AMERICAN EVALUATION ASSOCIATION

Public Statement on

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EVALUATION

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

This statement of the American Evaluation Association (AEA) affirms the significance of cultural competence in evaluation. It also informs the public of AEA's expectations concerning cultural competence in the conduct of evaluation.

The diversity of cultures within the United States guarantees that virtually all evaluators will work outside familiar cultural contexts at some time in their careers. Cultural competence in evaluation theory and practice is critical for the profession and for the greater good of society. This position is consistent with the AEA Guiding Principle that states:

" To ensure recognition, accurate interpretation, and respect for diversity, evaluators should ensure that the members of the evaluation team collectively demonstrate cultural competence. "

Cultural competence is a stance taken toward culture, not a discrete status or simple mastery of particular knowledge and skills. A culturally competent evaluator is prepared to engage with diverse segments of communities to include cultural and contextual dimensions important to the evaluation. Culturally competent evaluators respect the cultures represented in the evaluation throughout the process.

Several core concepts are foundational to the pursuit of cultural competence. First, culture is central to economic, political, and social systems as well as individual identity. Thus, all evaluation reflects culturally influenced norms, values, and ways of knowing—making cultural competence integral to ethical, high-quality evaluation.

Second, given the diversity of cultures within the United States, cultural competence is fluid. An evaluator who is well prepared to work with a particular community is not necessarily competent in another.

Third, cultural competence in evaluation requires that evaluators maintain a high degree of self-awareness and self-examination to better understand how their own backgrounds and other life experiences serve as assets or limitations in the conduct of an evaluation.

{ Cultural competence is a stance taken toward culture. }

Fourth, culture has implications for all phases of evaluation—including staffing, development, and implementation of evaluation efforts as well as communicating and using evaluation results.

These concepts apply to all evaluations. However, because this statement was written for a U.S. audience care should be used in employing these guidelines outside the United States.

The Role of Culture and Cultural Competence in Quality Evaluation

What is culture?

Culture can be defined as the shared experiences of people, including their languages, values, customs, beliefs, and mores. It also includes worldviews, ways of knowing, and ways of communicating. Culturally significant factors encompass, but are not limited to, race/ethnicity, religion, social class, language, disability, sexual orientation, age, and gender. Contextual dimensions such as geographic region and socioeconomic circumstances are also essential to shaping culture.

Cultural groupings can refer to individuals not related by lineage, such as organizational culture, gay culture, or disability community culture. Culture also refers to the institutions (such as government, education, family, and religion) and economic systems that shape and preserve shared patterns of thought, behavior, and beliefs.

Culture is dynamic, fluid, and reciprocal. That is, culture shapes the behaviors and worldviews of its members and, in turn, culture is shaped by the behavior, attitudes, and worldview of its members. Elements of culture are passed on from generation to generation, but culture also changes from one generation to the next.

Culture not only influences members of groups, it also delineates boundaries and influences patterns of interaction among them. Evaluators frequently work across these boundaries.

Evaluations reflect culture.

Evaluations cannot be culture free. Those who engage in evaluation do so from perspectives that reflect their values, their ways of viewing the world, and their culture. Culture shapes the ways in which evaluation questions are conceptualized, which in turn influence what data are collected, how the data will be collected and analyzed, and how data are interpreted.

> { Evaluations cannot be culture free. }

The universal influence of cultural values and perspectives underscores the importance of evaluations that are culturally competent. To draw valid conclusions, the evaluation must consider important contributors to human behavior, including those related to culture, personal habit, situational limitations, assimilation and acculturation, or the effect of the evaluand.[1] Without attention to the complexity and multiple determinants of behavior, evaluations can arrive at flawed findings with potentially devastating consequences.

Some impacts of programs, services, or products may be culturally specific and not obvious to persons unfamiliar with the context. Consider the example of an evaluation conducted in a culture-based school, where the curriculum is grounded in the values, norms, knowledge, beliefs, practices, experiences, and language that are the foundation of an indigenous culture. In this environment, cultural identity is viewed as essential to the development of young people whereas, in mainstream public schools, cultural identity activities are often considered enrichment. Given this different viewpoint, an evaluator from an indigenous background may be likely to include cultural identity development as a central aspect of the school's effectiveness, whereas another evaluator may not.

What is cultural competence?

Cultural competence is not a state at which one arrives; rather, it is a process of learning, unlearning, and relearning. It is a sensibility cultivated throughout a lifetime. Cultural competence requires awareness of self, reflection on one's own cultural position, awareness of others' positions, and the ability to interact genuinely and respectfully with others. Culturally competent evaluators refrain from assuming they fully understand the perspectives of stakeholders whose backgrounds differ from their own.

Cultural competence is defined in relation to a specific context or location, such as geography, nationality, and history. Competence in one context is no assurance of competence in another. The culturally competent evaluator (or evaluation team) must have specific knowledge of the people and place in which the evaluation is being conducted — including local history and culturally determined mores, values, and ways of knowing.

> { Competence in one context is no assurance of competence in another. }

The culturally competent evaluator draws upon a wide range of evaluation theories and methods to design and carry out an evaluation that is optimally matched to the context. In constructing a model or theory of how the evaluand operates, the evaluator reflects the diverse values and perspectives of key stakeholder groups.

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[1] Evaluand: the object of the evaluation; typically includes programs, services, products, policies, or individuals.

Why Cultural Competence in Evaluation Is Important

The importance of cultural competence can be viewed from the perspectives of ethics, validity, and theory.

Cultural competence is an ethical imperative.

Cultural competence is an ethical issue that represents the intentional effort of the evaluation team to produce work that is valid, honest, respectful of stakeholders, and considerate of the general public welfare. Culturally competent evaluation emerges from an ethical commitment to fairness and equity for stakeholders. Insufficient attention to culture in evaluation may compromise group and individual self-determination, due process, and fair, just, and equitable treatment of all persons and interests. Effective and ethical use of evaluation requires inclusiveness, learning across cultural boundaries, and respecting different worldviews.

Evaluators have an ethical obligation to ensure that stakeholders in all aspects of the evaluation process fully understand their rights and any inherent risks. In many minority and indigenous communities there is a history of inappropriate use of research or evaluation in ways that violated basic human rights. Vigilance to securing the well-being of individuals and their communities is essential. This includes practices that protect participants and their communities such as attention to how and with whom data are shared and unintended consequences of the data reported.

{ *Effective and ethical use of evaluation requires respecting different worldviews.* }

Ethical practices related to cultural competence involve:

- using approaches that are appropriate to the context. For example, verbal consents can be used in communities with oral traditions, high levels of concern about privacy, or low levels of literacy.

- incorporating ways to make findings accessible to all stakeholders, including forms of communication beyond written texts and the use of languages other than English.

- considering unintended consequences when reporting findings. For example, in some cultural contexts, participants in evaluations who are proud of their accomplishments may want to forgo anonymity and have their names attached to their stories. While this may be appropriate in some instances, in other situations the identification of participants may infringe on the rights of people who have not given informed consent.

As evaluators collect data, make interpretations, and form value judgments, they engage issues of culture directly, and should do so respectfully and fairly. At times, evaluators may encounter situations in which their professional or personal ethics come into conflict with specific practices or norms in a given cultural context. In these cases, the evaluator must weigh the ethics of walking away from a project or staying and seeking to create change from within.

Validity demands cultural competence.

Validity is central to evaluation. It marks the extent to which an evaluation "got it right" regardless of approach or paradigm. Valid inferences require shared understanding within and across cultural contexts. Shared understanding requires trust that diverse voices and perspectives are honestly and fairly represented. Cultural competence fosters trustworthy understanding. Evaluating with validity therefore requires cultural competence.

Inaccurate or incomplete understandings of culture introduce systematic error that threatens validity. Culturally competent evaluators work to minimize error grounded in cultural biases, stereotypes, and lack of shared worldviews among stakeholders.

Validity is supported when evaluators:

- accurately and respectfully reflect the life experiences and perspectives of program participants in their evaluations.

- establish relationships that support trustworthy communication among all participants in the evaluation process.

- draw upon culturally relevant, and in some cases culturally specific, theory in the design of the evaluation and the interpretation of findings.

- select and implement design options and measurement strategies in ways that are compatible with the cultural context of the study.

- consider intended and unintended social consequences in the overall assessment of their work.
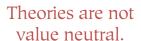
{ *Cultural competence fosters trustworthy understanding.* }

Like cultural competence, validity is not achieved in any absolute sense. It is fluid, linked to context, and temporary, pending the next evaluation.

Theories are inherently cultural.

Evaluation is steeped in theories—evaluation theories, social science theories, program theories, and theories of change. Theories come from academic research, practice experience, and community conversations. Theories shape our understandings of culture and are themselves shaped by cultural values and perspectives.

{ Theories are not value neutral. }

Theories are not value neutral. They reflect both implicit and explicit assumptions about how things work. It is important to scrutinize theories for culturally embedded perspectives regarding the definitions of social problems, the programs developed to address them, and the intended beneficiaries of these programs.

Culturally competent use of theory requires:

- thoughtful consideration of alternative theoretical perspectives.

- fitting theory to the cultural context of evaluation practice.

- developing culturally specific theory where appropriate.

- balanced consideration of both strengths and limitations of cultural practices when theorizing.

- vigilance to avoid equating cultural variables with problems or deficits.

- embracing complex explanations attentive to how power works within systems. 🌀

Essential Practices for Cultural Competence

Culture has implications for all evaluations and all phases of evaluation—including staffing, development, and implementation of evaluation efforts as well as communicating and using evaluation results. Given the diversity of culture and its fluid nature, no list of considerations and activities could suffice to ensure cultural competence. The practices described represent a starting point for developing and implementing a culturally competent evaluation.

Acknowledge the complexity of cultural identity.

Cultural groupings are not static. People belong to multiple cultural groups. Navigating these groups typically requires reconciling multiple and sometimes clashing norms. For example, individuals must negotiate both the values and norms of their racial or ethnic group regarding sexual orientation and their racial/ethnic identities within the cultural values and norms of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Attempts to categorize people often collapse identity into cultural groupings that may not accurately represent the true diversity that exists. For example, an evaluator who is not aware of values placed on different modes of communication within the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities (e.g., the use of sign language, lip reading, or personal assistive listening devices) can miss important individual differences regarding ways of interacting. The culturally competent evaluator recognizes and is responsive to differences between and within cultures and subcultures.

{ Cultural privilege can create and perpetuate inequities in power. }

Recognize the dynamics of power.

Culture is not neutral. Cultural groupings are ascribed differential status and power, with some holding privilege that they may not be aware of and some being relegated to the status of "other." For example, language dialect and accent can be used to determine the status, privilege, and access to resources of groups. Similarly, in some contexts, racialized "others" are framed against the implicit standard of "whiteness" and can become marginalized even when they are the numerical majority. Cultural privilege can create and perpetuate inequities in power and foster disparate treatment in resource distribution and access.

Culturally competent evaluators work to avoid reinforcing cultural stereotypes and prejudice in their work. For

example, evaluators often work with data organized by cultural categories. The choices evaluators make in working with these data can affect prejudice and discrimination attached to such categories. To challenge stereotypes, it is necessary to recognize the diversity within groupings and remember that cultural categories are fluid.

Culturally competent evaluators are also aware of marginalization. Understanding the experience of being devalued, marginalized, or subordinated is critical to responsible use of evaluative power. Evaluators who represent the values and standards of marginalized stakeholders use their power to promote equality and self-determination.

Recognize and eliminate bias in language.

Language is powerful. It is often used as the code for prescribed treatment of groups. Therefore, thoughtful and deliberate use of language can reduce bias when conducting culturally competent evaluations. For example, language can:

- respectfully and effectively convey important differences in the worldviews of key stakeholders.

- challenge stereotypes and patterns of marginalization or subordination.

- accurately reflect how individuals view their own group memberships and

create nuanced understandings that move beyond simple classifications.

- promote full participation when evaluation activities are conducted in participants' primary or preferred languages. This includes consideration of culturally specific communication styles and mannerisms.

Employ culturally appropriate methods.

The methods and tools used for collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data are not culture free.

Data collection methods and tools reflect the cultures in which they were developed. Even when methods and measures have been deemed psychometrically sound across cultural groups, they may not be applicable in every environment and context. Culturally competent evaluators seek to understand how the constructs are defined by cultures. For example, motivation for learning may be defined primarily in terms of benefits to the individual in some contexts and strongly linked to benefits to family or community in others.

Culturally competent evaluators also are aware of the many ways data can be analyzed and interpreted, and the contexts in which findings can be disseminated. These evaluators seek to consult and engage with groups who

are the focus of the data to determine alternative approaches to analyze and present findings, and to consider multiple audience perspectives in the process of interpretation.

To plan and implement culturally competent evaluations, evaluators:

- ensure that the members of the evaluation team collectively demonstrate cultural competence in the context for each evaluation.

- select or create data collection instruments that have been (or will be) vetted for use with the population of interest.

- engage in ongoing critical reflection on assumptions about what constitutes meaningful, reliable, and valid data and how these data are derived.

- employ data collection and analysis methods that address cultural differences in how knowledge is constructed and communicated.

- use intermediaries to assist with collecting data from persons whose participation would otherwise be limited by language, abilities, or factors such as familiarity or trust.

- engage and consult with those groups who are the focus of the evaluation in the analysis and interpretation of

data, to address multiple audience perspectives.

- recognize that reporting at different stages of the evaluation may introduce new audiences that can require new culturally appropriate communication strategies.

- tailor methods of reporting to stakeholder audiences in ways that address issues related to communication and language (may require multiple reports and reporting methods).

- employ culturally appropriate approaches in the metaevaluation process, including feedback from communities affected by the evaluation.

Closing

Evaluators have the power to make a difference, not only directly to program stakeholders but also indirectly to the general public. This is consistent with the Guiding Principle that obliges evaluators to consider the public interest and good in the work they do. In a diverse and complex society, cultural competence is central to making a difference.

Cultural competence connects with and complements existing knowledge and skills in the field. It offers both opportunities and challenges for evaluators. Cultural competence presents evaluators with new horizons for learning, opportunities for renewal, and the potential to deepen understanding of one's own work in all contexts. Cultural competence challenges evaluators to deepen their self awareness and sensitivity in terms of their own cultures and those of others.

Many evaluators are actively exploring the terrain of cultural competence. They are expanding the boundaries of what it means to respond to cultural diversity in authentic and respectful ways. This statement invites new conversations and connections to advance this sensitive and exciting work.

Notes

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