; don’t let this limit the efforts needed to better serve communities and engage them inclusively in your work.

If we want to engage diverse language groups inclusively in our evaluations, we also need to make sure to budget the time, resources, and staffing to be successful when implemented. Other best practices include the creation of a language access plan as a standard within each evaluation plan. Accounting for the focus on language in the process of designing an evaluation will become a standard both with changing of professional norms, policies, and our own mindsets about what it takes to do this work.

**Throughout the Design**

How we frame our research questions, in terms of language, matters. Here, we consider language in the context of asset-based framing vs deficit framing. Researchers tend to focus on solving problems, and thus our research questions may be framed around the social issue we want to solve rather than the community assets that offer solutions. However, questions about social issues can be addressed all the same with asset-based framing. This is in line with RTI’s Equity Centered Methodology Framework, where we explain how asset-based
focusing of research questions can be a transformational practice to shift power to minoritized and marginalized communities. Does your research question tend to focus on the deficits of communities? How can you revamp the framing of the question to focus instead on assets or successes?

When we collect data using traditional surveys or interviews, we often risk excluding a wide range of communities that deserve to have their voices heard because of language. Some people may be reluctant to participate in interviews because English is not their first language. Others may not have access to the appropriate accommodations needed to fully participate. Other ways to collect data that are more inclusive to diverse language communities include storytelling, photovoice, or other participatory methods that invite communities to share insights whether it be through imagery, stories, or building artifacts. Photovoice is one illustrative example of engaging historically excluded groups, such as individuals with disabilities, more inclusively in the research process. Additionally, the categories we choose to define people (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) in our instruments affect how communities are accurately and respectfully perceived.

Other components to consider are related to the facilitators or interviewers who will be collecting the data. Do they reflect the cultural communities you’re trying to reach? Are their staff equipped to communicate in languages for inclusive practices? Incorporating these activities can minimize issues of validity in qualitative and quantitative evaluation approaches.

When You Communicate

Communicating throughout any evaluation is important. But, if you’re not getting your message across to diverse audiences, then how does that compromise the utility of your efforts? What would you miss if you don’t center on language justice? Considerations for language justice can be incorporated in how you communicate in meetings, evaluation results, and across partnerships. Here, we consider the accessibility of materials, the reading level of what we write, and other strategies to ensure inclusion of broader audiences. Remember that having one language only allows a certain group of people to access the information. What implications does that have for the goals of your evaluation?

Some strategies you can apply for communication include:

- Incorporate plain language guidelines to ensure materials are easy to understand across a broader audience. The CDC has several resources that can be helpful when you’re developing communication materials or meeting agendas.
- Use readability tests, like the Kincaid reading level, to ensure a document or tool is easy to read and understand. We recommend a 6-7th grade reading level for any recruitment or data collection materials.
- For virtual meetings, turn on closed captioning, include subtitles, and share transcripts with meeting notes after meetings are done. See the Language Justice Checklist for hosting in person events.
- For communicating evaluation results in PDFs or PowerPoint, make sure to use alt text for people who use screen readers. Given what you’ve learned about the languages in these communities, consider whether there is a need to translate reports into other languages.
Considering Language Justice in Equity Centered Evaluation Practice

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Authors
Daniela Pineda
Senior Director, Center for Equity and Social Justice Research

Tatiana E. Bustos
Equity Capacity Building Hub Researcher and Facilitator, RTI International

Other resources are provided below to guide you in your journey to language justice:

- Language Justice in Evaluation
- Adopting Inclusive and Non Violent Language
- Why You Should Use Inclusive Language
- Considerations for LGBTQIA+ Communities
- Beyond Plain Language: Creating Effective Communication Materials for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (rti.org)
- Avoiding heterosexual bias in language (apa.org)
- Other examples of guidelines on language access

We recognize that changing how we practice evaluation can take time and opportunities will vary depending on the project. We encourage you to consider what is a good entry point for your work and to make use of these resources to consider the role of language in your practice. As the Kellogg Foundation’s Practices Guides remind us, doing evaluation in service of racial equity must be an intentional process of learning and unlearning.