




# The Importance of Culture in Evaluation

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR EVALUATORS





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## To Our Readers,

The Colorado Trust has a long-standing commitment to evaluate the effectiveness of its grantmaking. Over the years, the methods and styles of evaluations we've used have evolved, but the purpose – to foster learning and improvement in our work and the work of our grantees – has remained constant.

One area that we have worked to learn more about in recent years is that of cultural competency. As Colorado's racial and ethnic populations have grown more diverse, particularly through an increased influx of immigrants and refugees, our grantmaking also continues to evolve to better serve people of myriad cultures.

Striving to incorporate culturally competent practices into our grantmaking has been a part of Trust grantmaking for a decade, yet only recently has this received attention as something that offers specific lessons for evaluators.

Within an evaluation, the process of information exchange, interpretation and application of knowledge are significantly influenced by the cultures of the participants, including the evaluator. However, while there is growing interest in and discussion about what it takes to design and conduct a culturally competent evaluation, there is little practical information available. This report provides insights to help guide the complex dynamics between evaluators, funders and stakeholders of different cultures.

In this report we use the term “cross-culturally competent” evaluations over “culturally competent” evaluations. This is not to imply that culturally competent evaluations are somehow not enough, or even differ from those that are cross-culturally competent. Rather, we want to strongly emphasize the need on the part of evaluators to move fluently across many cultures. Attending a workshop that addresses issues related to a specific culture may not provide skills that can be transferred to other diverse cultures. Evaluators need to develop the skills to ask the right questions about the practices of any cultural group or any new situation, so that the competencies are utilized across many cultures and in many settings.

These skills are wide-ranging and likely take a lifetime to acquire. While this report is not the definitive answer to all questions about cross-culturally competent evaluation, we hope it provides a good start in helping evaluators to assess their own work and how they work with others, with the goal of creating more useful evaluations for all stakeholders.

Sincerely,



Nancy B. Csuti, DrPH  
*Director of Evaluation*

## Introduction

It is the job of evaluators to understand how a group of people perceive an intervention, communicate their views and act on the knowledge gained from the evaluation. Evaluators' ability to do this enables them to gather quality data, make accurate conclusions and ensure that the evaluation findings are used appropriately. This process of information exchange, interpretation and application of knowledge are influenced by the cultures of the participants, including the evaluator. Because of this, cross-cultural competency is an essential component in evaluation and a necessary skill for evaluators to have.

There is a growing body of work about what it takes to design and conduct a culturally competent evaluation. The number of workshops and presentations about this topic at the American Evaluation Association conference (AEA), the leading professional association for evaluators in the United States, has increased steadily over the last decade. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, a journal sponsored by the AEA, has published several special issues on the topic. In 2004, the AEA's Diversity Committee completed a review of the *Program Evaluation Standards* (developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation) and recommended improvements for incorporating cultural diversity, cultural concerns and cultural competency into the standards. The role of culture in evaluation is gaining attention, encouraging evaluators and those who commission evaluations to give it as much consideration as they would other evaluation components, such as sampling and measurement.

At the same time, the depth of discussion among scholars, professionals, funders and other audiences of cross-culturally competent evaluations remains limited. Suggested evaluation practices such as a mixed-method approach, collaboration with stakeholders and a culturally diverse team – albeit critical in such evaluations – do not automatically assume cross-cultural competency. It is possible, for example, for evaluators to engage the wrong leaders in designing the evaluation because they did not fully understand the leadership structure of a particular cultural group; informal leaders who are influential, but not easily identifiable to the evaluators, may be left out of the process.

While it is impossible to become perfectly competent in another culture, it is possible to gain sufficient competency to work across cultures. The term *cultural competency* has, at times, been misconstrued by some evaluators to mean that it would apply only to someone who knows all there is to know about a specific culture. Consequently, training on the behavioral patterns of a particular group of people is not helpful in the face of yet another culture. Given the exponential growth in the number of people from various cultures now living in the United States, such training quickly becomes an impractical task.

It is more feasible to equip evaluators with the knowledge and skills to work with people from different cultures by having an open mind, not making assumptions and asking the right questions respectfully. Only then can the competency to work across cultures, or *cross-cultural competency*, become possible. This report provides examples of where cross-cultural competency is critical in evaluation and recommends questions and strategies that an evaluator should consider when practicing this form of competency.



## CHARACTERISTICS THAT AFFECT INTERACTIONS AMONG PEOPLE

There are three key characteristics that affect interactions among people, and are therefore critical considerations in a cross-culturally competent evaluation:

1. Culture
2. Social identity or group membership
3. Privilege and power

## Culture

Culture is a central component of cross-culturally competent evaluations, yet rarely is it defined. Evaluators with little or no proficiency in cross-cultural competency tend to use the term interchangeably with race and ethnicity. Consequently, they may ignore the cultures of people of a certain sexual orientation, generation, income level or religion.

*Culture is a set of socially transmitted and learned behavior patterns, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought that characterize the functioning of a particular population, profession, organization or community.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>*

Culture comes in many forms and shapes that are constantly evolving. One way of thinking about culture is as “an iceberg sticking out of the ocean.”<sup>4</sup> At the tip of the iceberg, visible above sea level, are relatively obvious forms of culture, such as music, dance, food, clothing, language, skin color, celebrations and art. These forms are more easily recognized and understood by someone outside the culture. They produce few misunderstandings between people in and outside the culture.

Right beneath the sea level are less obvious forms of culture, such as religion, history, rituals related to birth and death, social class, concepts of beauty, patterns of superior and subordinate relationships, rites of passage, body language and use of leisure time. These forms may become apparent to the outsider who asks the right questions, listens carefully and pays close attention to non-verbal cues. If misunderstood, negative feelings between people in and outside the culture could result.

Even deeper in the ocean are forms of culture that require extensive inquiry and observation for the outsider to understand, such as the meaning of community, concept of space and time, logic, notions of leadership, patterns of decisionmaking, beliefs about health, help-seeking behavior, notions of individualism versus collectivism, attitudes toward the elderly and approaches to problem-solving. These manifestations of culture are typically learned through modeling, usually at an early age. When the norms are violated, they could seriously harm relationships and cause adverse consequences for the people involved.

Considering this understanding of culture and all its possible forms, it is apparent that culture can affect every aspect of evaluation. For instance:

- How a group of Muslim women from Afghanistan respond to a female or male evaluator is regulated by a set of behavior patterns and beliefs about gender roles in their culture.
- How Latinos answer the question, “How many family members live with you?” is shaped by their cultural values about kinship.
- How evaluators explain their work is influenced by their profession’s norms and standards.
- How responsive a group of White residents are to an evaluator’s invitation to participate in a community assessment is shaped by their history and beliefs about citizen participation.

*Nobody can ever know everything about a culture, therefore, one must develop the capacity to not make assumptions and respectfully ask the right questions.*



## CROSS-CULTURALLY COMPETENT EVALUATORS

- Are conscious that people are different and have their own way of thinking and behaving according to their cultures
- Deliberately set aside time and resources in the evaluation timeline and budget to learn about differences and similarities
- Are willing to engage in a dialogue about how culture, social identity, and privilege and power affect them personally and their work
- Design processes that take into account cultural differences and similarities among all the stakeholders and between the evaluator and the stakeholders.

**Identify and work with a bridge builder or cultural translator.** Evaluators seldom work in a vacuum. Often they are hired by people who are at least somewhat familiar with the cultural group affected by the evaluation, and who may be able to explain some basic characteristics of the cultural group. If they cannot, it is likely that they know someone else who can. Evaluators could also ask their colleagues who may be familiar with the cultural group about social norms within that group. Another option is for evaluators, with the help of the funder or grantee, to identify community residents who could educate the evaluator about the cultural group. Such people can serve as bridge builders or cultural translators.<sup>5</sup> They are the people capable of crossing cultural boundaries and helping the evaluator learn. Their role is crucial for the evaluator and they should be compensated for their time and knowledge.

Some questions the evaluator should ask the bridge builder or cultural translator:

- How do people from this culture typically greet each other?
- Whom should I greet first if I am approaching a group of people?
- How do people from this culture tend to view someone with authority and power?

- What past experiences has the community had with researchers and evaluators?
- Who are the typical beholders of knowledge in this culture?

**Listen, observe carefully and ask respectfully.** As simple as this suggestion is, it is also the hardest and often least practiced behavior.<sup>6</sup> When working among people from another culture on an evaluation, evaluators should use the opportunity to ask questions, note non-verbal communication and rules of conduct, and listen to people's expectations and concerns. Evaluators might want to ask the bridge builder or cultural translator to introduce them to ease the initial interaction. Evaluators might also find it useful to note and discuss their observations with the bridge builder or cultural translator.

*The term **stakeholder** means everyone who has a stake in the evaluation, including the evaluation's funder, staff, consultants, grantees and community leaders in the grantee communities.*

## QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATORS TO ASK

### *Pertaining To Culture*

- Who can help me understand this cultural group and some of its basic norms?
- Who can introduce me and help me gain entry into the group?
- What non-verbal communication and rules of conduct did I observe in this group?
- What have others learned about what it takes to work with this group? What are some of their mistakes that I should be careful not to repeat?
- What does this term or concept mean for this cultural group? How can I find out more about its meaning?
- What is the term in this group's language?
- Which professionals can I consult for translation and interpretation?
- Where can I pilot-test my questions and instruments?

**Find out about previous experiences and lessons learned.** In addition to listening, observing and asking, evaluators should take the time to find out what their colleagues have learned from past and similar experiences. They should review past studies pertaining to the relevant population affected by the evaluation. They could also consider interviewing other evaluators and researchers who have worked with the relevant population. Evaluators should not, however, accept what they learn without cross-checking the information, make sure that it can be confirmed by credible sources and include people from the cultural group in question.

**Don't assume that a particular concept or term means the same thing for everyone.** Language and context play a very important role in evaluation.<sup>7,8</sup> For example, in a study about the sense of home as a measure of immigrant integration, research showed that the concept of "home" in four different cultural groups (Jamaican, Polish, Salvadoran and Somali) was influenced by the circumstances under which their members migrated to Canada and that the word "home" may not exist in all languages.<sup>9</sup> If the researcher did not consider the possible interpretations of a simple word like "home" before collecting the data, his

findings could be rendered inaccurate and the four groups' extent of integration falsely assessed.

In a study about civic engagement among Chinese, Salvadoran, Vietnamese and Indian immigrants, another researcher found that the concept of civic engagement was closely related to the political history of the immigrants' countries of origin.<sup>10</sup> This means that evaluators of civic engagement initiatives must pay attention to the meaning of civic engagement in different contexts, and not assume that "civic engagement" has the same meaning across cultural groups.

One way to ensure that cultural context and nuances are considered in an evaluation is for evaluators to conduct discussion groups with members of the cultural group affected by the evaluation. These discussions can be helpful in exploring the meaning of words, concepts and context in English or in the group's native language before questions, response categories and instruments are finalized.<sup>11</sup>

**Consult expert translators and interpreters.** Language is part of culture, and as the United States becomes more linguistically diverse, interpretation and translation is an important consideration in evaluation.



A rigorous process for translating questionnaires into different languages and cultural context was developed by one researcher<sup>12</sup> and involves three types of people: skilled professionals trained in translating the source questionnaire; reviewers with good language abilities who are also familiar with the subject matter and survey design; and the individuals who, in collaboration with the translators and reviewers, make the final decision about which translation options to implement. These final decisionmakers should be proficient in the languages involved. This model also emphasizes the importance of pre-testing the translated questionnaire with the cultural group involved, as well as the documentation of decisions made about the translation and subsequent revisions.

Interpretation during interviews and focus groups should follow a similar rigorous process. Interpreters should have adequate time to review the questions and protocol in advance and to translate the materials before actually interpreting them at the interview or focus group. This will minimize the risk of misunderstandings, especially of key concepts and words relevant to the evaluation, as a consequence of “on-the-spot” interpretation.

**Pilot test questions and instruments.** Evaluators should pilot test the instruments under conditions that emulate the actual situation. This will provide further opportunity to gather feedback from people of different cultures. As always, when revisions are made in an evaluation the decisions about those revisions must be documented in detail for future reference.<sup>12</sup>

## Social Identity and Group Membership

Social identity is formed when a group of people attempt to see their group differentiated from other groups as a way to preserve and achieve group distinctiveness.<sup>13</sup> This identity is informed by behavior patterns, beliefs, institutions and attitudes held by a particular group.

### Multiple Social Identities Complicates the Process

*In a study about experiences of mothers in gaining access to higher education, a middle-class White woman assumed her gender and motherhood would ease her ability to engage female participants (mostly women of color) for her inquiry. She went through an education institution to make the initial contact and found that she was perceived by the women the way the educational institution was perceived – White, middle class and oppressive. In this context, she learned that race and class played a more dominant role than gender in the dynamics between her and the study participants.<sup>14</sup>*

*Another researcher encountered a slightly different situation when she discovered that her African American heritage and gender encouraged her research participants (African American female teachers) to set aside more time to talk to her. On the other hand, the ease she felt with the female participants was not there in her interviews with male teachers, despite the shared racial background. Gender became more salient than race in this instance.<sup>15</sup>*

People have several social identities because they tend to belong to two or more groups. Sometimes, a person's identity is obvious (e.g., a woman, a person of color); at other times, an inappropriate identity may be incorrectly imposed on the person.

Like many people, evaluators often forget that people belong to several groups at the same time and as such, they naturally have multiple social identities. For example, someone can exhibit the behavior patterns associated with being Asian, a woman and a professional, all at the same time. The relevance of each set of patterns depends on the present context in which a person is operating. For instance, being Asian may be more relevant when among Latinos and Whites, while being a woman may be more relevant when among a group of Asian men. Social identities often become the basis for creating an "us versus them" dynamic, even within a cultural group.

The evaluator can embody different social identities, and so can all of the other stakeholders who participate in an evaluation. The interplay between all the identities creates a complex context for an evaluation, generating dynamics that could facilitate or hinder communication.

Funders, nonprofit leaders and program managers often assume that hiring an evaluator who shares similar traits – especially obvious traits such as skin color and language ("the tip of the iceberg") – with the evaluation participants ensures cross-cultural competency. While such similarities may be helpful, they should not be the sole criteria for cross-culturally competent evaluations<sup>7</sup> because the dynamics of multiple social identities can complicate the situation. Evaluators with similar traits, while likely able to tell the story accurately may make inaccurate assumptions because they undervalue the layers of diversity and variations within a cultural group. For instance, a Puerto Rican evaluator from New York City may not necessarily understand the culture of Mexican immigrants in rural Colorado. This is why an evaluation team made of diverse members is an advantage – they can provide a system of checks and balances from different cultural perspectives.

*Unspoken and even unrealistic expectations can arise from situations where evaluation participants assume that the evaluator is "one of them," or "not one of them." A cross-culturally competent evaluator is conscious of and able to navigate these expectations.*

## QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATORS TO ASK

### *Pertaining to Social Identities and Group Membership*

- Are there enough resources and time for me to build relationships and trust? If not, can I still conduct this evaluation without compromising its cultural competency?
- What social identities and groups do I belong to? How might they color the lens through which I view the world?
- What social identities and groups do people who don't know me think I belong to?
- Who is knowledgeable enough to help me ensure multicultural validity?
- What advocates or advocacy groups do I know that help me understand the current political, social and economic situation of the people who will be impacted by the evaluation?
- What newspapers and other media outlets can I access to help me better understand the local context?



**Set aside time and resources to build trust and relationships, and to understand the cultural groups and cultural context.**

The evaluation process must allow time for trust-building because evaluation can often cause anxiety, fear and resentment.<sup>4, 6, 16, 17</sup> Trust and positive relationships enable evaluators to gather authentic data. Cross-culturally competent evaluators must be prepared to give up their time outside of the traditional work hours and to meet stakeholders, especially community residents, at less formal, more convenient settings (e.g., library, the person's home or coffee shop). This is an essential practice not just in cross-culturally competent evaluations, but in all evaluations. Evaluators should never assume anything based on what they see on the surface; the evaluator will know when there is trust because stakeholders, especially community participants, will volunteer more information than needed.<sup>17, 18</sup>

Evaluators can initiate the trust and relationship-building process by attending activities conducted by the community stakeholders, such as high school graduation ceremonies, parent teacher association meetings, dance performances, art exhibitions and other cultural gatherings and celebrations. This effort not only helps the evaluators learn about the different cultural groups and the context in which they are conducting an evaluation, it also shows the participants that the evaluator is interested in understanding their institutions and culture. For instance, among Native American tribes an evaluator who is capable of understanding their institutions is more valued and respected than one with degrees of higher learning and a professional reputation.<sup>19</sup>

**Keep current on the dynamic context in which the evaluation is operating.** Research suggests that evaluators would benefit by proactively learning about the relevant issues that make a difference for the groups impacted by the evaluation,<sup>20</sup> as well as for the success of the evaluation itself.

*A cross-culturally competent evaluator recognizes, understands and is able to navigate the dynamics caused by multiple social identities and group membership, and the power differences that are generated by those dynamics.*

In order to do this, evaluators should talk with someone from the community directly affected by the evaluation. They should stay abreast of current affairs pertaining to this community (e.g., through news coverage), or contact local or national advocacy groups that work on issues impacting this community (e.g., National Council of La Raza, NAACP, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, National Immigration Forum, AARP and National Organization on Disabilities). Evaluators could ask such questions as:

- What are the current issues or concerns affecting this community?
- Why is the initiative or program important?
- What potential impact, both positive and negative, can the evaluation have on the community and beyond?
- Who else could tell me more about this community?

In a Native American community, for instance, it would be helpful for the evaluator to understand the history of oppression, struggle for tribal sovereignty and misrepresentation by researchers.<sup>19, 20</sup> In a Latino immigrant community, evaluators might find it useful to know about the immigration policy landscape and issues pertaining to immigration documentation. Such understanding will raise evaluators' awareness about how people might respond to them (e.g., with trepidation or hope) and what factors could influence the evaluation or vice versa (e.g., policy change, elections).

**Foster collaboration among all stakeholders, from the funder to the grantee representative, to encourage a broad and inclusive view.** Collaboration among all stakeholders in the evaluation are critical to ensure

“multicultural validity,” where multiple cultural perspectives are captured accurately, appropriately and comprehensively.<sup>19,20</sup> Multicultural validity ensures that the information gathered by the evaluator is authentic and not based on false assumptions and data. Multicultural validity embodies three dimensions: soundness of logic, measures and methods of inquiry across cultures (methodological validity); awareness and sensibilities of the evaluator about people from different cultural groups and the lens through which one views the people (interpersonal validity); and the social actions and implications that emerge from the evaluation (consequential validity).<sup>20</sup>

No single evaluator, funder, nonprofit representative or consultant alone is able to ensure multicultural validity. It requires collective thinking and reflection to view the evaluation design, process and outcomes from different angles. The dismissal of any cultural differences or the assumption that one knows everything there is to know about another culture, even as an insider, is enough to threaten multicultural validity. Evaluators have to seriously consider those who are part of the collaboration and the dynamics among the participants. The questions and suggestions in the culture section above are important considerations for this part of the process as well.

One researcher described how the evaluation of Jesse Jackson’s PUSH for Excel educational program was damaged because the evaluators imposed their own definition, standards and measures of an education program without extensive consideration for their appropriateness in an African American community and cultural context.<sup>21</sup> The evaluators did not believe in engaging African American community stakeholders in the evaluation design and process.<sup>22</sup> The evaluators concluded that PUSH for Excel was not an educational program; these claims had serious consequences when the media reported them. The multicultural validity in this evaluation was threatened from the beginning due to the evaluator’s lack of cross-cultural competency.

## Privilege and Power

The question about what makes an evaluation cross-culturally competent cannot be thoroughly answered without addressing the issues of privilege and power. To have privilege is *to have a right or an advantage granted to or enjoyed by a particular group of people beyond the common advantage of all others*, according to the American Heritage Dictionary.<sup>2</sup> Being privileged may mean an exemption from certain burdens or liabilities. The dictionary defines power as the ability or capacity to exercise authority, control and influence.<sup>2</sup>

In evaluation, issues related to privilege and power emanate from three circumstances:

1. Personal relations between the evaluator and the individuals directly involved in the evaluation (e.g., funding agency, grantee representative or local data collectors)
2. Consideration of contextual conditions and structural inequities (i.e., subtle patterns in policies and practices that permeate the political, economic and sociocultural structures of the United States in ways that generate differences in well-being between people of certain distinct characteristics) in design, data analysis and reporting
3. Use of findings.

There have been many incidents where evaluators have used their privilege and power, whether intentional or not, for negative (e.g., personal gain) or positive (e.g., to bring attention to social inequities) results. For example, there have been evaluators who advocated for the use of their evaluation approach and techniques

*Evaluators have the privilege of being the beholder of data with the power to transform the data into information and knowledge that in turn can influence all types of decisions, from program design to policymaking.<sup>23,24</sup>*

even if the approach and techniques were not the most appropriate ones for the study or the community. The evaluators' use of highly technical language impressed the consumers such that they did not consider other options. Educating consumers about evaluation is essential, but not all evaluators feel obligated to do this.

There have also been evaluators who used their analytical power and the credibility of their profession to bring attention to institutionalized policies, procedures and practices that affect a disadvantaged population. Cross-culturally competent evaluators, for instance, would be aware that they have the privilege and power as scientists to point out that a child's performance in a testing situation can be affected by external conditions, such as stereotypes deriving from race and privilege, and not just by the child's ability.<sup>25</sup>

Evaluators are also often associated with researchers because of their similar functions. Historically, there have been many researchers who exploited disadvantaged communities. Native American families, for instance, have been studied extensively by anthropologists and other researchers. These studies, which often portrayed Native Americans in a negative light, perpetuated stereotypes about this population.<sup>19</sup> In the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, rural African-American men with syphilis were not treated even after effective antibiotics were developed. Consequently, many communities of color often view evaluators with suspicion.

Below are insights to help guide effective personal relations between the evaluator and the individuals directly involved in the evaluation.

**Accept that there are status differences.** The personal relations between the evaluator and the individuals directly involved in the evaluation are affected not only by their cultural differences based on social traits, such as race and ethnicity as discussed in the culture and social identity sections above, but also differences in organizational cultures. Frequently, evaluators are

*Cross-culturally competent evaluators accept and acknowledge their privilege and power, consciously work to negotiate that privilege and power with the different groups of stakeholders for ethical use, understand that evaluation can potentially do harm or generate benefit, and consider the structural inequities (e.g., institutionalized racism, classism, sexism) that affect the evaluation process and findings.*

people with high levels of education, a privilege that often sets them apart from the people affected by their work. When evaluators acknowledge and accept their privileges, they will more likely be vigilant about the status differences and when these differences might affect the evaluation process.

Consider for instance evaluators who hire and train people from a cultural group to help collect data. Cross-culturally competent evaluators who accept that there are status differences would ask the individuals what they think of the task and how it might affect their relationships with other members of their cultural group. They would not assume that people consider it a privilege to handle data. In a large community, accepting the data collection task could have no impact on the individuals' relationships. In a small community, the task could cause community members to worry that the individuals will know too much about their lives. Consequently, the individuals' status in their community may be threatened and the quality of data compromised.

**Demystify evaluation.** Some evaluators come from academic institutions and they tend to think and speak in relatively esoteric terms. The technical terms used by evaluators also tend to be unfamiliar to stakeholders with little or no research training. Evaluators can close this gap by paying attention to

*Cross-culturally competent evaluators go out of their way to demystify evaluation by explaining the evaluation design, implementation and results in plain and simple language, and encouraging people to ask questions. This practice should not be mistaken as “dumbing down” for the less-educated person; on the contrary, it is about making the evaluation clear for everyone.*

exchange are appropriate and friendly, as long as the evaluator clearly explains the purpose, process, who sees the information and how the information will be summarized and used.

Evaluators should also consistently engage stakeholders in conversations about the evaluation. Through such conversations, stakeholders are exposed to why the evaluation is important, why it is designed the way it is and what information can be generated from it.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, evaluators learn from the stakeholders about what could make the evaluation more useful as well as what could go wrong. It becomes a reciprocal learning process that evaluators have to appreciate and desire.

### **Create a comfortable setting for evaluation**

**participants.** Focus groups and interviews should be conducted in settings that make evaluation participants comfortable. A cross-culturally competent evaluator asks respondents their preferences for where the event should occur, in what language and whether the event

the language they use.<sup>25,26</sup> The problem lies not in the language itself, but rather in how it might exclude or confuse the listeners or make the users of the terms appear condescending.

Evaluators can replace technical terms with commonly-used terms. For instance, evaluators can use focus group methodology without identifying it as such. Terms like meeting, discussion and information

## **QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATORS TO ASK**

### *Pertaining to Privilege and Power*

- What privileges and power do I have in this situation?
- Can the average person not steeped in evaluation terminology understand me?
- Is the location for the discussion or interview easily accessible, familiar and comfortable for the people with whom I will meet?
- Do I know what policies, procedures and practices might affect the program’s impact?
- Do I know what policies, procedures and practices might affect the program staff’s performance in the evaluation?
- What am I assuming about each group of stakeholders in the evaluation?
- Who is in my sample and what do I need to know about them?
- What is the best time for me to collect data from them?
- Who should collect the data so that participants feel comfortable and safe?
- How will the study’s findings be used by community members, politicians, policymakers, journalists and special interest groups?
- Will the findings place a stigma on a certain group or give the group power to access resources and improve their situations?
- What are the self-serving purposes of the research to the sponsor and the evaluator?



can be recorded on tape. Evaluators should conduct focus groups and interviews as if these events were friendly chats or informal discussions, without straying from the protocol, and at the same time taking notes in plain sight of the respondents to reduce any mystique about the process.

**Partner with people with complementary capacities.**

In order to make evaluations more understandable, evaluators might consider partnering with an adult educator to help design and present information and facilitate discussions about the findings with stakeholders. Adult educators are trained to teach and transfer knowledge to adult learners and are likely to be more skilled at group facilitation and conflict management.

**Consider how certain terms and concepts can diminish or perpetuate existing prejudices.** For example, in her findings one researcher pointed out that grantees of an at-risk youth program associated the term “at-risk” youth with being poor, African American or Latino, anti-social and deviant, or children of substance abusing, illiterate or immigrant parents.<sup>25</sup> This label caused the funder and grantees to design programs that attempted to increase the youths’ self-esteem, develop coping skills and reduce teen pregnancy, parenting and juvenile crime. It promoted the deficiencies of a particular group of people and inadvertently perpetuated stereotypes about them. The label also made the youth feel ashamed and inadequate. When the evaluator asked the funder to rethink the term “at-risk” and to eliminate it from future requests for proposals, subsequent grantees began to emphasize positive youth development, prevention and promotion of protective factors. The new thinking recognizes the assets of a particular group of people.

**Consider contextual conditions and structural inequities.** Cross-culturally competent evaluators are conscious about deficit model interpretations, which tend to use stereotypical labels that presume

a dysfunction among a particular cultural group.<sup>25</sup> They carefully examine the data to understand how contextual conditions and structural inequities affect the outcomes. Comparative studies that do not account for structural inequities are particularly dangerous because they assume that the playing field is level for everyone, regardless of their cultural background. Consequently, any behavioral differences from the majority group that sets the norms are considered deviant<sup>29</sup> and harmful institutional policies that contributed to the differences are ignored.<sup>30</sup>

The use of mixed methods is helpful to ensure that structural issues are considered in data analysis and interpretation. Patterns of statistical significance can be obtained through quantitative methods, while contextual information surrounding the patterns can be gathered through qualitative methods.

For example, an evaluator might have found equal home ownership rates between immigrants and long-time residents in a particular community and concluded that there was no difference between these two groups of people based on this characteristic. Analysis of interview data, however, provided a deeper understanding of this finding – immigrants typically owned trailer homes, while their long-term counterparts owned single-family homes that cost three times more. Quantitative data alone would not have revealed the situation of segregated housing in this community.

## Contextual Conditions and Structural Inequities in Data Analysis and Reporting

*Evaluators have the privilege and power to shed light on a social phenomenon by bringing attention to terms, concepts and contextual conditions that might perpetuate or eliminate structural inequities in their data analysis.<sup>16, 25, 28</sup>*

*Cross-culturally competent evaluators are conscious about deficit model interpretations. They carefully examine the data to understand how contextual conditions and structural inequities affect outcomes.*

However, this does not mean that a mixed-methods approach ensures cross-cultural competency. In order for the approach to be such, the evaluator still needs to observe the influence of culture, social identities, structural inequities, power and privilege in every aspect and step of the process.

**Carefully examine the demographic variables used in the analysis.** Cross-culturally competent evaluators tend to be cautious about group differences and carefully examine which demographic variable may have contributed to the disparity being studied.<sup>31</sup> For example, before concluding that race is the factor causing group differences, evaluators should control for other key factors (e.g., income, education level, gender, age) to see if racial differences remain or completely disappear, and study the context to review other possible explanations for the disparity.<sup>31</sup> Such deliberate and careful examination will help ensure an accurate and thorough explanation for a particular disparity.

## USE OF FINDINGS

Evaluators seldom have a candid discussion with stakeholders about the use of findings and the subsequent risks and benefits. The perception of risks and benefits are highly subjective<sup>32</sup> and they determine the perceived power of the evaluation process and the dynamics within.

There are many ways for examining the perceived risks and benefits. The perceived benefits could include prejudice reduction, shared power, public

## Conclusion

To conduct a cross-culturally competent evaluation, the evaluator must be able to maintain an open mind, accept diversity, engage in a reciprocal learning process with stakeholders, avoid making any assumptions about anyone or anything, and ask questions respectfully. Evaluators who say that one single standard can be used and that they know everything there is to know about the evaluation participants and their cultures demonstrate a lack of cross-cultural competency.

A commitment to the values mentioned above, however, is not sufficient, since the most well-intentioned professional can say that they embrace all of these values; therefore, another core factor in a cross-culturally competent evaluation is the evaluator's ability to consciously and deliberately question the evaluation design, methods, process and findings, and search for occasions when differences are likely to affect the evaluation.

Building cross-cultural competency is a journey. Evaluators who have the ability to work across cultures may be difficult to find. The information provided in this report suggests that evaluators can begin to build their effectiveness at conducting cross-cultural evaluations by concentrating on three dimensions: culture, social identity and group membership, and privilege and power.



recognition, professional development and knowledge dissemination. The perceived risks could include the perpetuation of oppression, fear of others learning about one's opinions, the emotional harm that a person could experience during an interview process or the possibility of losing funding for a program. Evaluators should remember that one person's risk could be another person's benefit.



Novice evaluators can begin by concentrating on the culture dimension. They should recognize the role of culture in evaluation and set aside time and resources to deliberately learn about the cultures of the evaluation's stakeholders. To do this, evaluators can:

- Identify and work with a bridge builder or cultural translator
- Listen, observe carefully and ask questions respectfully
- Find out about previous experiences and lessons learned
- Avoid assuming that a particular concept or term means the same thing for everyone
- Consult expert translators and interpreters
- Pilot test questions and instruments.

Next, evaluators can focus on the social identity and group membership dimension. They should develop an understanding of the interplay between multiple social identity groups, the varied and changing expectations among stakeholders, and the dynamic context within which the evaluation is operating.

To do this, evaluators can:

- Set aside time and resources to build trust and relationships and to understand the cultural groups and cultural context
- Continuously sharpen one's understanding of the dynamic context in which the evaluation is operating
- Foster collaboration among all the stakeholders to encourage a broader and more inclusive view.

Finally, evaluators should expand and deepen their knowledge about the dynamics of privilege and power in evaluation. To do so, they can:

- Accept that there are status differences
- Strive to demystify evaluation
- Create a comfortable setting for evaluation participants
- Partner with others who have expertise that complements their own

- Consider the terms and concepts used and be aware if they reduce or perpetuate existing prejudices
- Consider contextual conditions and structural equities
- Carefully examine the demographic variables used in the analysis.

The evaluator who has the increased ability to conduct culturally competent evaluations must commit to do so for every stage of the evaluation, from design to reporting. More importantly, the evaluator's behavior and decisions must be *intentional* to ensure cultural competency.

Stakeholders and consumers of evaluations should not automatically assume that all evaluators who are committed to participatory and empowerment approaches are cross-culturally competent. Evaluators with a belief in the importance of engaging stakeholders and recognizing the importance of culture have only partially achieved cross-cultural competency. Cross-culturally competent evaluators deliberately pay close attention to the micro-level, with a focus on such things as which stakeholders (particularly from the cultural group affected by the evaluation) should be involved, who should contact them, what is the most convenient meeting time and location for them, what language should be used to ensure that the participants can express themselves confidently, who is the best person to facilitate the meeting and how this person should dress, what compensation is appropriate and what should be the seating arrangement.

It is true that all good evaluations are also cross-culturally competent evaluations. It is inconceivable that an evaluation involves only homogenous groups; after all, every person has at least two social identities and group memberships based on some form of culture. Once these practices are given equal deliberation and value in an evaluation design, as are sampling and measurement, the words *cross-culturally competent evaluation* won't be necessary – that will be understood. Until that time, the discussion must continue to be present as a constant reminder of the diversity and complexity of our world.

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