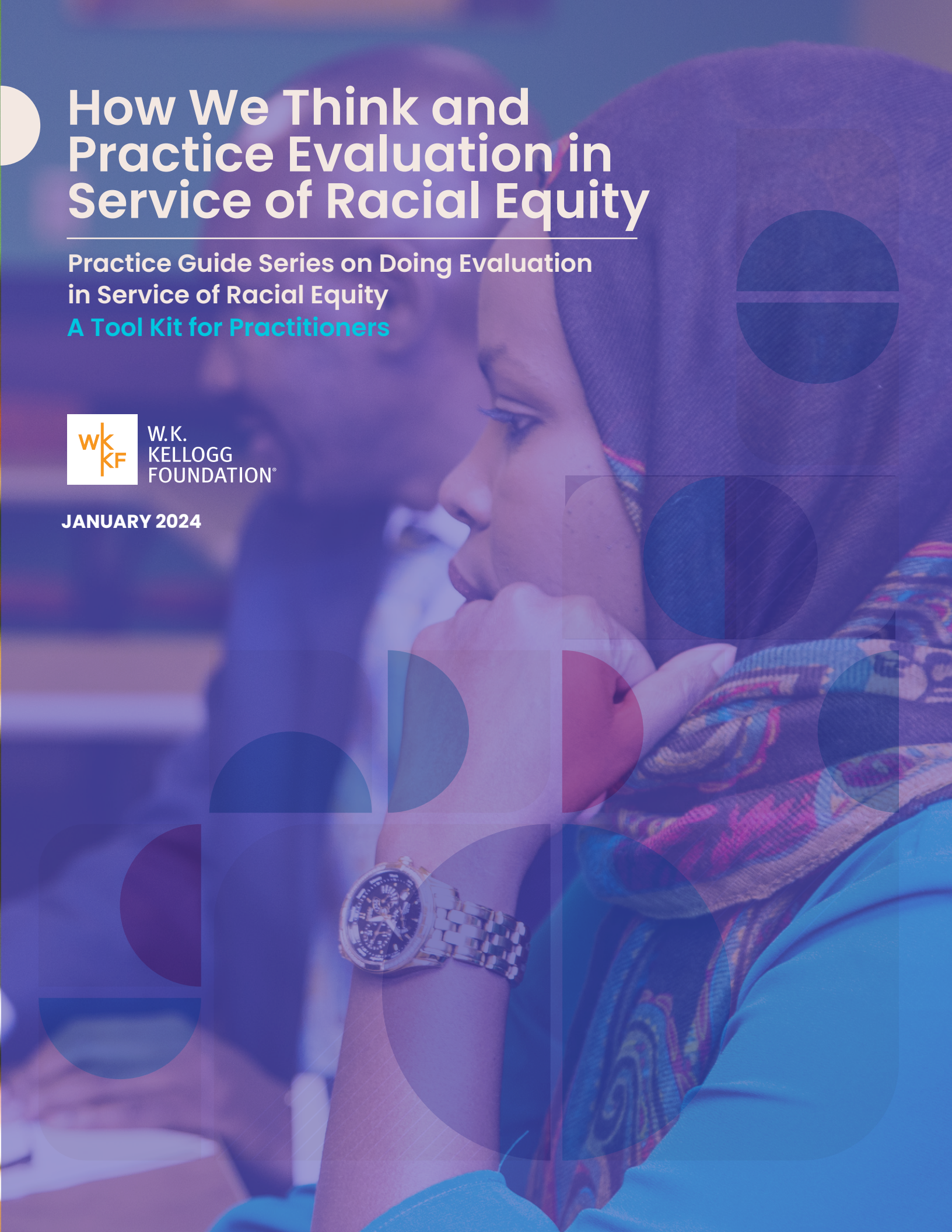
How We Think and Practice Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

Practice Guide Series on Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

A Tool Kit for Practitioners



W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION®

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Introduction

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?

tip sheet

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.

tip sheet

Ways to Overcome Resistance to the Idea and Practice of Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity

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.



Part 1

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."

INSIGHT



The purpose is to understand what you are feeling in the moment because it can guide how you respond to resistance. If you feel impatient or frustrated, how might your conversation go with a person resistant or unsure about engaging in equity work? Will you be open and willing to listen to their perspective?

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?"

INSIGHT



The purpose is to understand what you are feeling in the moment because it can guide how you respond to resistance. If you feel impatient or frustrated, how might your conversation go with a person resistant or unsure about engaging in equity work? Will you be open and willing to listen to their perspective?

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

This initial self-assessment helps ground yourself in what is actually happing, 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?

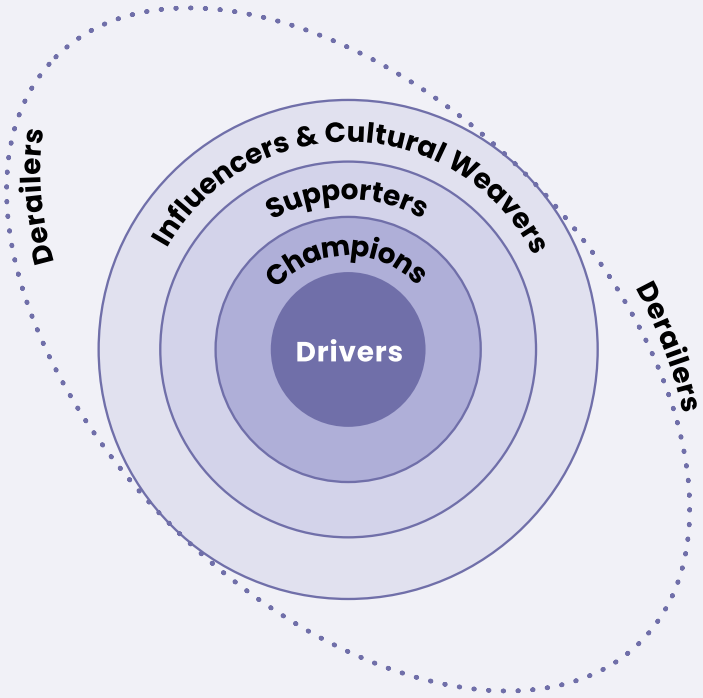
You can be proactive and anticipate potential resistance and how people might react rather than wait to respond in the moment. The goal is to communicate in a non-alienating and non-judgmental way from a state of compassion. Note, this doesn't mean you have to agree with the person. Rather, you create 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?

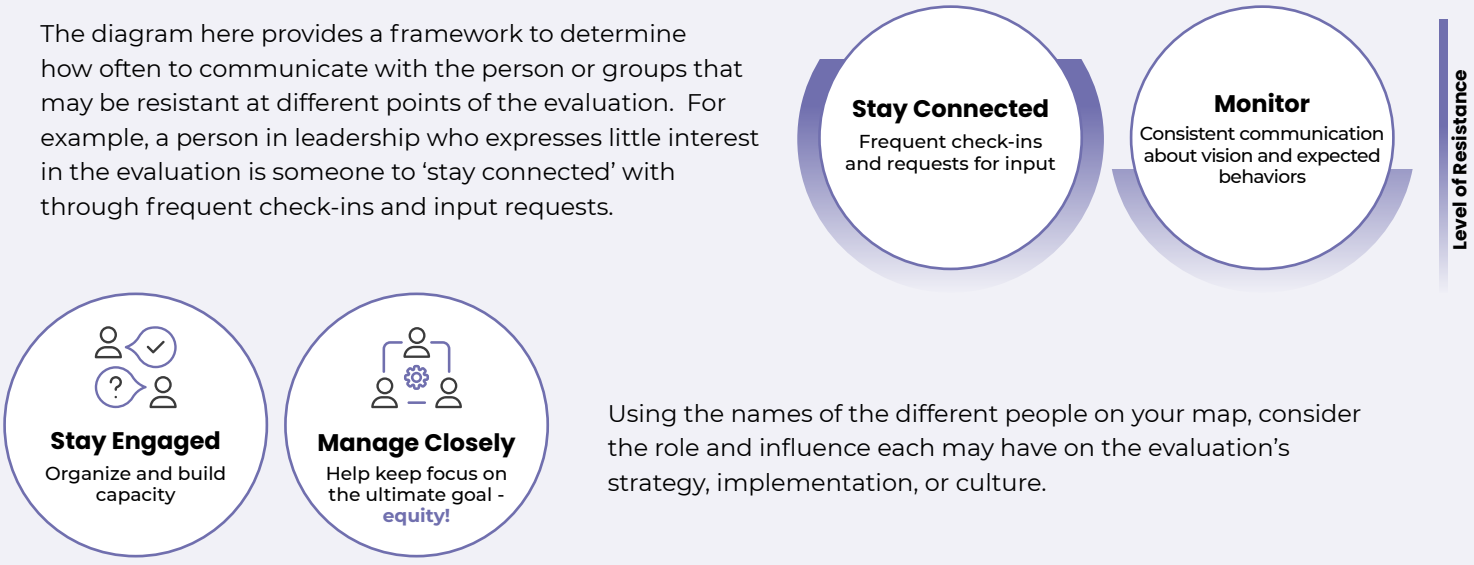
Type	Cause of the behavior	Tips for how to respond
Passive	◉ Threat response and threat activate fear in the brain ◉ Fear manifests itself in 4 different behaviors: fight, flight, freeze, or freak-out	◉ Encourage people to externalize their thoughts so they can find a more realistic and balanced perspective ◉ One-to-one conversations or conversations in group environments can help people externalize
Active	◉ Threat they want to "fight" to eliminate ◉ The change can cause them to lose control or feel unfairly treated ◉ An attempt to reassert lost autonomy	◉ Resist the urge to "fight" back to avoid heightening the tension ◉ Understand the potential threat your proposed change may present for people ◉ Address early and directly
Attached	◉ Strong sense of ownership for existing practices or processes ◉ Strong emotional ties to or passionate about the "values" involved, may associate with their success ◉ 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	◉ Ignite a fresh reflection on the root problem you're trying to address ◉ Return the focus to purpose, define the current need, and reflect on current real data that is different than the past ◉ Create a new neural network around a solution to provide the basics to form a new picture
Uncertain	◉ The brain is constantly trying to make sense of situations and leans toward known patterns ◉ There are gaps where there are no definite facts	◉ Be conscious of the conflicts at play by recognizing what is on the person's plate ◉ Consider how your message fits in the flow of information fighting for attention ◉ 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

Type	Cause of the behavior	Tips for how to respond
Overwhelmed	◉ Change is like the last grain of sand toppling the dune with already fast pace, series of changes; busy schedules; and other perceived stressors	◉ Be conscious of the conflicts at play by recognizing what is on the person's plate ◉ Consider how your message fits in the flow of information fighting for attention ◉ 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
Conflict Entrepreneur	◉ Desire for attention and power ◉ Unknown factors	◉ Know when to pause or disengage ◉ Scope the importance of the relationship in the context of the work ◉ Gauge what depth of interaction might be needed to reach the ultimate goal — advancing equity

Determine the needed frequency of communication

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?

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

Risk	Type of Resistence	Form of Response(s)	Type and Frequency of Communication

Manager

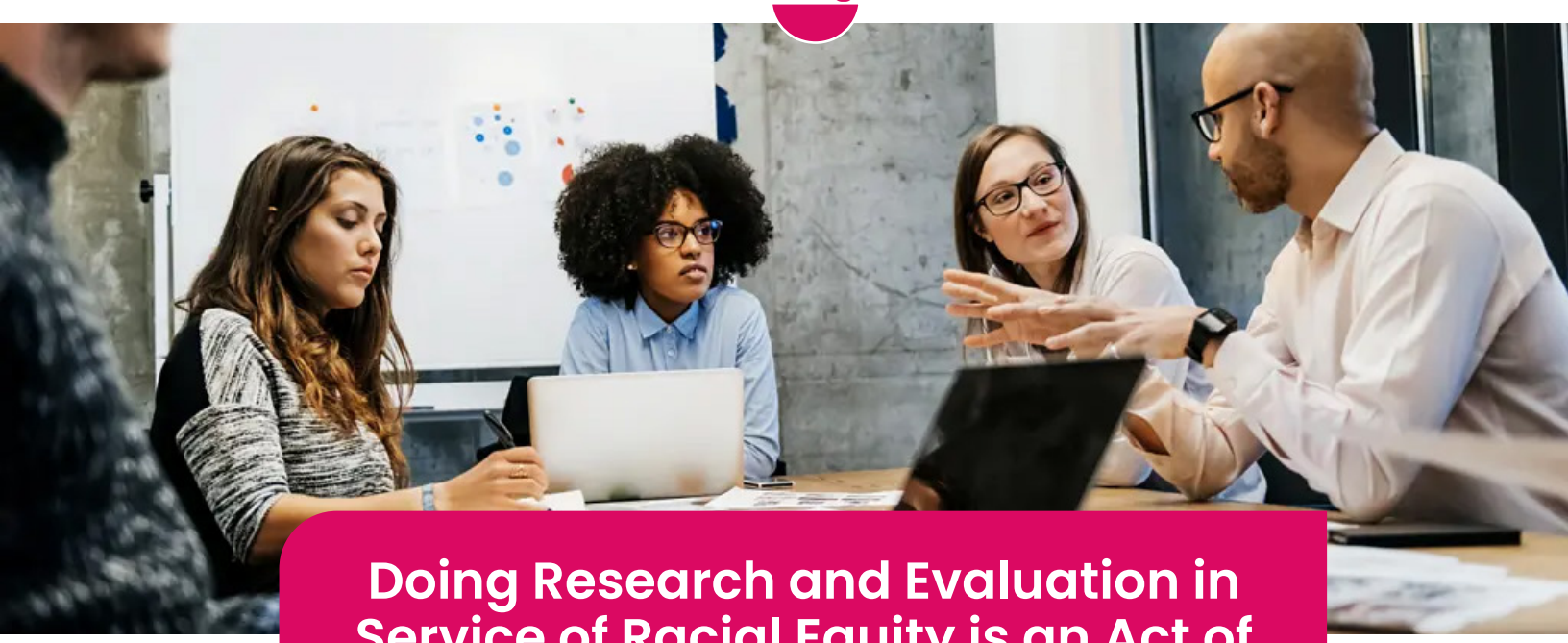
Risk	Type of Resistence	Form of Response(s)	Type and Frequency of Communication

Staff

Risk	Type of Resistence	Form of Response(s)	Type and Frequency of Communication

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

RTI INTERNATIONAL

June 02, 2023

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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

Considering Language Justice in Equity Centered Evaluation Practice

September 22, 2023

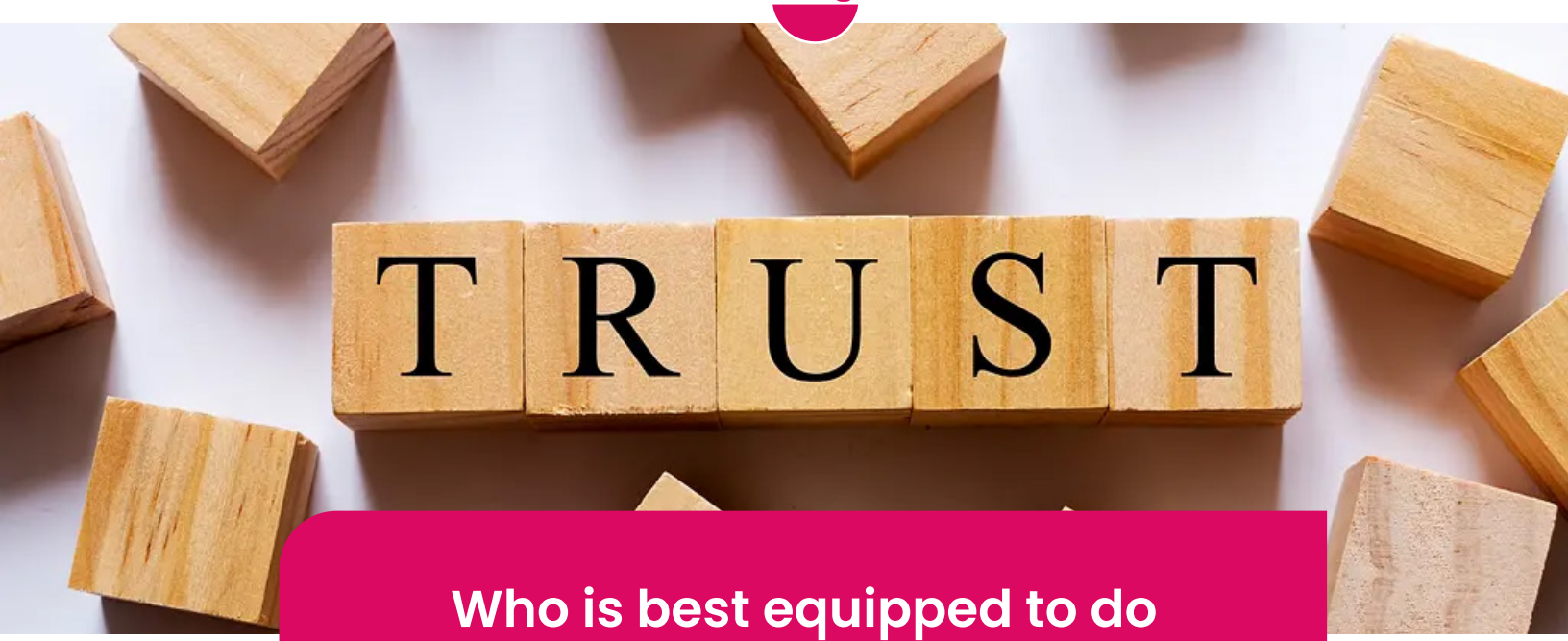
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how we do research requires us to dig deeper than being aware of the possible misuse of research, for example, to further a political agenda. We need to do the work of uncovering our deeply held beliefs about how the world works and be attentive to 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?

RTI INTERNATIONAL

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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

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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 "...[p]racticing 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.

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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.