How We Do Evaluations 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?

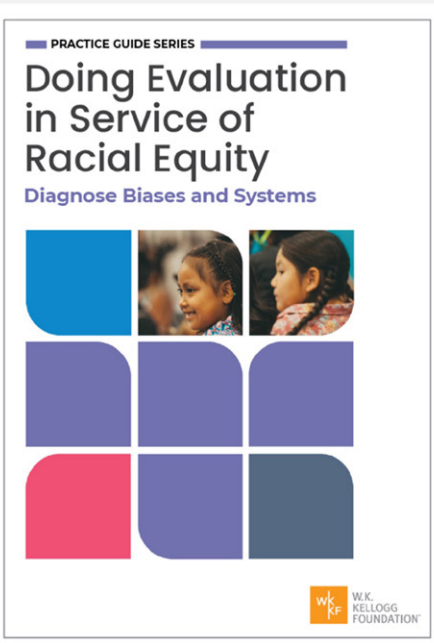
This is not the evaluator's responsibility alone, especially if there's an intermediary or technical assistance partner involved. Nevertheless, here are some ideas. Frequently, the learning agenda is developed by the funder, technical assistance partner, or evaluator based on "lessons learned" data from 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?

slide deck



A Racial Equity Lens from the Get-go

Tips to help foundations, evaluators, and others clarify and operationalize racial equity by applying a systems lens to their theory of change

July 2022

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.

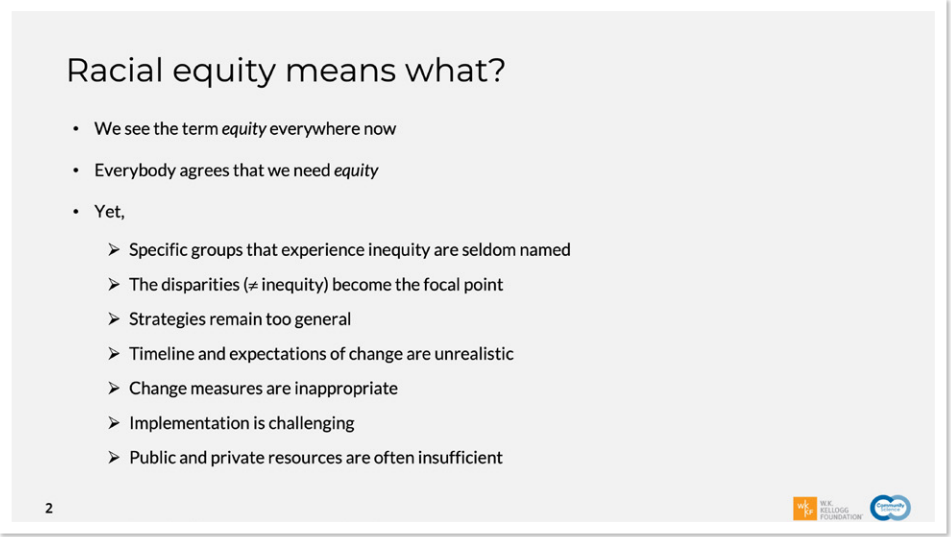
We learned from the questions asked and feedback shared during webinars, workshops, and other forms of engagement, that both evaluators and funders struggle to bring attention to policies, practices, relationships, and narratives that could — inadvertently or intentionally — harm communities that have 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.

SLIDE: Racial equity means what?

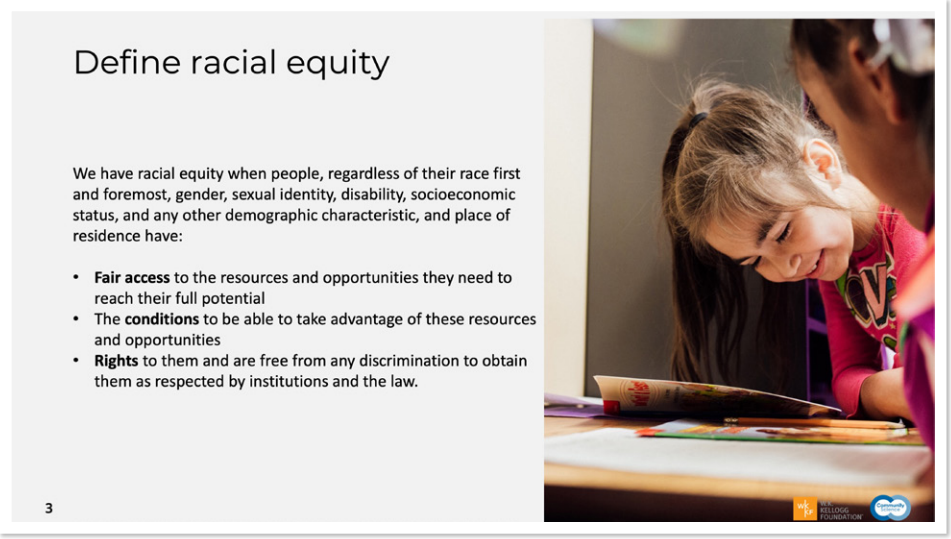
Let's start with the term "racial equity." We see the word "equity" in front of everything — "data equity," "education equity," "health equity," "economic equity," and more. Typically, the use of the word implies that it has to do with racism. We all agree that we need "equity"— yet, we are not always 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!



SLIDE: Define racial equity

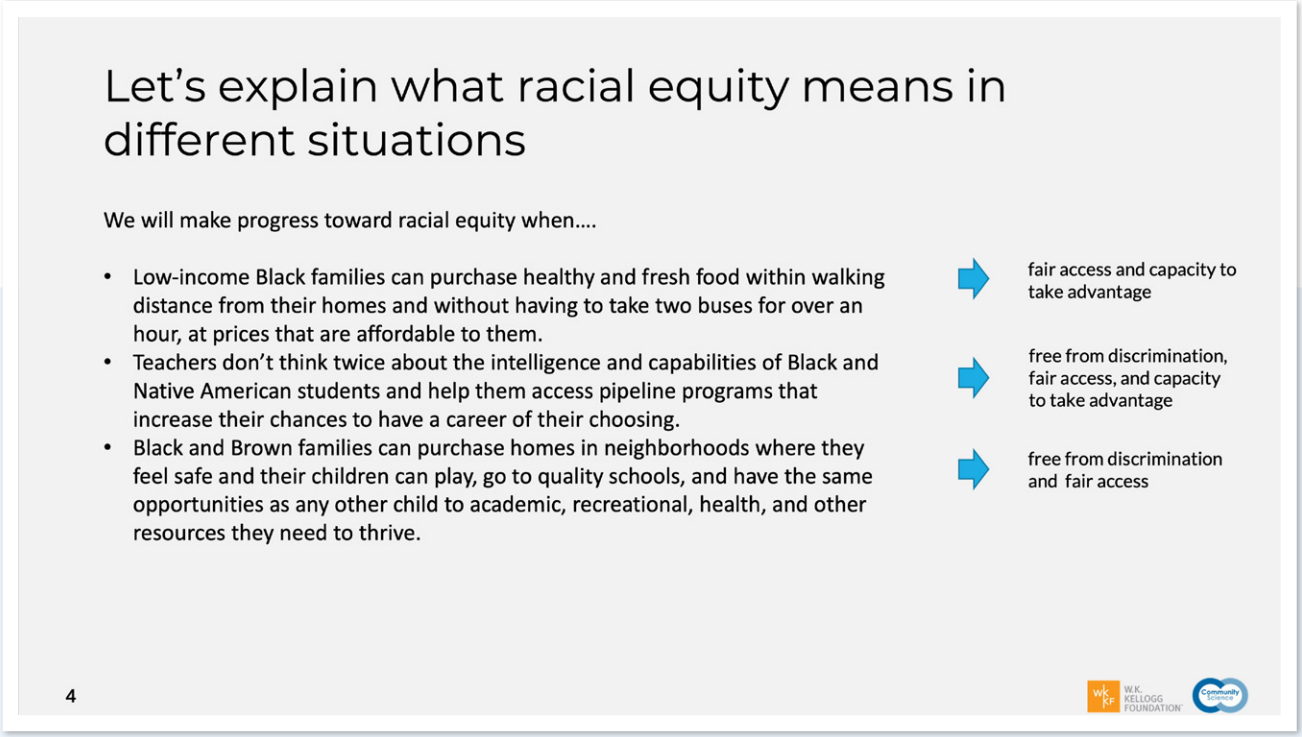
Therefore, it's really important that we take the time — before we design, implement, or evaluate anything — to understand what we mean by equity, and in particular racial equity.

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.

SLIDE: Let's explain what racial equity means in different situations



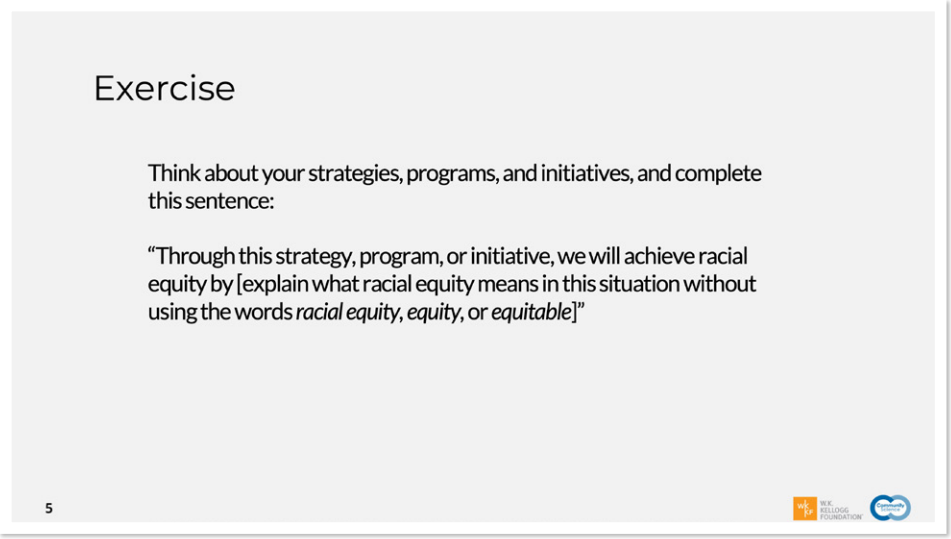
We should always strive for racial equity as far as people's lives are concerned — be it education, health, jobs, transportation, housing, food access, or some other condition that affects people's well-being. Why? Because it doesn't matter our race and ethnicity; racial disparities and inequity affect 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.

SLIDE: Exercise

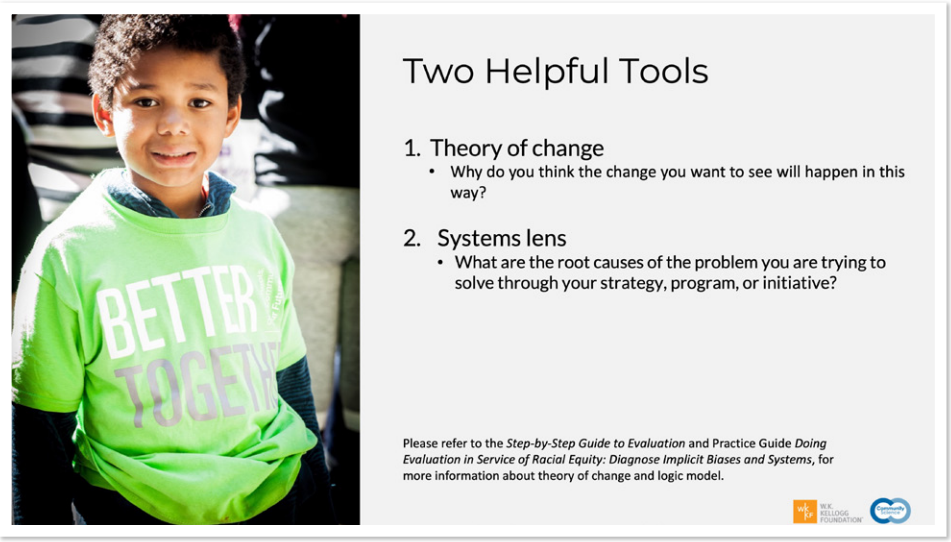


Here's a quick exercise. Think about your strategy, program, or initiative that you are funding or implementing that you say is to help eliminate racial and ethnic disparities and achieve racial equity.

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



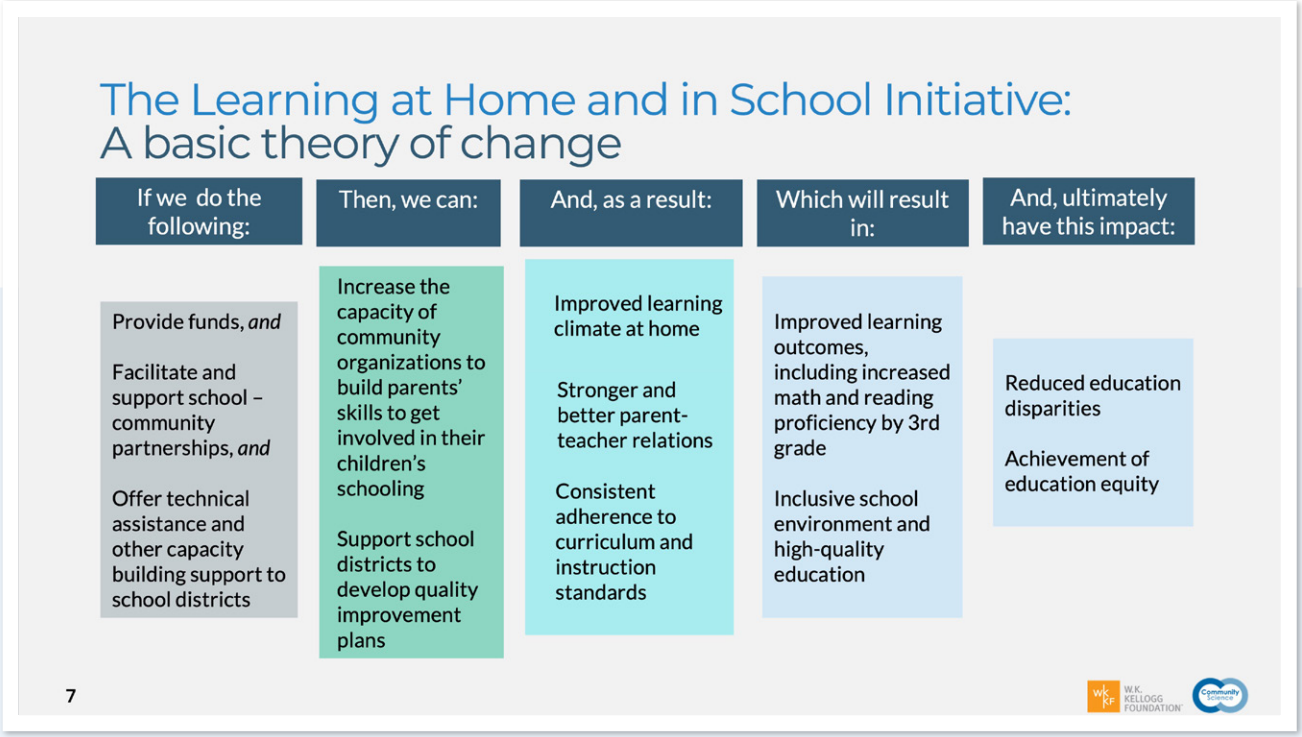
Now that you've operationalized racial equity in your strategy, program, or initiative, let's take a look at your theory of change and use of a systems lens to ensure the theory explicitly deals with racial equity.

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.

SLIDE: The Learning at Home and in School Initiative: A basic theory of change



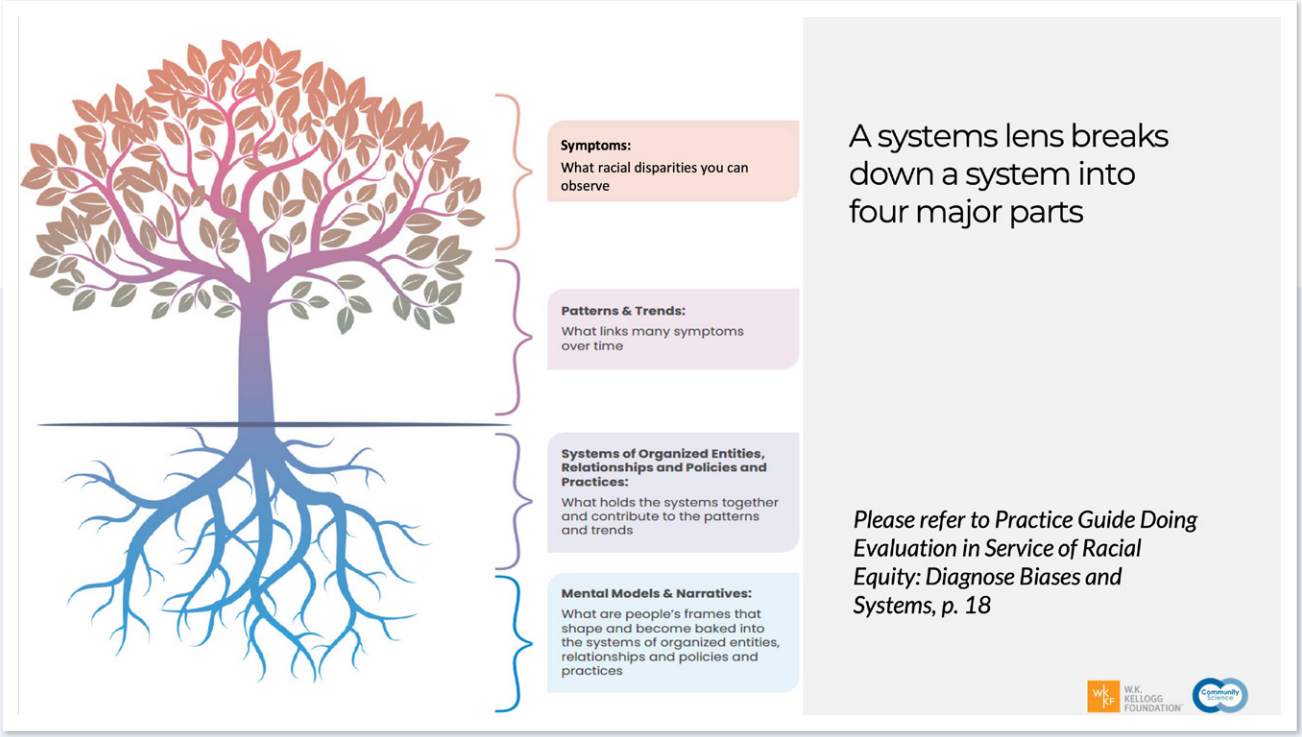
Let's walk through a basic theory of change. This theory of change is usually the starting point and you can go deeper by applying a systems lens. So, in this hypothetical situation, you wish to increase access to quality education for children to reduce the education disparities you know exist in your community and help move the needle on improving education outcomes for children who are treated unfairly in our education system due to their race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, place of residence, and other discriminating factors.

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?

SLIDE: A system lens breaks down a system into four parts



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.**

Be mindful that people have multiple social identities

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

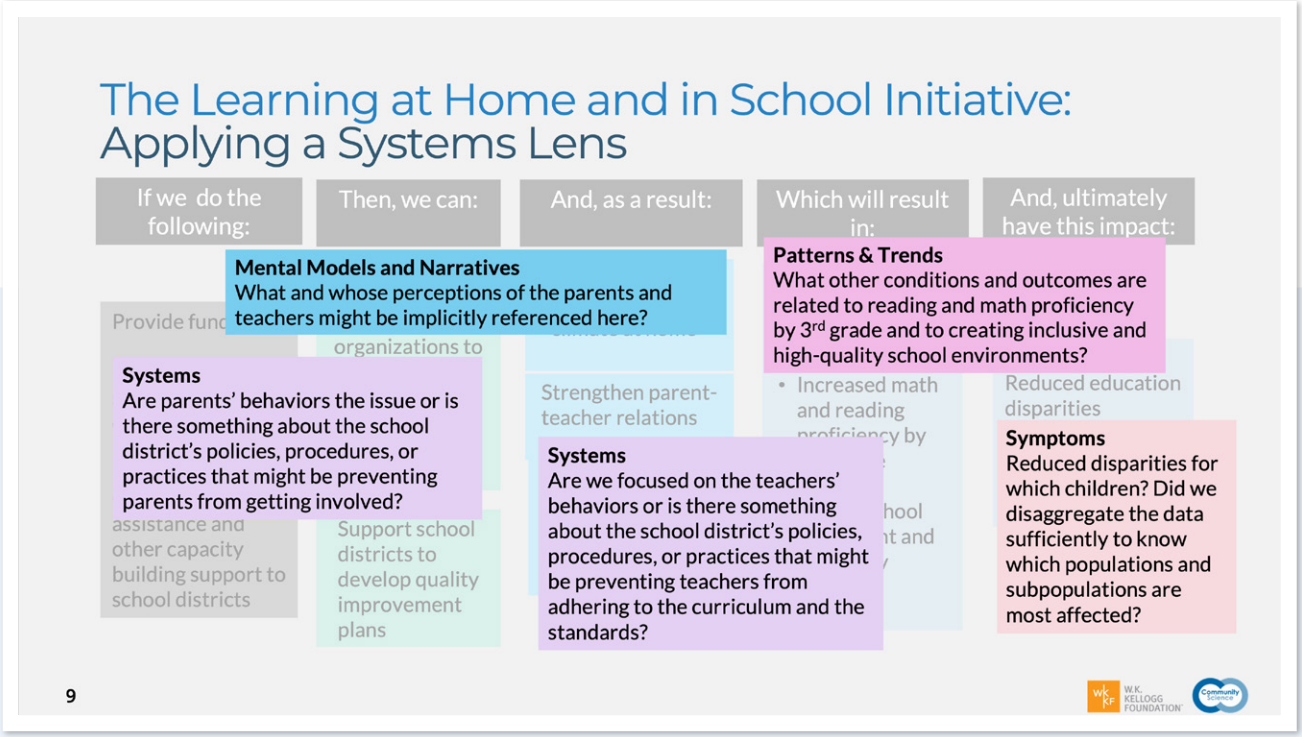
they establish maintain the status quo that produces the patterns and trends that link the symptoms. **Listen carefully to what people say about their experiences** related to a particular condition like education or health and identify the systems at play.

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.



SLIDE: The Learning at Home and in School Initiative: Applying a Systems Lens



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.

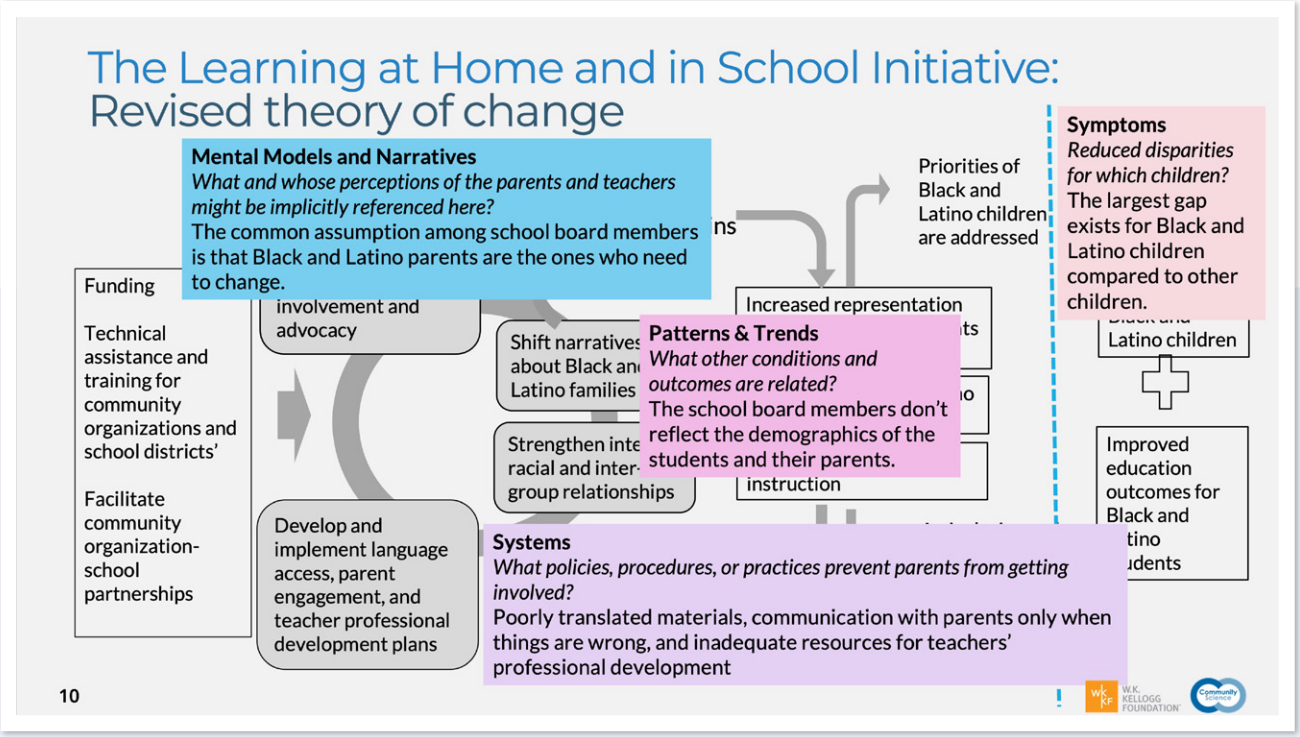
Let's start by clarifying who we think are experiencing the disparities. If we are vague, we risk creating strategies that are too general and inconsiderate of the specific and unique situations of certain groups. For example, a strategy designed for Black parents will look different from one for immigrant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

SLIDE: The Learning at Home and in School Initiative: Revised theory of change



The idea here is that you can see how the theory of change for the hypothetical initiative could change after applying a systems lens.

Parents should have a leadership role

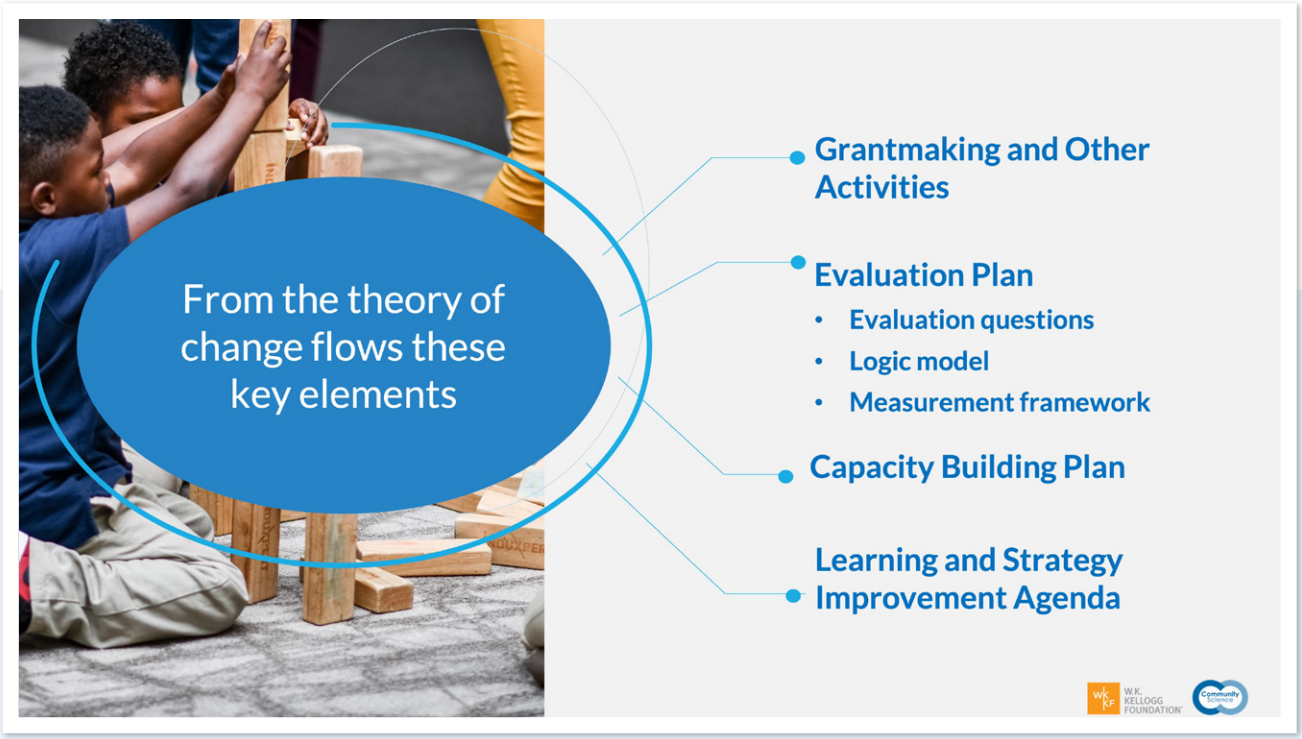
First, you noticed that the biggest gap exists for Black and Latino children. Now, you can explicitly call that out. Then you determined that it takes more than stronger parent-teacher relations to ensure that schools are inclusive and high-quality — parents should have a leadership role. Black and Latino 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.

SLIDE: From the theory of change flows these key elements



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.



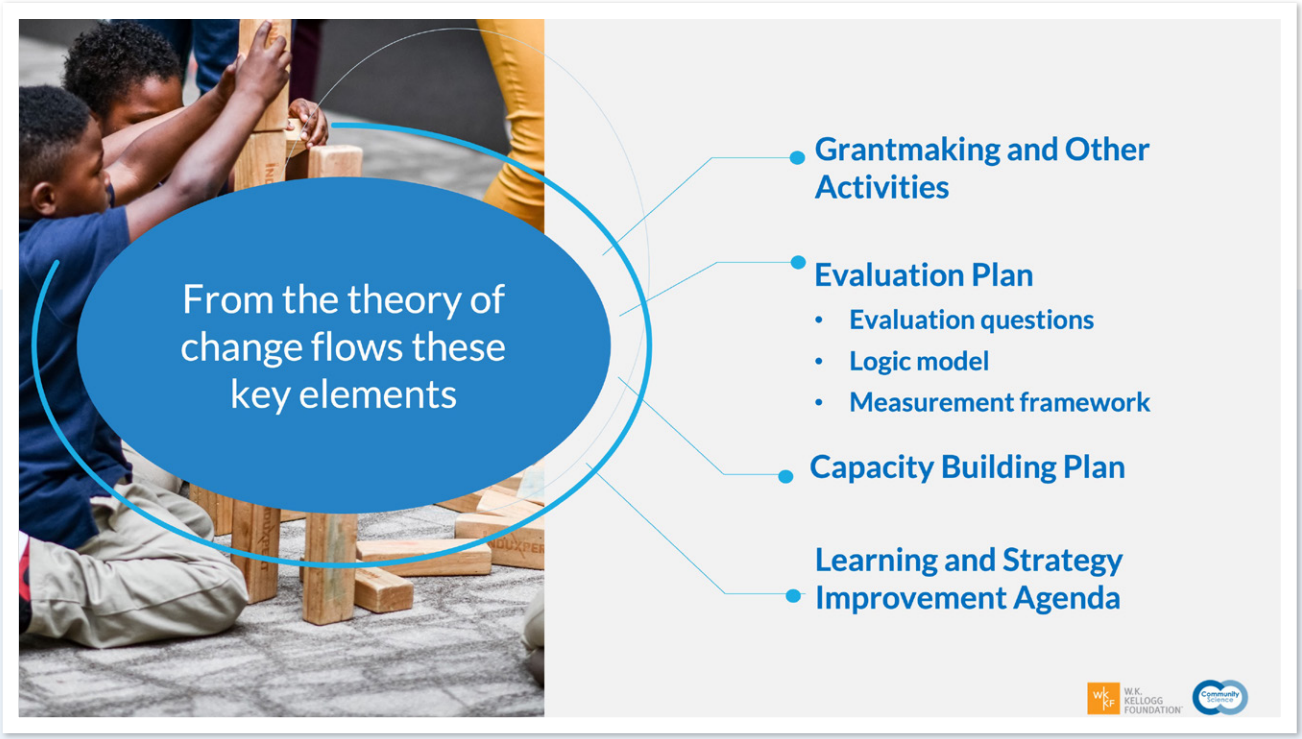
This is a list of questions that you can ask to get started applying a systems lens. As you ponder each question and gather information to answer, think about the implications on the design, barriers to be overcome, and what you can do to design, conduct, and support an evaluation in service of racial equity.

A Resource for You: Initial Questions to Ask

Questions to facilitate your application of the systems lens	How can you go about answering these questions?	What implications will the answers have for evaluation design?	What barriers have to be overcome?	What can you do to contribute to doing an evaluation in service of racial equity?
Symptoms: What racial disparities can you observe? Here we're looking for what's beyond the obvious. Dig deeper. Ask yourself: • What do you already know and what don't you know that you need to know? • What's happening that matters here? • How do these critical things apply in the disparities you observe: Access? Opportunity? Control? Capacity? Power? • What needs to change?				
Patterns and Trends: What links many symptoms over time? Be curious about why symptoms keep recurring. Ask yourself: • What's contributing across multiple disparities and multiple populations? • Which groups in the community lose access, opportunity, and control and where do they lose it? • Who has power? How is it exercised? • How does it all matter? • What needs to change?				

A Resource for You: Initial Questions to Ask

Questions to facilitate your application of the systems lens	How can you go about answering these questions?	What implications will the answers have for evaluation design?	What barriers have to be overcome?	What can you do to contribute to doing an evaluation in service of racial equity?
Systems of organized entities, relationships, policies and practices: What's holding the systems together? 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: • What's helping to maintain the status quo? • What holds the parts of the system in place? • Who benefits? Who doesn't? • How are things incentivized and disincentivized? For whom? • What needs to change?				
Mental Models and Narratives: What frames are implicitly "baked in" and shape decision-making? 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: • What do we instinctively accept and never question? • Who has access, opportunity, and control to protect? • How do they benefit? • How and when did these assumptions become common? Why is this important? • What needs to change?				



Remember, It takes practice to make explicit what are implicit assumptions.



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.



Culture, Context & Ecosystem: Why They Matter in Measurement, Monitoring & Evaluation

Kien Lee, Ph.D., Community Science
Huilan Krenn, Ph.D., W.K. Kellogg Foundation

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?





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,

SLIDE: What Constitutes a Good Measure?

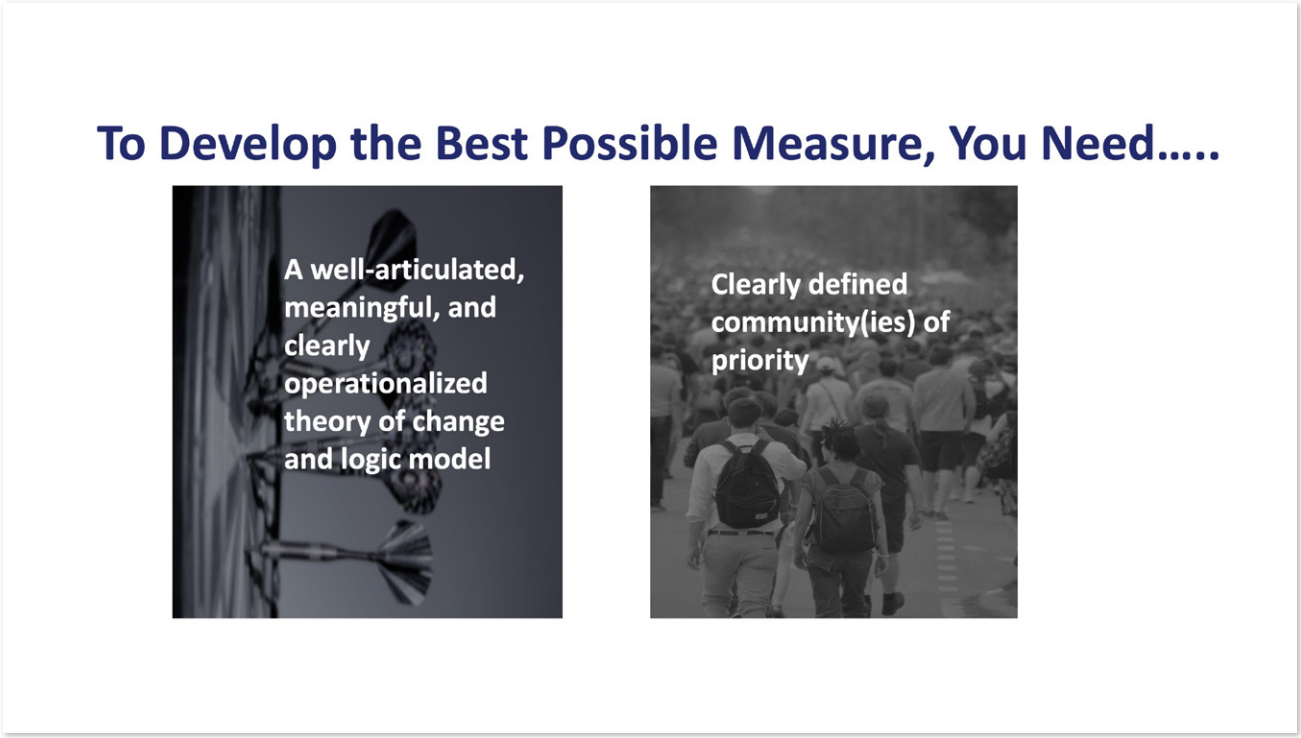
you don't want a set of questions that ask about someone's health conditions when you really want to know about their access to healthcare. Content validity means that it covers all relevant aspects of the concept you want to measure, and this concept is observable. Take for example, the measure for 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.

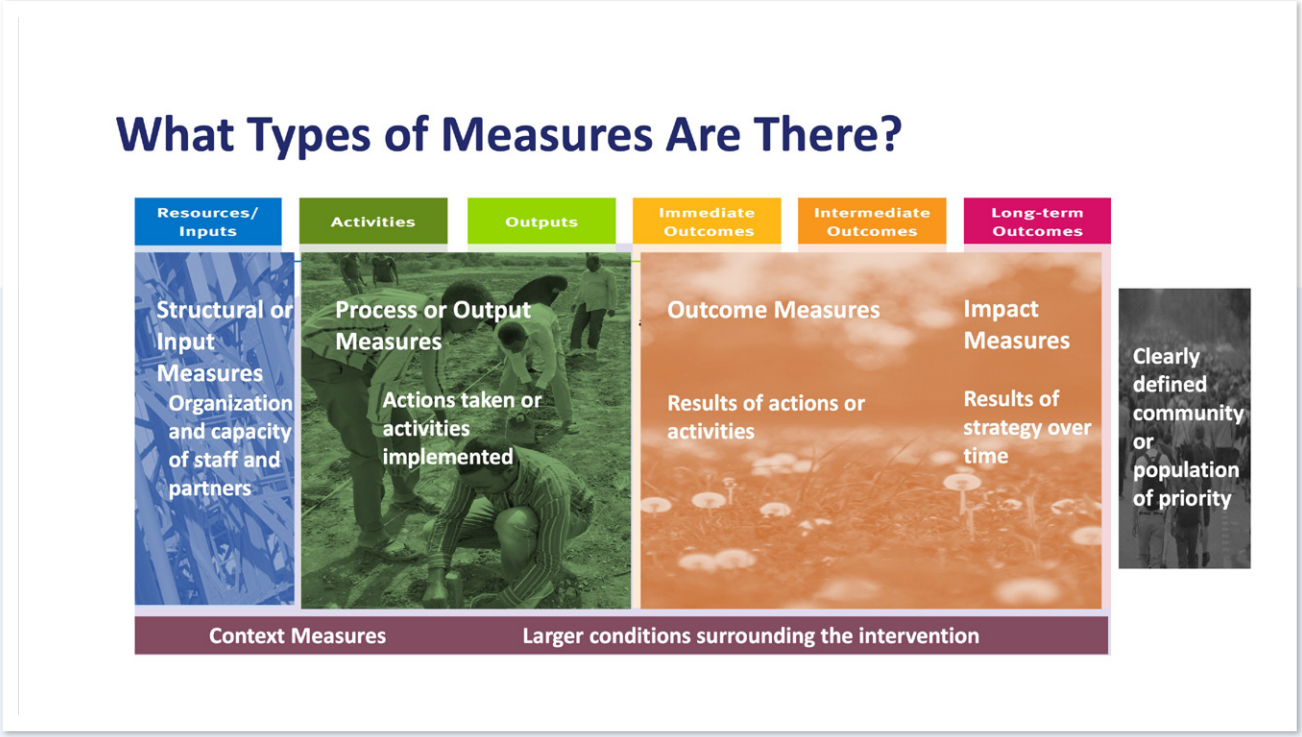
Finally, multicultural validity means that the concept you want to learn about considers differences across cultures, and the measure is responsive to those differences. For instance, the measure for healthcare access should consider the availability of healthcare coverage and linguistically appropriate 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.

SLIDE: To Develop the Best Possible Measure, You Need.....



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



There are at least five types of measures: structural or input, process or output, outcome, impact, and context. These align with the flow of a logic model.

There is a tendency to measure outputs instead of outcomes because it's easier.



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.

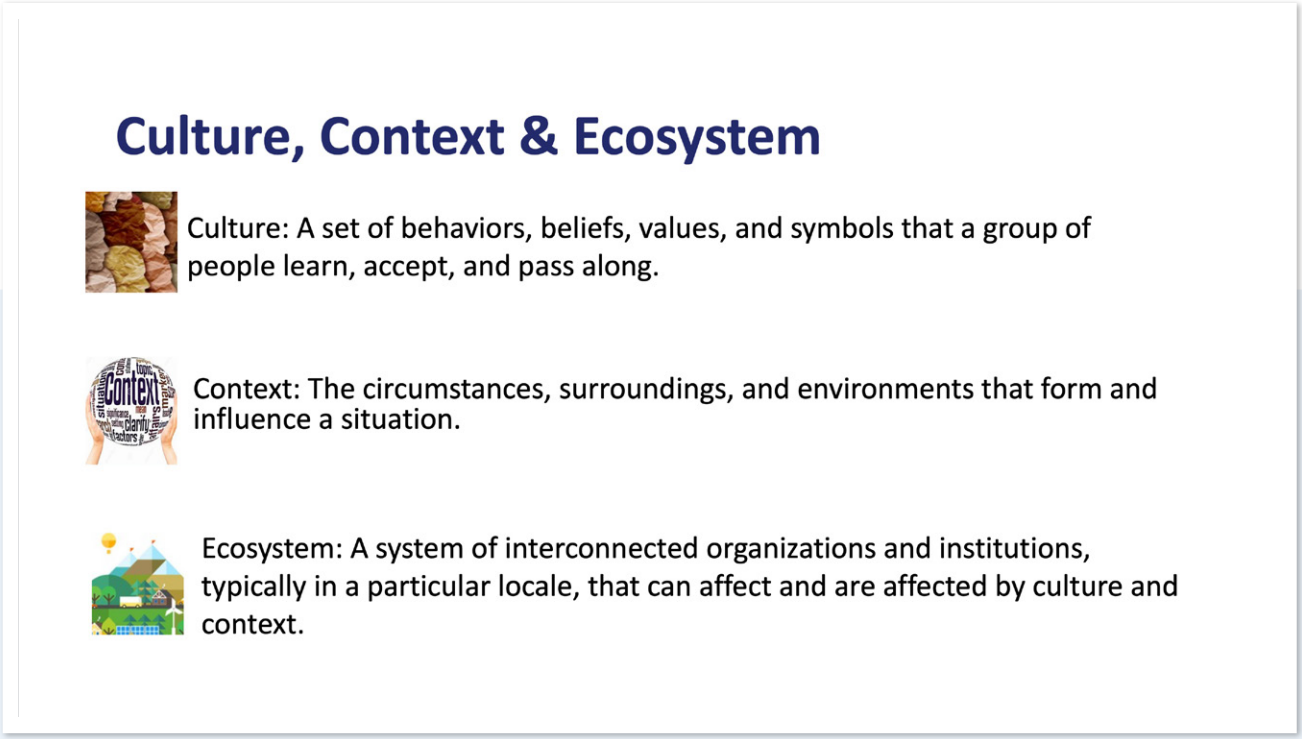


The last, but not least, common pitfall is the number and range of factors contributing to the outcome.

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.

SLIDE: Culture, Context & Ecosystem



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.

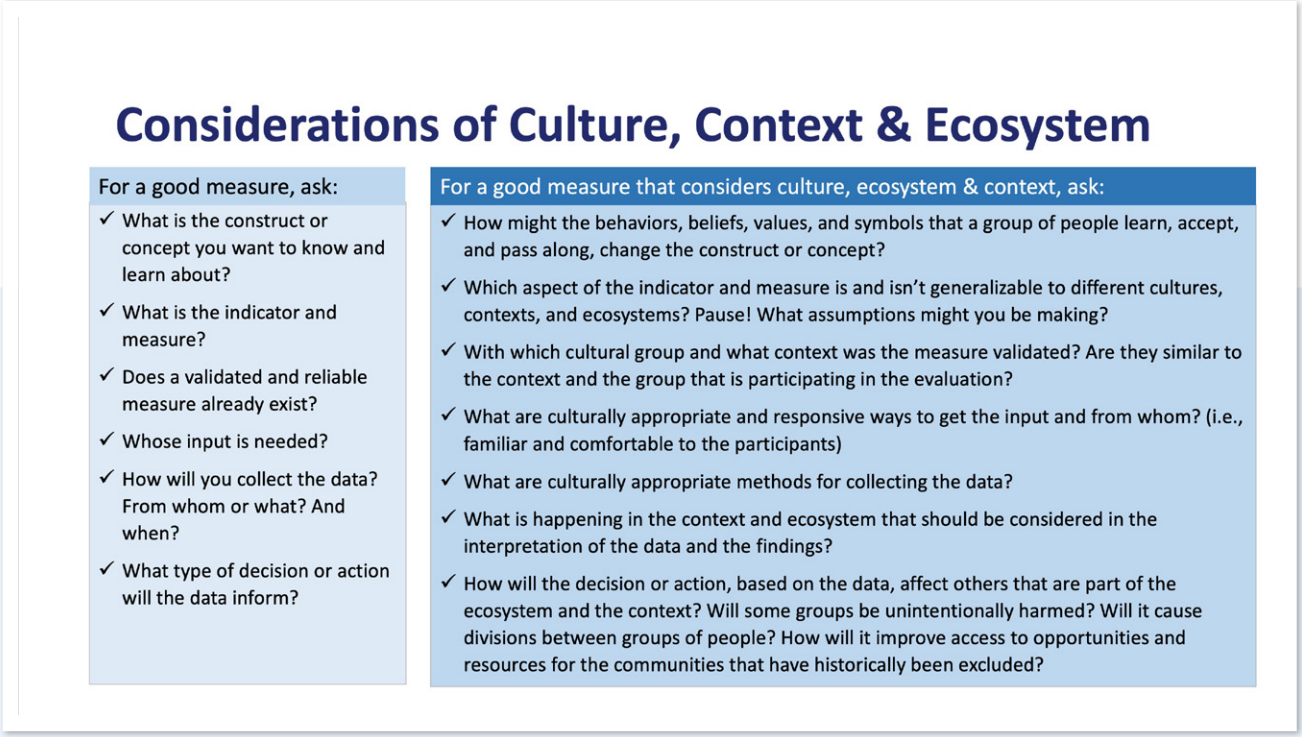
Context

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

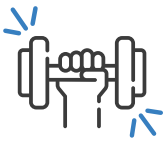
Ecosystem

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.



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?

tip sheet

Collection of Demographic Data

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.



Reference Survey	Your Survey
Survey Question	**Survey Question**
Race	Racial Identity
Demographic Categories	**Demographic Categories**
Caucasian	White
African American	Black or African American
American Indian	American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native
Asian	Asian American
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

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
https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2102/2020/04/ORARC-Tip-Sheet-Inclusive-Demographic-Data-Collection.pdf

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
https://www.schusterman.org/article/5-best-practices-for-equitable-and-inclusive-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.

Resource

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

https://diversegreen.org/research/tracking-diversity-the-green-2-0-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.

Resource

NWIT Guide

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1E_CSANwOqbKjEG27woNbGZ09JIXUfAf4Cp9j8g5DFak/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.

Resource

We All Count - 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/486/11
- NAMI Core Demographic Questions Explained https://www.nami.org/getmedia/5adbaa46-26ff-4704-b9ac-f5c01ad3f8ed/Core-Demographic-Questions-Explainer-Field
- 2020 United States Census https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires.2020_Census.html
- How to ask about gender in forms respectfully. (2020, January 6). Ruth Ng. Retrieved October, 2021, from How to Ask About Gender in Forms Respectfully | Ruth Ng 4.



Equitable Evaluation Practices for Place-Based Development

RTI INTERNATIONAL

October 3, 2023

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Director, Economic Development

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 changeover 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.

blog

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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-

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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.



Considering Language Justice in Equity Centered Evaluation

RTI INTERNATIONAL

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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,

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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

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framing 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.

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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.