The Equity Assessment and Improvement Tool for Research Teams[1]

Introduction

The overarching goal of this Tool is to build the capacity of research and evaluation teams[2] (which could include researchers, evaluators, planners, program developers, administrators, and individuals with lived expertise[3]) to take actionable steps toward bold and transformative systems change through increasing equity in their research and evaluation activities, including key decision-making points.

The next sections describe a set of operating principles, background and context, intended use of the Tool, a list of key terms to facilitate use of the tool, and guidance on preparatory efforts (including a suggested phase of work to occur before bringing on individuals with lived experience), followed by the Tool itself. Finally, a Resource List of complementary resources is provided and includes a reference to an expanded glossary.

Operating Principles

The Tool was developed with the following operating principles in mind. The statements reflect values and beliefs that encourage active engagement among all team members across various phases of research and evaluation. Tool users are encouraged to engage in team-based discussion about whether these operating principles are consistent with the teams' values and beliefs and if there are others not listed below that should be considered.

We believe that it is important to:

1. Engage in bold and transformative work to inform and encourage innovative and equitable research, programs, and policies aimed at systems change.
2. Engage individuals with lived expertise in research, evaluation, and program development, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation and input.
3. Strive for equity when conducting research and program evaluation that impacts program design, service delivery and policy.
4. Avoid harming people and populations impacted by our research, evaluation, program design, and service delivery.
5. Contextualize differences across groups when conducting research and program evaluation, designing programs, and delivering services.
6. Strive for equity when using findings in decision-making.

The Tool is organized into six sections of items that align with these operating principles.

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[1] The tool was developed by the steering committee for the 21st Century National Research Agenda. See the website: The National Research Agenda for a 21st Century Child and Family Well-Being System.

[2] Throughout this document research teams refers to all those who work on a research or evaluation team.

[3] The terms Individuals with lived experience, people with lived expertise, lived experience experts, and variations of these terms are used interchangeably in the introduction to reflect the current variation in the field.

Background and Context

Since 2020, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and the William T. Grant Foundation have partnered with a broad array of experts, national associations, and people with lived experience to develop a transformative 21st Century Research Agenda for a child and family well-being system. The Agenda identifies pressing research gaps in community-based maltreatment prevention, child protective services and prevention of foster care, out-of-home care, and workforce. The two-year review and consensus-building process included development and use of the DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) Framework for supporting the identification and assessment of research gaps and questions to include in the National Research Agenda.

Following completion of the National Research Agenda, professionals in the field expressed interest in better understanding how to apply the DEI Framework that was used during the development of the Agenda. In late 2023, the user-friendly Tool in this document began being developed by the National Steering Committee, which includes a team of six lived experience experts. Using the original DEI Framework as a basis, its values and principles were modified for development of this Tool.

Intended Use and Purpose of the Tool

Building on the above operating principles, the Tool is intended to promote equitable research and program development by:

- Supporting the building and sustainability of inclusive research teams.
- Guiding research teams while they engage in activities that support bold and transformative change.
- Encouraging researchers and administrators to engage people with lived expertise in projects at the earliest stage possible.
- Suggesting practical actions (items) that collectively improve equity.
- Offering benchmarks or team objectives that aid teams in monitoring successes and progress over time.
- Providing structure for "check-in" opportunities among all team members.
- Promoting robust team discussions and encouraging interactive dialogue based on Tool items.
- Helping teams identify areas for growth and improvement.
- Providing selected resources to support efforts.

The Tool may also be shared with funders as a resource and for distribution to grantees.

This Tool is not intended to replace the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process; rather the Tool acts as a companion tool to enhance the quality of research.

Key Terms

Some key terms you will see in the Tool are defined below.

- *Bold and transformative*: Strive for equity when conducting research and program evaluation, designing programs, and delivering services. This includes addressing root causes whenever possible.

- *Community*: Community members and residents are impacted by child welfare systems and act as key resources/constituents (e.g., Elders, natural helpers, community leaders).

- *Community–based participatory research (CBPR)*: CBPR is an approach intended to improve outcomes by including researchers, organizations, people with lived experience and community members in all aspects of the research. Community members provide meaningful input on research processes and programming, including helping with disseminations activities.

- *Equity*: Equity is about social justice. Social justice is about addressing ableism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, classism, and structural and systemic oppression. Social justice and equity include an end goal of social inclusion, and ongoing processes and intentional efforts, such as thoughtful decision-making among those with power and correcting for past and present injustices. Equity cannot be achieved without diversity, inclusion, and belonging[4]. (See for example, https://www.aecf.org/blog/equity-vs-equality)

- *Justice*: "The process of society moving from an unfair, unequal, or inequitable state to one that is fair, equal, or equitable. A transformative practice that relies on the entire community to acknowledge past and current harms to reform societal morals and subsequently the governing laws."[5]

- *Individuals with Lived Experience / Expertise*: Leaders who have interacted with the child welfare system and gained expertise through lived experiences and whose knowledge, insight, and input uplift high quality research.

- *Population of Focus / Priority Population*: The group that is the focus of the study.

- *Respect*: Respect is paramount and is earned through trust building. For trust to flourish, transparency and inclusion is needed. Respect involves an inclusive approach to research, careful assessment to do no harm, and contextualizing research findings[6].

- *Team / Team Members*: Individuals contributing to carrying out the research or evaluation including individuals with lived expertise.

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[4] Andrews, K., Elm, J., McDaniel, M, & Pecora, P.J. for the 21st Century National Child Welfare Research Agenda project. (2021). *Framework for Applying DEI Principles to the National Child Welfare Research Agenda Project*. Casey Family Programs.

[5] Nakintu, S. (2021). *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Key Terms and Definitions.* National Association of Counties. https://www.naco.org/resources/featured/key-terms-definitions-diversity-equity-inclusion.

[6] Elm, J. H. L., & Handeland, T. (2020). *Momentum and Longevity for Tribally Driven Health Equity Science: Evidence from the Gathering for Health Project.* Human biology, *91*(3), 153–162. https://doi.org/10.13110/humanbiology.91.3.05

Preparatory Efforts and Guidance

Aligned with the guiding principles above, below are some essential processes that researchers, evaluators, planners, administrators, and other organizational decisionmakers (hereinafter referred to as project leadership) should complete prior to using the Tool. Effective and meaningful use of the Tool is dependent on preparatory efforts for structuring an equitable environment for all team members – especially for individuals with lived experience, who may be new to working on a research team. Several items in the Tool assume that the preparatory processes outlined below have occurred.

Furthermore, the guidance provided below is a starting point for launching a readiness process and project leadership are encouraged to visit additional resources to enhance their learning and adapt processes specific to their situations. (See Resource List at the end of this document.) In practice, the implementation of the guidance presented below may overlap.

Acknowledge and Address Biases and Assumptions

A critical step in the preparatory process is for project leadership to explore, acknowledge, discuss, and address their biases and assumptions – individually and amongst one another. This practice aims to help leadership work through any beliefs that may unconsciously inhibit them from appropriately operating in an equitable workspace. This can also bring to light any systemic norms that may uphold existing biases and assumptions for individual project leadership. Furthermore, this set of activities – completed among project leadership – acts as a practice for setting up a team culture and creating an environment which promotes inclusion of productive team conversations about equity in the research process in the future.

Exploring and discussing biases among project leadership is important before engaging individuals with lived expertise to participate in a project. This process acts as a foundation for engaging in equity conversations with the team, especially with individuals with lived expertise as they onboard and participate throughout the life of the project. All team members should be encouraged to explore their own biases at regular intervals, and this should coincide with building a workplace culture that normalizes discussions about biases and differences. This type of culture can translate into advancing equity in the research process as team members have comfort and ability in applying their critical thinking skills when developing research products and other programs. For example, team members will have built a practice that supports their ongoing contextualization of differences across groups in the workplace setting and will be able to apply this when interpreting data and writing manuscripts.

Some questions to consider as part of this step include:

- *What have you done to foster a sense of safety for open sharing?*
- *Do team members share viewpoints openly?*
- *Do team members have opportunities to share?*
- *Has the team discussed personal and professional biases?*
- *What types of privileges does one have?*
- *How might one's biases influence how they conduct research?*

Include Individuals with Lived Experience

Inclusion of individuals with lived expertise should be equitable, meaningful, and substantial. This is foundational for bold and transformative research, evaluation, and programming. It involves planning prior to outreach, engagement, and onboarding individuals with lived experience. It is important that individuals with lived experience contribute as full team members at the earliest possible stage of research to positively impact both *what* is researched and *how* research gets done, so this planning phase cannot be overlooked. Without this care, there is risk of harm. There should also be a readiness phase with all existing team members. For example, project leadership should send reminders to team members to not use acronyms as individuals with lived experience are oriented.

Engaging in preparatory efforts will help build a supportive and equitable environment prior to onboarding individuals with lived experience. Steps are needed so that people with lived experience are best able to contribute their knowledge. If not already completed, project leadership should develop policies, procedures, and protocols to ensure that individuals with lived experience are treated like other team members including:

1. ***Establishing a protocol for providing equitable compensation.*** Individuals with lived experience are subject matter experts and deserve equitable compensation for their time like other team members.
2. ***Creating an orientation plan***. Project leadership should develop an orientation plan as part of onboarding individuals with lived experience. This should include a range of specific activities and a socialization phase to foster working relationships among team members.
3. ***Creating a training and strengths assessment and plan.*** Conversations with individuals with lived experience can help identify training needs. Project leadership and other team members can offer guidance for how individuals with lived experience can gain new knowledge and skills. Interests and strengths should be considered for developing a training plan. For example, individuals with lived experience may be interested in learning more about participatory research services and may benefit from reading resources or workshops. The lived experience person training plan should be revisited at regular intervals to ensure that individuals with lived experience are getting what they need to advance their skills.
4. ***Supporting opportunities for meaningful participation and input.*** Project leadership should understand any institutional parameters for participation by people with lived experience (e.g., any limitations set forth in an existing research protocol before modifying an IRB submission) and plan to have conversations with individuals with lived experience about their role on the project (e.g., how their voice will be included in decision-making, when the project structure or a particular topic requires leadership decision making). It's important to have honest conversations and to balance expectations.

The Equity Assessment & Improvement Tool for Research Teams

This Tool is organized into six sections of items that align with the operating principles.

1. Engage in bold and transformative work to inform and encourage innovative and equitable research, programs, and policies aimed at systems change.
2. Engage individuals with lived expertise in research, evaluation, and program development, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation and input.
3. Strive for equity when conducting research and program evaluation that impacts program design, service delivery and policy.
4. Avoid harming people and populations impacted by our research, evaluation, program design, and service delivery.
5. Contextualize differences across groups when conducting research and program evaluation, designing programs, and delivering services.
6. Strive for equity when using findings in decision-making.

Principle 1: Engage in bold and transformative work to inform and encourage innovative and equitable research, programs, and policies aimed at systems change.

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Designed the project to be bold and transformative to effect systems change.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Developed a logic model or theory of change that visualizes intended transformation.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Ensured the project has potential for substantial impact through the inclusion of individuals from historically oppressed or marginalized communities.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Implemented community-based participatory methods to support conducting equitable research.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

Principle 2: Engage individuals with lived expertise in research, evaluation, and program development processes, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation and input.

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Engaged individuals with lived experience from the conceptualization stage of the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Engages individuals with lived experience in research activities continually.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Discusses roles and responsibilities among all team members.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Established a plan or process for having critical conversations between all team members.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
5. Engages in clear communications related to power sharing among team members.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
6. Provides opportunities to learn from one another.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
7. Provides equitable opportunities for individuals with lived expertise to shape project materials and activities.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
8. Ensures that individuals with lived experience have the tools and support to engage in the research process.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

Principle 3: Strive for equity when conducting research and program evaluation that impacts program design, service delivery and policy.[7]

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Understands the difference between equality and equity.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Recognizes that striving toward equity means diversity, inclusion, and belonging are key ingredients.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Recognizes and discusses the strengths and resiliency of the population of focus.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Reinforces opportunities for team members to discuss biases.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
5. Considered culturally specific definitions of terms that may deserve special consideration.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
6. Validated definitions of key terms with members of the community/priority population.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
7. Considered how definitions of key terms may impact the study's methodology, analyses, and findings of the study.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
8. Allows time for team members to share understandings of key terms used in the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
9. Respects that knowledge diversity and culture may translate into variation in program design, service delivery and policy for populations of focus.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

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[7] The questions below are especially relevant for the early phase of a research project, when being designed and choosing methods.

Principle 4: Avoid harming people and populations impacted by our research, evaluation, program design, and service delivery.

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Identified risks and unintended consequences of the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Identifies which groups may differentially benefit from the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Follows a plan to avoid marginalizing and oppressing the population of focus for the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Critiques work to avoid negative stereotyping about the population of focus for the project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
5. Plans to address identified risks and unintended consequences of our project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

Principle 5: Contextualize circumstances of the population of focus when conducting research and program evaluation, designing programs, and delivering services.

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Uses multiple methods to learn about the histories and cultures of the population of focus for this project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Recognizes and discusses historically traumatic events that have impacted the population of focus for this project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Recognizes and discusses the oppression currently experienced by the population of focus for this project.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Asks important questions to understand the circumstances in which the population of focus lives and uses the information gained to inform decisions that impact their lives.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

Principle 6: Strive for equity when using findings in decision-making.

For each item below, rate the degree to which your team:	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	Comments
1. Engages partners in the interpretation/implications of the data and findings.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
2. Engages partners in the recommendations based on data and findings.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
3. Creates space to engage in conversations about the data.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
4. Engages partners in summarizing and sharing findings with audiences.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
5. Includes lived experience experts as co-authors when publishing findings.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	
6. Co-presents with lived experience experts when sharing findings.	Not at all	A little	Some	Mostly	Completely	

Resource List[8]

Amison, T. et al. (2022). *We Know Us: Guide to Participatory Meaning Making with Young People.* Hello Insight. https://3077086.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/3077086/WeKnowUs_Guide.pdf.

> This Guide was developed by a diverse group of young people and experts in youth-adult partnerships. The Guide helps adult researchers and practitioners become allies who fully understand the value of youth voice in research that is for, by, and about them. This tool is rooted in the young people's belief that they solely hold key understanding of their experience within our society and should have the opportunities to participate in the work that claims to support them.

Burkhardt, T., Huang, L. A., Kakuyama-Villaber, R., & Pacheco-Applegate, A. (2021). *Racial Bias in Data Assessment Tool.* Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Racial-Bias-in-Data-Assessment-Tool_Chapin-Hall_INTERACTIVE.pdf

> The Racial Bias in Data Assessment Tool assists users in assessing the risk of racial and ethnic bias in datasets for secondary analysis. The tool is rooted in literature that highlights issues related to racial and ethnic bias in datasets and proposes best practices for collecting race and ethnicity data to promote racial equity.

Casey Family Programs and the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team. (2022). *How can agencies and organizations prepare for authentic youth engagement?* Seattle: Casey Family Programs. https://www.casey.org/youth-engagement-oneseries/

> Developed in partnership with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team who are youth and family advocates from Family Voices United, a collaborative project among Casey Family Programs, Children's Trust Fund Alliance, FosterClub, and Generations United. This brief offers some questions for agencies to consider before undertaking a new youth engagement effort or when making changes to an existing approach. It also illustrates effective power sharing and offers examples from agencies with successful youth engagement strategies. This brief is the first in a three-part series on youth engagement values and approaches.

Chicago Beyond (2018). *Why am I always being researched? A guidebook for community organizations, researchers, and funders to help us get from insufficient understanding to more authentic truth.* Chicago Beyond. https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/

> This guide names seven inequities held in place by power and calls out how they get in the way of truth and impact. The Guidebook is based on the premise that if evidence matters, we must care how it gets made.

Elam, P. & Walker, W. (2021). *Is my evaluation practice culturally responsive?* MPHI. *https://mphi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Is-my-Evaluation-Practice-Culturally-Responsive.pdf*

This document is a cultural diversity and cultural competency self-assessment checklist designed for personnel providing research and evaluation services and support to agencies, projects, and boards of directors that require such services be viewed through a lens of diversity, inclusion, and equity.

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[8] Child Welfare Information Gateway's glossary is currently under construction and will be added to the list of resources when it becomes available.

Green-Rogers, Y. et al. (2022). *Applying race equity strategies throughout the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process*. Chicago, IL; Seattle, WA; Reston, VA; Arlington, VA, and Tampa, FL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Casey Family Programs, ICF, Capacity Building Center for States, James Bell Associates, and the University of South Florida. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Casey-Equity-Report_CQI-Final.pdf

> This resource offers action steps that can be applied within each of the core functions of the CQI process as well as a set of cross-cutting strategies that support applying a race equity lens at any stage.

Hawn Nelson, A., Jenkins, D., Zanti, S., Katz, M., Berkowitz, E., et al. (2020). *A Toolkit for centering racial equity throughout data integration.* Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania. https://aisp.upenn.edu/centering-equity/

> This toolkit is designed to help guide partnerships, collaboratives, agencies, and community initiatives seeking to center racial equity while using, sharing, and integrating administrative data.

Mihalec-Adkins, B. P., Killett, S., & Gabel, G. (2023). *How Can Funders Support Child Welfare Researchers in Meaningfully Engaging Lived Expertise?*. Casey Family Programs & William T. Grant Foundation. https://wtgrantfoundation.org/meaningfully-engaging-lived-expertise-in-child-welfare-research

> This checklist, found near the middle of the webpage, summarizes actions funders can take to support researchers in meaningful engagement of lived expertise in high-quality research. This document accompanies the *Promoting meaningful partnerships with lived experience experts in high-quality research: Considerations for funders*, referenced below.

Mihalec-Adkins, B.P., Killett, S., Gabel, G. (2023). *Promoting meaningful partnerships with lived experience experts in high-quality research: Considerations for funders*. William T. Grant Foundation. https://wtgrantfoundation.org/meaningfully-engaging-lived-expertise-in-child-welfare-research

> This brief suggests specific steps that funders can take to support researchers in efforts to engage individuals with lived expertise while meeting various ethical and scientific standards. Meaningfully engaging individuals with lived expertise in high-quality research requires significant determination, time, funding, and flexibility. As such, it can be challenging for researchers to do this well while balancing concerns and careers. However, funders are uniquely positioned to influence longstanding incentive structures and how researchers engage with and value lived experience expertise.

Ryan, K., Thomson, A., Cachat, P., Joraanstad, A., Sparr, M., West, A., Mendes, G., Fogt, J., & Bluford, E. (2024). *Concept mapping to engage individuals with lived experience: An example from developing a measure of reflective supervision in home visiting* (OPRE Report No. 2024-015). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/Concept-Map-Lived-Experience_508.pdf

> This brief illustrates the use of concept mapping to engage individuals with lived experience in an early phase of research. Potential audiences include those who wish to enhance the applicability and usefulness of research and measure development efforts (e.g., evaluators, researchers). Individuals who support, provide, or receive reflective supervision may also benefit.

Sevak, P. et al. (2022). *Guide for Staff with Research or Analytical Responsibilities: Advancing Equity through Quantitative Analysis*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Washington, District of Columbia. https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/guide-advancing-equity-qa

> This Guide explores opportunities to advance equity in quantitative analysis, including by recognizing common biases (e.g., research and measurement bias) and discussing specific quantitative methods and tools to help quantitative analyses address equity. It provides specific considerations and strategies throughout all stages of the quantitative research and analysis process, including planning and designing quantitative analysis with an equity focus, identifying and comparing subgroups, assessing and addressing data quality and small sample sizes, and modeling subgroup and distributional differences in regression equations.

Thomas, K., O'Brien, K., Miller, N., Armstrong, M., Moore, E. & Day, A. G. (2022). *Advancing equity through research and evaluation: A guide for child welfare leaders and decision makers*. Chicago, IL; Seattle, WA; Reston, VA; Arlington, VA, and Tampa, FL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Casey Family Programs, ICF, Capacity Building Center for States, James Bell Associates, and the University of South Florida. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Casey-Equity-Report_Final.pdf

> This Guide offers action steps that can be applied within each of the core functions of the research process as well as a set of cross-cutting strategies that support applying a race equity lens at any stage. The Guide also presents an Influence Framework that systematically walks through the research and evaluation life cycle, elevating certain strategies and the opportunities at every stage where leaders and decision makers can prioritize equity.

Thriving Families Safer Children, Equitable Compensation Taskforce. (2023). *Equitable Compensation Taskforce Report.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children. https://cdn.ymaws.com/flchildren.org/resource/resmgr/custompages/tfsc/tfsc_equitable_compensation_.pdf

> This Report recommends a funding model for lived expert compensation, including suggested rates of pay and potential sources for sustainable funding. The Report also offers recommendations to create the conditions for successful partnership around lived expert engagement.