DIVERSITY EQUITY INCLUSION

Guiding Questions for Supporting Culturally Responsive Evaluation Practices and an Equity-Based Perspective

June 2021   *By Oscar Cerna and Barbara Condliffe, with Ashley Wilson*

The credibility of MDRC's work depends on providing both rigorous and relevant research. It also depends on recognizing that multiple perspectives and frameworks are necessary for better understanding the cultural priorities and needs of the populations we study. At MDRC, this leads us to conclude that adopting more culturally responsive research practices and an equity-based perspective is essential for maximizing the benefits of our work. MDRC's Equity Collaborative has been learning about culturally responsive evaluation practices and equity-based approaches while considering the challenges and opportunities of integrating these practices into more of our work. In this document, we offer definitions for culturally responsive evaluation and an equity-based perspective, then describe how MDRC staff and the broader policy evaluation field can apply these practices and perspectives.[1]

Over the last two decades, the fields of applied research and evaluation have begun defining and characterizing culturally responsive approaches.[2] For instance, **culturally responsive evaluation** (CRE) "recognizes that demographic, sociopolitical, and contextual dimensions, locations, perspectives, and characteristics of culture matter fundamentally in evaluation."[3] It "gives particular attention to groups that have been historically marginalized."[4] Being culturally responsive also requires reflecting on one's own culture and relationship to the culture(s) within which evaluators operate.

CRE asks that evaluators broaden the scope of stakeholders typically involved in a research project and ensure that the design and implementation of studies reflect the voices of all relevant stakeholders. CRE also requires that evaluators be mindful of inherent power dynamics between researchers and research subjects that may inadvertently affect the data collection, definition of outcomes, interpretation of results, and reporting priorities. It encourages evaluators to seek alternative ways to collect data that may lessen these dynamics, build trust in the process with research subjects, and facilitate more honest responses. Part of the aim of CRE is for evaluators to redefine how they approach research with communities by both developing more inclusive research practices and by making efforts to shift power dynamics between researchers and research subjects.[5]

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While CRE addresses *how* we engage in policy-relevant research, an **equity-based perspective** challenges us to examine *what* projects we pursue and *what* research questions we address. An agenda of evidence-building for equity might include implementation studies that describe the current conditions of equity/inequity, impact evaluations that measure whether interventions reduce inequities between groups, and demonstrations that design and test interventions to address inequities.

Given the importance of increased equity across educational and social service systems, MDRC will be increasingly drawing on CRE and equity-based perspectives across the research and technical assistance we conduct. This will enhance the work we undertake and its responsiveness to the communities and populations who participate in our studies, increasing the odds that they will genuinely benefit from our work.

For each phase of a hypothetical evaluation or study, the table below includes a framing statement about including practices of cultural responsiveness and equity and key questions to consider for integrating these practices. We hope that our colleagues find this resource useful for considering how to apply an equity lens and culturally responsive practices in different types of education and social policy research projects, including implementation studies, impact evaluations, demonstrations, technical assistance, and continuous improvement efforts.

Guiding Questions for Incorporating Culturally Responsive Evaluation Practices and an Equity-Based Perspective, by Project Phase

Project Phase	Considerations from a Culturally Responsive & Equity-Based Perspective	Guiding Questions
PROJECT MANAGEMENT		
• Initiate, plan, execute, facilitate, and end a project.	• Build sufficient time and resources for culturally responsive research practices into project work plans. This includes (and is not limited to) assembling an appropriate team that includes diverse perspectives and lived expertise (when possible), as well as necessary language and translation ability; providing them with adequate training; and planning for potentially expanded stakeholder recruitment and interactions. • Budget for data collection and analysis time dedicated to expanded data exploration and analysis of baseline equity conditions, as well as additional equity-based outcomes.	• To what extent does the project team reflect multiple backgrounds and cultures? • Have or will all team members receive appropriate training to prepare them to recognize their own biases and how they may shape their work on the project? Who will facilitate these conversations on the team on an ongoing basis? • Will team members receive training on how to conduct an evaluation using a culturally responsive and equity-based perspective?
PROJECT DESIGN (GENERAL)		
• Create or adapt a project and research design to answer the primary research questions and/or address project aims. • Outline the theory of change and conceptual model for the program/policy being implemented or studied and decide on a research design.	• Consider the sociocultural context(s) and motivations for pursuing a research project so that the research activities will be sensitive and responsive to the cultural norms, attributes, and needs of the communities or targeted audiences that will be affected by the project. • Incorporate issues of equity and steps for staying culturally responsive to these communities and stakeholders during discussions regarding project design—both internal and with funders/potential sites. • Consider how the design (for example, randomized controlled trial, ethnography, technical assistance) may adversely affect the well-being of the communities and other stakeholders.	• What are the baseline conditions of equity, and of structural barriers to equity, in the ecosystem where the project will take place? How can the project team deepen its knowledge of baseline conditions to develop a better project? • Are key stakeholders and communities actively participating in the decision-making for the project's design? • How is the design focused on being strengths-driven (that is, focused on attributes and assets) versus being deficit-based (that is, focused on limitations)?

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IMPACT RESEARCH DESIGN		
• Develop a study design for measuring program impacts. This may be an experimental or nonexperimental design. • Develop and pre-register an analytic plan, which specifies the confirmatory and exploratory research questions, identification strategy, sampling strategy, variables to be collected, impact outcomes to be measured, and subgroup analysis to be performed.	• Consider whether there are ways to use data to assess if equity conditions are affected by the intervention, and how these conditions may be affected by an impact design (such as random assignment). • Consider whether planned subgroup analyses are meaningfully aligned with the theory of change, and whether it is possible or desirable to investigate intersectional relationships in analyses (that is, is there a theoretically based reason to believe that an intervention may have differential impacts among groups?).	• Is it possible to measure baseline equity conditions, such as gaps in access and achievement within the existing ecosystem where the intervention occurs (for example, a college campus or a school district)? • Do impact questions address whether an intervention closes gaps in access, achievement, or other measure among different student groups? • Do impact questions focus on subgroups defined by categories meaningful to the context or by the intersectionality of different characteristics (race, class, gender)? • Are the outcomes defined from a deficit- or strengths-based perspective?
IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH DESIGN		
• Develop a study design for describing program implementation. Describe implementation context, assess implementation fidelity, assess program quality, and assess service contrast conditions (when part of a randomized controlled trial).	• Consider a plan for describing important sociocultural characteristics of a project's environment and any conditions of inequity at baseline. • Describe goals that the program or policies may have to increase equity. • Consider whether and how program participants' and community stakeholders' voices can provide context for understanding the sociocultural environment, and how these voices can be integrated into the assessment of a program's implementation quality. • Consider how historic and current inequities have shaped program design and delivery.	• Does an implementation research question address issues related to how the program may (or may not) be adapted to fit different cultural contexts? • What key sociocultural characteristics surrounding the project may play a role in program implementation? • What are differences that may exist in the use of or satisfaction with a program by different subgroups? • Does the implementation research seek multiple perspectives from stakeholders and communities about existing inequities or biases that they may feel are being perpetuated?

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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)/ FORMATIVE FEEDBACK DESIGN		
• Create guiding questions and recommended action plans for formative feedback or technical assistance projects. • Determine how information will be collected to address those questions and how that information will be shared back with project partners.	• Make formative feedback or TA inclusive at multiple levels of the partnering organization, as well as with community stakeholders. • Consider guiding partners to address issues of equity directly—for example: to what extent is the program reaching those most in need of services? Which program participants are benefiting most from the program and why?	• If the goals of the TA engagement are open-ended (for example, supporting a partner in developing a research agenda), has the team discussed opportunities to build an equity lens into the partner's work? • How are partners being culturally responsive in their approach to services? Are there ways to support partners in efforts to deepen their CRE practice (for example, support self-assessments)? • What are the power dynamics at play in the relationship between the TA team and the service provider? How do sociocultural differences between and within the various teams affect this dynamic? How are these dynamics addressed to make the TA engagement inclusive?
COST STUDY DESIGN		
• Develop a cost study analysis plan, designed to measure program costs, as well as possibly the cost effectiveness of an intervention, if the study finds positive impacts.	• Consider whether it is feasible or desirable to build in cost-benefit measures that account for the cost of social impacts of either providing or not providing an intervention. For example, calculating not just the cost per participant of a dropout prevention program, but the cost savings to society of each additional graduate, in reductions in negative outcomes, such as crime, social services, and health care costs associated with poverty.	• How can the project measure social benefits of an intervention? • What kinds of social cost savings are built into successful interventions? • What are the social costs of the "business as usual" condition?

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DATA COLLECTION FIELDING ACTIVITIES		
• Gather information from or about study participants. • Data collected can be used to construct qualitative or quantitative measures (see rows below). • Note: An Institutional Review Board (IRB) must reviews all projects that involve data collection activities to assess the level of risk that the research activities pose to study participants and the adequacy of a study team's plans to minimize those risks and protect participant rights.	• Developing culturally responsive data collection procedures can be considered essential to protecting the rights of study participants by reducing the risk of data collection activities reinforcing oppressive power structures. Additionally, culturally responsive data collection procedures improve the reliability and validity of the data being collected and thus strengthen the rigor and relevance of research projects. • Work with Institutional Review Board to assess the level of risk that the research activities pose to study participants and how that risk might differ based on context and participants relative position to power.	• Has the research team considered how the past experiences or trauma of a community might pose obstacles to data collection? If these obstacles exist, what stakeholders or experts can the research team engage to modify the approach and questions? • Are the language, content, and design of the instruments culturally sensitive? Has the team considered whether and how questions on a data collection instrument might reinforce negative stereotypes about certain student groups or social constructed notions of gender and race? • Have the instruments been validated with their intended audiences? • Has the research team considered cultural context in how it collects data, whom it collects data from, and when to collect data? • How has the research team engaged with the IRB to assess the risks and necessary protections for research subjects given historic and current inequities?

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Qualitative Data • Collected via interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews. • Used to describe the implementation of programs or policies, to describe participant and other stakeholder experiences during implementation, and to describe the conditions and other factors that surround the program or policy under study.	• Recognize and address project team members' biases related to their personal lived experiences, which influence how data are collected and interpreted and can perpetuate inequalities. • Discuss how to reduce biases prior to collecting qualitative data at the project sites, and how the data can highlight the voices and experiences of participants.	• Who on the project team is collecting the qualitative data and how might their racial, gender, and class background influence the data collection activity? • How has the qualitative research team learned about the cultural context of their participants? • For studies that include interview data, how are the power dynamics between interviewer and subject addressed in the analytic approach? • In observations, how may the researchers' presence influence the feelings or experiences of respondents?
Quantitative Data • Constructed using survey data, administrative records data, or other sources of data that can be systematically counted/aggregated or otherwise quantified, such as data scraped from the internet or other sources.	• Descriptive measures can be helpful in better illustrating the landscape of inequity in which interventions are situated. Some may be appropriate to use as outcomes for impact analyses or outcomes for service contrast analyses. (See related document, Equity Metrics, Measures, and Analytic Approaches in Education Research.)	• Is there an opportunity in this project to measure and report on equity questions and outcomes? Why or why not? • What data does the project need to collect to address those questions? • Is there an opportunity in the study to describe the systemic conditions faced by different groups in the ecosystem of this project?

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ANALYSIS		
• Use a pre-specified analysis plan to analyze and report on data analyses.	• Ensure that equity issues are addressed in the pre-specified analysis plan. • As appropriate, revisit equity issues when reviewing preliminary findings and adjust final analysis plan accordingly.	• Is there insight learned from engaging with respondents for data collection that makes the team want to revisit their pre-registered analysis plan prior to executing analyses? • Do the measures of demographics or identifying characteristics align with how the community would define themselves? What are the limitations of the selected approach? • How will qualitative findings regarding participants' experiences in and perception of the program influence the interpretation of the quantitative findings regarding the outcomes of the program? • For studies that include qualitative data analysis, how are the sociocultural biases of the coders addressed in the analytic approach?

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CONVEY FINDINGS		
• Project team considers multiple modes of presenting findings depending on intended audiences. • Topics may include project narratives, research processes, tables and graphs, funder information, and acknowledgements.	• Demonstrate a culturally responsive approach to writing through the content of the product, as well as the process through which it is created. • For each type of product, consider the intended audience(s) and focus on crafting language and exhibits that can effectively engage them. • Represent our research partners and participants in culturally responsive ways.	• Is the language in the product inclusive with respect to the participants (for instance, using "person-first" language)? • Does the product discuss or acknowledge the structural biases that created the conditions within which the project occurred and/or was created to address? • Is the cultural context of the project being effectively represented in the reporting of implementation and impact findings? • Has the report been reviewed by individuals with diverse perspectives, including those in the community under study? If individuals from the community under study are not engaged as reviewers or co-authors, what perspectives might be missing? • Has the community/organization/network been consulted in what kind of products they would find useful?
SHARE FINDINGS AND SET THE STAGE FOR FUTURE LEARNING		
• Make data available for further research and use. • Make information available via the web, general and targeted e-mail announcements, mass mailings of printed copies, media outreach, press releases, social media. • Engage partners to augment dissemination.	• Consider diverse engagement strategies and materials to reach as many stakeholders as possible.	• Is there an explicit or implicit goal of bringing awareness to equity in the dissemination products? • Are there different types of media for reaching specific audiences or stakeholders? • To what extent will our dissemination activities reach the communities that we have researched? Are there ways to craft dissemination products and activities that will be useful to the subjects of the research?

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Acknowledgments

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