



EQUITY
AND
EVALUATION

Models of How Equity

Can and Does

Impact Evaluation

Prepared for American Evaluation Association Annual Conference 2018
Authors: Thana-Ashley Charles, Kate Locke, Deepti Sood

Updated April 2019

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TCC Group
333 7th Avenue, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10001
info@tccgrp.com
www.tccgrp.com

INTRODUCTION

The philanthropic and nonprofit fields, and organizations and individuals serving those fields, have shown an increasing focus on equity over the last few years.¹ Conversations have moved from murmurings to deeper engagement by institutions like Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, which have explicitly published principles on applying an equity lens to grantmaking and evaluation.

At TCC Group, we have also taken a more proactive approach to making equity an internal value, including the establishment of a Diversity Committee that works on policies and practices related to our firm's own work on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We've instituted a robust learning agenda for staff across the firm and strengthened our evaluation work by participating in the American Evaluation Association's Graduate Education Diversity Initiative (GEDI). This win-win initiative is committed to fostering a more diverse field of evaluators, and participating allows us to provide hands-on experiences for evaluators from diverse backgrounds. It also helps us gain critical insight into how those being actively trained in Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE) perceive our evaluation practices.²

Upon absorbing the wealth of information shared by our colleagues, we realized we've had varying experiences in how we've incorporated an equity lens (or lack thereof) into our work.³

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation defines equity as "the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair." The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept."

² The GEDI (Graduate Education Diversity Initiative) program is run by the American Evaluation Association and meant to introduce graduate students from underrepresented populations to the evaluation field. Associated activities include a site placement (where interns work two days a week) and additional activities linked to evaluation curricula, such as attending conferences.

³ As a definition for equity, TCC tends to use the definition provided by Annie E. Casey (above). We haven't fully defined equity lens for our own practice, but see it as emphasizing and bringing a

We've decided to share some of our experiences with our peers in the field in order to spur conversation, disseminate our lessons learned, and encourage others to talk about these issues. One of our biggest challenges in navigating equity issues in evaluation is how unprepared people can be to talk candidly. We hope that by sharing our experiences, we can make this conversation more explicit.

While we absolutely don't pretend to have all the answers, or indeed a lot of them, we do think that our learnings will help guide others trying to embed the principles of equitable evaluation into their work.⁴

This booklet shares five scenarios around equity in which we've had to clarify our role and form an appropriate response.



Equity as a leading principle

How do evaluators explicitly embed equity into their lens of evaluation?

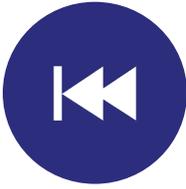


Equity as a capacity

How do evaluators assess the uptick of equitable practice when it is delivered via capacity-building trainings?

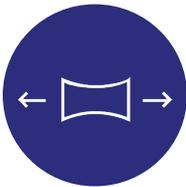
focus on equity into our work as evaluators.

⁴ The three articulated principles by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative are: 1) evaluation and evaluative work should be in service of equity; 2) evaluation work can and should answer critical questions about ways historical and structure decisions have contributed to the condition to be addressed, effect of a strategy on different populations and underlying systemic drivers of inequity, and ways in which cultural context is tangled up in both the structural conditions and the change initiative itself; 3) evaluative work should be designed and implemented commensurate with the values underlying equity work (e.g., multi-culturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership). Learn more about the Equitable Evaluation principles.



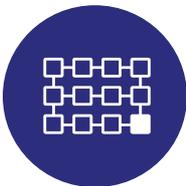
Equity as an afterthought

How do evaluators focus on equity when it has been added as a new outcome years after the initiative has been in place?



Equity as a point of tension

How do evaluators raise issues related to equity that are influencing the work when key players do not have a clear equity lens?



Equity as tokenism

How do evaluators navigate a situation where they are asked to favor certain staff over others because of their identity?

Each scenario stems from actual experiences with clients, though we present them here without identifying information in order to place the focus on the concepts.



Equity as a leading principle

How do evaluators explicitly embed equity into their lens of evaluation?

THE SITUATION

TCC Group worked with a foundation that had an explicit focus on equity and expected itself—and its consultants and grantees—to use equity as a leading principle. As a way to implement this principle, the funder often sought to make sure that grassroots and values-driven organizations received the necessary funds to gain access to larger community conversations or actions.

THE EVALUATOR'S ROLE

Our role was to evaluate the impact of the work that had been awarded over the last five years. Part of impact was defined by how effectively the foundation supported these grassroots and values-driven organizations in gaining access to conversations and contributing to decision-making.

WHAT WE DID WELL

- Our team used a mixed-methods approach in our work. This allowed us to build a more iterative process with multiple levels of reflection around the work and the impact of values (including equity) on that work. Using two methods—interviews and surveys—gave equal weight to qualitative feedback that may not have been reflected in the more quantitative survey.
- We also focused on embedding participant ownership. In this particular project, we held space in the report to

share stories of success directly from participants (i.e., not necessarily filtered through the lens or voice of the evaluator). We gleaned these stories from our raw interview notes and shared them with grantees for their review and approval. This allowed for grantees to define success in their own ways and explicitly sign off on how their work and impact were portrayed in the report. Transferring some of the ownership to participants also established a greater sense of transparency between the funder and the grantee, which is one way to create a more equitable dynamic between the groups.

- Finally, because equity was an explicit value guiding the evaluation, we focused on measuring it explicitly. We dove deep into the data available to understand what types of organizations were being funded and what opportunities existed to support other organizations. This allowed us to raise the profile of some equity-focused organizations in a way that these organizations may not have been able to do on their own.

WHERE WE CAN IMPROVE

- While including grantee success stories is a good start, we'd like to challenge ourselves to include more participatory feedback from the actual grantees representing these grassroots organizations. This can happen by forming a stakeholder advisory group or by giving grantees an opportunity to weigh in on the evaluation design. We feel this would increase the likelihood that our evaluation design and final products would best answer the highest-priority questions for all stakeholders.
- We'd also like to be more purposeful about building the evaluation relationship before diving into data collection. With a limited project budget, it's easy to default to faster

data collection methods (e.g., surveys) that might provide less nuanced data. We've learned from previous experience that grassroots organizations tend to value face-to-face meetings, building relationships, and gaining a full understanding of what the evaluation work and how it will be used. Ideally, we could have spent more time building these relationships with grantees to develop trust before jumping straight into asking for data. Furthermore, we did not pilot the tools we used for language to ensure that the ways the funder, the evaluators, and the grantees were talking about equity and outcomes were similar.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Funders who lead with equity may have a difficult time hearing feedback on how their intentions may be missing the mark. Funders who feel they are already on the morally correct side of leading with values may be hesitant to hear feedback that grantees see flaws in their approach. In these instances, we believe it's the evaluator's duty to ask questions about which groups are being excluded and highlight the value of developing more inclusive criteria than what the funder created originally.
- Equity-based funders may have an interest in a more participatory evaluation but it may not necessarily be in line with their budgets. Regardless, it's worth offering a range of participatory activities to make sure some level of client voice is included.



Equity as a capacity

How do evaluators assess the uptick of equity when it is delivered via capacity-building trainings?

THE SITUATION

TCC Group was engaged in a multi-year, multi-site evaluation on behalf of a foundation. In addition to providing operating funds for grantees to engage in their work, the foundation also placed a heavy emphasis on capacity-building and technical assistance activities, as well as a strong emphasis internally on equity. This led to a situation where each site eventually received explicit trainings meant to improve their understanding of issues related to equity and how they could better use an equity lens in their work supporting economic and family development for people experiencing poverty.

THE EVALUATOR'S ROLE

TCC's role was to evaluate the efficacy, relevance, and impact of the technical assistance provided. While we were interested in understanding what technical assistance ideas stuck and ultimately entered the culture of each site, we were also interested in how each site responded to the idea being introduced by the funder rather than organically from the work taking place.

WHAT WE DID WELL

- A mixed-methods approach worked well in this scenario. Using a survey that asked respondents to rate their own adoption of values year-over-year as well as through in-

person interviews, TCC discerned a true uptick around issues of equity, and how values varied by individuals. We also workshoped our data collection tools with grantees to ensure we were asking about equity in a way that resonated. One site, for example, always showed a relatively high commitment to equity based on survey data, but interviews helped us determine that it largely addressed equity in a superficial manner.

- We also defined equity at both the value level and the operations level. We measured not just the level of buy-in and conversation about equity, but also the specific changes in organizational practices and procedures. We then verified these organizational changes with staff to understand how comprehensively these changes took place in reality.

WHERE WE CAN IMPROVE

- Ideally, evaluators would have the access to speak directly with program participants about their experiences. There's not necessarily a correlation between program staff believing they have embodied equity into their work and the clients' experiences. Because of the complicated structure of this particular evaluation, we weren't able to talk to any clients directly to understand what values they felt were driving the program work. This led to a staff-driven perspective rather than an understanding of how the adoption of an equity lens was perceived (if at all) by participants.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Be explicit about equity. Use a clear, unified definition that applies to all types of stakeholders. Arriving at a clear definition may require some facilitation between the groups of stakeholders to determine a point of common language that considers the various perspective.

- Ask stakeholders at all levels about their experiences with equity and what has changed since the implementation of the program. Rather than just including leadership, include line staff and people receiving direct services themselves in data collection, which can provide a truer understanding of how equity is—or isn't—being adopted into the culture and processes of work.



Equity as an afterthought

How do evaluators focus on equity when it has been added as a new outcome years after the initiative has been in place?

THE SITUATION

TCC served as the external formative evaluator for a multi-year, multi-state initiative undertaken by a foundation known as a proponent of equity work. The initiative did not explicitly mention equity as a leading value, but added it as an area of emphasis later on. Support staff also did not bring significant expertise in equity issues to the table and many of the initiative actors did not have relevant experience in utilizing an equity lens. The mandate was issued after grant funding was awarded and work plans were approved; therefore, very few resources were allocated to equity-related work. Furthermore, most grantees that the initiative supported were very homogeneous compared to their overall field.

THE EVALUATOR'S ROLE

TCC was tasked with assessing grantees' progress against the initiative's key components, one of which was to address racial and ethnic disparities in the grantees' field. In some instances, we provided the first opportunity for grantees to discuss their challenges and concerns with adding an equity lens.

WHAT WE DID WELL

- When engaging grantees on their equity work—either through formal interviews or informal conversations—we acknowledged the lack of resources allocated for the work.

Grantees were struggling to incorporate an equity lens without funding and with limited technical assistance, and we made sure to acknowledge the resource challenge. We even framed questions in a way to make grantees more open and less defensive, such as, “We know that this was added on to your grant after the fact—given limited resources, what have you been able to achieve?” This allowed for very frank and candid conversations, and allowed us to provide more honest feedback to the funder.

- We also made sure to highlight best practices. In some instances, grantees had some good success despite their resource challenges, and we made sure to highlight successes in the equity work in the same way that we assessed other grant deliverables. We also shared these stories directly with other grantees who were hungry for news of best practices in this area.

WHERE WE CAN IMPROVE

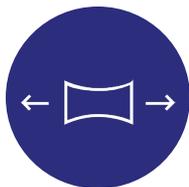
- While these types of conversations can be challenging, we would aim to engage our client in a more candid conversation about the positioning of equity work. It has been our experience that a haphazard approach can lead to more harm than good. If we face a similar situation moving forward, we will highlight some of our experiences with how an after-the-fact approach can be harmful, and how to incorporate equity with more intentionality.
- We will also seek to balance a foundation’s overall reputation for leadership in equity with how individual program officers and staff highlight equity and buy into those values, which can vary a great deal in a foundation.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Even foundations with solid reputations around equity can struggle to apply an equity lens. Don’t assume that all

program staff are well-versed in these concepts just because of their organization's reputation.

- People without much experience using an equity lens can be very defensive. Neutralizing the conversation can generate better data and build stronger rapport.
- Sometimes it is unavoidable for an initiative to add an equity lens after it has begun, but this addition should always come with resources and thoughtful technical support.



Equity as a point of tension

How do evaluators raise issues related to equity that are influencing the work when key players do not have an equity lens?

THE SITUATION

While working as an external evaluator for a multi-year effort, equity emerged as an issue that was causing major division among the group of people working on the effort. The funder as well as many of the involved organizations did not have an explicit equity lens and were uncomfortable broaching the issue. Initially, several concerns emerged regarding equity in the work—both in terms of demographics of key players and implications on the messaging itself. Leadership primarily addressed these concerns in an ad hoc and tokenistic manner, and they re-emerged as a major point of contention the following year. Ultimately, the evaluation became a major vehicle for highlighting the tensions on all sides.

THE EVALUATOR'S ROLE

As the external evaluator, we were tasked with assessing the overall functioning and health of the group working on a collective effort. As evaluators, we served as sounding boards, documentarians, and a data source as the funder sought to resolve the crisis.

WHAT WE DID WELL

- While we did not anticipate that the issue of equity would ultimately play a large part in what happened to the initiative, we verbally flagged it as a trouble spot early on,

holding informal check-ins with the initiative manager and the funder. The early resolutions on equity issues seemed quite tenuous and were noted, though other minor fractures consumed our focus early on.

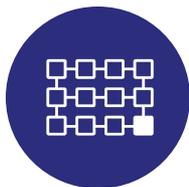
- We provided a summary of the conflict that shared perspectives from all sides in a data-grounded and neutral way. We shared the summary with both the initiative manager and the funder. Our interview and survey findings provided a way for key leaders to talk about the challenges and problems without finger-pointing or blaming—instead, they were able to refer to our findings as more neutral observers. We also talked through the findings as a trusted resource and thought partner as leadership reflected on their responses.

WHERE WE CAN IMPROVE

- We would want to have a more up-front conversation with the funder when these issues start to emerge because internally, they lacked a strong lens to navigate this space. We were more accustomed to having these conversations with funders who embrace equity publicly, and we weren't as equipped to navigate this with this particular funder.

LESSONS LEARNED

- By framing information in terms of the implications on grantee success, we effectively reduced defensiveness and blame. However, this did not result in any particular self-reflection on equity issues for the funder.
- The evaluator needs to be prepared to acknowledge any elephants in the room in a professional way. This situation involved multiple elephants and was challenging to navigate. It is really important to be able to take personal space for reflection and self-care when engaged in this level of conflict and anger among evaluands.



Equity as tokenism

How do evaluators navigate a situation where they are asked to favor certain staff over others because of their identity?

THE SITUATION

TCC Group staff is diverse with respect to our racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, as well as our multidisciplinary experience, lifestyles, and interests. As our diversity statement articulates, we value the whole person for who they are and the qualities and skills that every individual brings to their work.

Our clients often tend to value this and appreciate our team-based approach. But sometimes, clients will ask for a particular person to be on a project or attend a meeting in a way that disregards professional background and instead focuses on a person of a particular identity in a way that feels tokenistic for the staff person being asked. In our case, our chosen team was questioned based on racial identity and sexual orientation.

THE EVALUATOR'S ROLE

In these situations, our role as the evaluator is often to ensure that the team we are bringing to any project or meeting is the right team to meet the roles and responsibilities of the evaluation. Given that our team is relatively non-hierarchical, staffing decisions often come down to who we think will be the best person in the room—whether because of their professional background, availability, client relationship, or otherwise.

WHAT WE DID WELL

- We tend to address these situations by talking to the preferred staff person about their level of comfort with the request. We'll then often reach out to the client and either agree this staff person makes sense (if this is the case) or, if this is not the case, suggest some alternatives—for example, bringing multiple staff. We also reiterate to the client the other talents, skills, and capacities this staff person brings to the table aside from the perceived optics of their identity.

WHERE WE CAN IMPROVE

- Most important to us is that our staff feel they are appreciated for what they bring to the table and are not being seen superficially. We'd like to continue to have conversations with staff around how we should handle these requests as well as offer them necessary professional or personal development resources to help navigate these situations. We also will continue to reflect on how to talk to clients about these type of requests.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Understand the difference between outright tokenism and authentic engagement. Tokenistic requests will be more focused on shallow representation rather than a thoughtful engagement of individuals representing a particular identity and the potential value, insights, and trust-building, or other characteristics they can bring to bear.
- Make staff aware of what's happening behind the scenes. In our experience, clients will often email the client lead and state their request for a different staff member. If this conversation stays at only the senior level, the team isn't able to further understand how to operate in these situations, and the chosen staffer is deciding without access to the full information.

- Be clear with clients around the decision-making process. When the chosen staffer feels the meeting or project is a good fit, and we agree, we make sure to articulate to our clients the full value that can be derived from having that person on the team, such as their credentials or expertise. But when the preferred staff member is uncomfortable with the request, we also articulate some of the nuances behind our decision-making process to the client, so they understand the delicacy of making these types of decisions.



CONCLUSION

TCC Group sees our own journey towards equitable evaluation as one very much in progress. At the same time, we've learned some critical lessons in recent years about how to better embed equity into our own work. Some of these lessons include:

- The importance of facilitating honest and critical reflections about our own processes and engagements
- The benefit of stakeholder engagement to guide this work
- Being clear at the organizational level about the stand on equity we want to take
- The benefit of mixed-methods

We hope this booklet helps inform others about what we have learned from grappling with equity in our work and stimulate additional learning and reflection.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

TCC Group has found these resources to be valuable:

- **Equitable Evaluation Initiative**

<https://www.equitableeval.org>

- **BetterEvaluation's guide to equity in evaluation**

https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resource/guide/design_manage_equity_focused_evaluation

- **Race Equity Tool's clearinghouse**

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/evaluate>



ABOUT TCC GROUP

TCC Group collaborates with leaders to solve complex social problems.

As a mission-driven consulting firm and certified B Corporation, TCC Group partners with foundations, nonprofits, and companies to propel positive social change through strategy, capacity building, initiative design, strategic communication, management, and evaluation.

We design and implement solutions for social impact by immersing ourselves in interconnected communities and systems, co-creating innovative and effective processes, and applying and sharing our experience with the field.

For more information about TCC Group, visit our website: www.tccgrp.com.

