Advancing Culturally Responsive Evaluations for Boys and Men of Color

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RISE FOR BOYS AND MEN OF COLOR
Introduction: State of the Field

The field of culturally responsive evaluations (CRE) and comprehensive efforts to improve outcomes for boys and men of color (BMOC) are in their infancy. Yet attention to the development of the knowledge base and expansion of practice is needed due to the groundswell of interest in both areas in recent years. For instance, in 2014, President Obama established the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Task Force. MBK is a coordinated federal effort with private philanthropic organizations and communities to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by BMOC and to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential. While BMOCs are the targets of many social programs and interventions, a dearth of high-quality culturally responsive evaluations exist on the effectiveness of various gender- and population-specific approaches for BMOCs to achieve measurable results.
The development and implementation of cultural responsive evaluation approaches are needed within the field of evaluation to provide authentic feedback on programs and interventions that work for BMOC. Although the American Evaluation Association (AEA) was established 30 years ago, it released its public statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation quite recently, in 2011.\(^1\) Predating this effort, in 1999, a collaboration between AEA and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation called the Building Diversity Initiative began to address the complexity of needs and expectations concerning evaluators working across cultures and in diverse communities. Ricardo Millett, the former Director of Evaluation at the Kellogg Foundation, explained why he devoted this attention to culturally responsive evaluation:

> Evaluation is not accurately capturing the experiences of those who are affected by the programs and policies we inform. Conventional program evaluation often misses the kinds of data and experiences that can help to frame effective programs and policies, and this problem relates directly to how we approach diversity and multiculturalism in our profession. . . . Generating authentic knowledge is about finding a way to make sure that evaluation is participatory and grounded, and collects and interprets data within real settings. It is not about capturing whether participants work well for a program, but whether a program works well for participants.\(^2\)

Millett’s call for action continues to be relevant today. For this reason, the Research, Integration, Strategies and Evaluation (RISE) for Boys and Men of Color Initiative was launched in 2015 with an eye toward stimulating research and evaluation practices for BMOC initiatives.\(^3\) A core issue that RISE addresses is the limited availability of CRE resources that often leave practitioners to do their work without systematic and rigorous evaluation. Among the 10 principles that RISE promotes, the most salient to this paper is the focus on culturally relevant, authentic, inclusive, and rigorous evaluation. This tenet emphasizes the importance that programs serving BMOC are rigorously and appropriately assessed by scholars of color and other evaluators who deeply understand cultural context and appreciate the viewpoints that people of color offer. This principle and, in fact, most of the RISE principles reinforce standard practices of culturally responsive evaluation. In addition to the principle of culturally relevant, authentic, inclusive, and rigorous evaluations, other salient principles call attention to 1) balanced treatment of racial and ethnic groups; 2) structural, systemic, and policy change; 3) multiple ways of knowing; 4) narrative change moving beyond deficit-oriented and racist misrepresentations of boys and men of color; 5) interdisciplinarity; 6) intersectionality; and 7) disaggregated data analysis.\(^4\)

In this paper, we begin with a review of the role of CRE as it applies to rigorous, authentic evaluation of programs that serve BMOC. Next, we define what is meant by “culturally responsive evaluation,” including key principles and essential practices. We conclude with a potential evaluation framework and a set of field-level recommendations for building the pipeline of diverse evaluators.

Evaluation serves a vital function for the social sector. Funders, policymakers, and practitioners rely on evaluation as a tool for management, strategic planning, and accountability for their work. In recent years, however, there have been critical questions raised about how conventional evaluations—still largely rooted in a white, Western-centric tradition—function across different cultural contexts. Such questions include the following: To what extent do existing evaluation frameworks and measures present valid findings across multiple dimensions of diversity, such as race/ethnicity, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, or immigration status? How can the cultural contexts of racially and ethnically diverse groups be better integrated in evaluation theory and practice? What methods are most suited for culturally responsive evaluations?

Within the evaluation field, a growing body of literature discusses the theoretical underpinnings for cultural responsiveness in evaluation. AEA has been focused on advancing CRE methodologies, measurement tools, and metrics, while sharing strategies and promising practices for deepening a CRE approach. Critical momentum is building as individuals and organizations across multiple disciplines come together around a collective vision for advancing CRE as a legitimate form of high-quality evaluation.

Researchers, funders, and others committed to working with communities of color can capitalize upon these growing efforts. The increasing racial and ethnic diversity of U.S. communities—along with evidence of persistent educational, economic, and health disparities, and high levels of discrimination experienced by BMOC—have created a heightened sense of urgency for responsive programming and evaluation strategies. Funders are seeking solutions not only rooted in communities’ cultural assets, but also in the intersection of multiple dimensions of diversity, such as economic class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. CRE has the potential to assist evaluators, policymakers, and funders to become more strategic and innovative in their practices, decisions, and investments by yielding valid and culturally relevant findings rooted in the realities experienced by BMOC.
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. Culture not only influences members of groups, but it also delineates boundaries and influences patterns of interaction among them. Evaluators frequently work across these boundaries.
What Is Culturally Responsive Evaluation

CRE is, at its simplest, evaluation that integrates cultural practices, understandings, and norms into its theory, measures, analysis, and practice. Like traditional evaluation, it prioritizes objective inquiry designed to provide information to decision makers and other parties interested in a particular program, policy, or intervention. However, CRE also requires frameworks that incorporate different worldviews, value systems, and their interaction at multiple levels of society. It engages in data collection strategies that take into account potential linguistic and structural barriers; it includes a reexamination of biases built into evaluation measures and their cultural appropriateness; and it utilizes creative strategies for ensuring culturally competent analysis and creative dissemination of findings to diverse audiences.

CRE aims to:

Unmask cultural differences so that relevant, culturally based knowledge and cultural assets can be central to problem solving and strategic planning.

Affirm the individual and intersectional effects of race/ethnicity, immigrant status, age, socioeconomic factors, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identities.

Build the capacities of specific populations and communities of color to self-assess needs, resources, and solutions.
What Is Cultural Responsiveness?

Cultural responsiveness, or 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. This 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 responsive evaluators refrain from assuming they fully understand the perspectives of stakeholders whose backgrounds differ from their own.

AEA CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EVALUATION STATEMENT
Guiding Principles for Culturally Responsive Evaluation

While AEA provides a general set of guiding principles for conducting evaluations, its “Statement of Cultural Competence in Evaluation” focuses on a set of practices rather than principles for cultural competence. These practices are similar to the set of key principles for CRE that were recommended by Inouye, Yu, and Adefuin from the California Endowment’s *The Diversity in Health Evaluation Project*. The principles from this project fall into five major categories:

1. **Inclusion in design and implementation**: Stakeholders and communities understand and support the research and are actively involved in all phases of the evaluation so that they are empowered to do self-evaluation through intentional capacity building.

2. **Acknowledgment/infusion of multiple world views**: Culturally responsive evaluators have a genuine respect for communities and seek deep understanding of different cultural contexts, practices, and paradigms of thinking. Communities know best their issues, strengths, and challenges. The diversity of communities is represented in CRE staffing and expertise.

3. **Appropriate measures of success**: Measures of success are discussed or collaboratively developed with those being evaluated. Data collection instruments and outcome measures are tested for multicultural validity across populations that may be non-English speaking, less literate, or from a different culture. CRE methods and instruments consider alternative or nontraditional ways of collecting data.

4. **Cultural and systems analysis**: Culturally responsive evaluations take into account how historical and current social systems, institutions, and societal norms contribute to power and outcome disparities across different racial and ethnic communities and intersection of racial, cultural, gender, religious, economic, and other differences. CRE questions take a multilevel approach to understanding root causes and impact at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, cultural, system, and policy level, rather than focusing the analysis solely on individual behavior.

5. **Relevance to diverse communities**: Culturally responsive evaluations inform community decision-making and program design. Findings from culturally responsive evaluations are co-owned with diverse communities and shared in culturally appropriate ways.
Traditional evaluation is rooted in the assumption that formally trained evaluators are the “experts” who implement evaluations based on established measures of what is “good practice.” CRE is instead characterized by reciprocity. While still integrating their own expertise throughout the evaluation, the evaluator does not presume to understand every facet of the cultural context of the populations or communities being studied. As a result, CRE is characterized by a fundamental shift in how the evaluation is conceptualized and designed, how communities are engaged in the data collection and analysis, and how the findings from the evaluation are ultimately communicated and used.

These principles are consistent with the AEA’s quality standards of practice for the profession, which include systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honesty, respect for people, and responsibilities for general and public welfare. However, the guiding principles put forth by Inouye, Yu, and Adefuin for culturally responsive evaluation depart from these broader principles to explicitly consider race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, and/or immigrant status.

When implementing culturally responsive evaluation, it is important to note that culturally responsive evaluations build on core elements of sound, traditional evaluation practices, such as data-based inquiry, valid and reliable measures, and impartial assessment. CRE also reflects characteristics of quality evaluations based on guidelines set forth by AEA, such as strongly respecting stakeholders’ self-worth, considering perspectives of a full range of stakeholders, and (where feasible) providing benefit to those who contribute data.

However, as shown in Figure 1 below, when the principles of CRE are applied to all aspects of evaluation—from the evaluator, to design and planning, to data collection, analysis, reporting and application of findings—there is a significant shift in how evaluation is actually implemented.

**FIGURE 1. The Paradigm Shift from Traditional to Culturally Responsive Evaluation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRADITIONAL EVALUATION</th>
<th>CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EVALUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluator</strong></td>
<td>Formally trained evaluators are the experts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Evaluator</strong></td>
<td>Leader, judge, expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design &amp; Planning</strong></td>
<td>Evaluator presents design for funder approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Collection</strong></td>
<td>Conducted by evaluation professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Results and their meaning are analyzed by evaluator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting</strong></td>
<td>Written report and briefing to funder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application of Findings</strong></td>
<td>Findings used as monitoring device.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Recommendations for Advancing CRE and the Evaluation Field

With the strong interest in stimulating CRE for BMOC, this is an important time to rethink how evaluators can engage in CRE practice, expand the frameworks for analysis, and take action to diversify the pipeline for culturally competent evaluators. The following are some key recommendations to those interested in applying and advancing CRE of BMOC programs and initiatives.

1. **Engage in essential practices that advance cultural responsiveness.**

Complementing the CRE principles presented, the following essential practices provide a starting point for developing and implementing a culturally responsive evaluation. These practices allow us to complexify our understandings of context and culture and to illuminate the dynamics and effects of power differentials within target populations, all of which will enhance our ability to interpret findings:

- **Avoid homogenizing cultural groups:** In many Asian and Latino communities, for example, diversity among cultural groups may be great (i.e., Southeast Asian can consist of Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Thais); alternatively, Latino can consist of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, El Salvadorians, Cubans, and Haitians. It is therefore important to collect and disaggregate data on such vast groupings as they intersect with gender, geography (e.g., urban and rural), and other dimensions that affect BMOC so as to increase our understanding of differences across major groups and within subgroups. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that culture is not static. Most cultures evolve as they come into contact with other cultures and as people identify affiliation with multiple cultural groups. Consequently, culturally responsive evaluators need to examine the impact of the nuances of culture on participation, behaviors, and outcomes.

- **Examine power differentials:** Tremendous differences stem from varying levels of privilege, accents, distribution of resources, living conditions, decision-making processes, skills and expertise, and communication styles. Culturally responsive evaluators work to identify their own biases and privileges, dispel stereotypes, and examine the structural and systemic forces that marginalize or subordinate particular populations or communities.

To the extent that evaluation is not a value-free endeavor, evaluators can use their knowledge, privilege, power, and expertise to promote equitable outcomes for the self-determination of BMOC.
Adopt frameworks that consider embedded contexts and structural analyses of inequalities.

In determining appropriate frameworks for evaluation of boys and men of color, two key CRE and RISE principles provide helpful guidance. The first is “Multiple Ways of Knowing,” which acknowledges that people of color are experts on their own experiences, and historical, cultural, and social contexts greatly influence BMOC’s behaviors and outcomes. The second is the RISE principle of “Structural, Systemic, and Policy Change,” which focuses our attention to forces that can work to dismantle systems of oppression and institutionalized racism faced by boys and men of color. We know that disparities faced by boys and men of color are created and mediated by multiple social determinants of behavior. Individuals’ behaviors are conditioned in social contexts of families, peer groups, and culture as well as their physical environment and geographic communities. Individuals are not only influenced by their own values, norms, beliefs, and characteristics, but also by their relationships with others, the institutions and communities to which they belong, and the broader society in which those institutions are embedded. Building on past and current work at the state and local level, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services and Administration’s (SAMHSA) Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies has developed a robust resource tool to support prevention practitioners. This tool identifies factors that protect boys and young men of color against substance use and misuse, as well as mitigate adverse experiences that affect this group, such as racial and ethnic discrimination.

SAMHSA’s Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (2016) socio-ecological model (see Figure 2) is not only a valuable framework for building our understanding of factors that impact BMOC’s well-being, but also for usage in culturally responsive evaluations. It helps to draw evaluators’ attention to the larger contexts and systems in which programs and interventions operate, as well as the factors that need to be taken into account in the design and implementation of programs and initiatives for BMOCs.

This framework also shows promise in that it moves us away from the individual-focused model of evaluation to explain embedded contexts that likely impact outcomes for BMOC. Instead, it allows us to look at factors that protect against negative outcomes for BMOC and the relationship and interactions amongst multiple levels of influence, including systemic inequality. For example, research by Niehaus and Kumpiene shows that Latino adolescents who have experience with language brokering (translating for family) in more complex situations are more likely to believe in their own academic success. Other research shows that African American eighth and twelfth graders who experience achievement-oriented school climate tend to have lower odds of lifetime substance use. Asian American, black, and Latino adolescents from low-income families who have positive perceptions of school climate demonstrate improved quality of general friendship. Overall, utilization of socioeconomic frameworks such as the one offered by SAMHSA can increase awareness of evidence-based factors that contribute to effective program implementation and evaluators’ capacity to monitor and evaluate prevention programming for specific BMOC groups.

FIGURE 2. Socio-Ecological Model

SAMHSA’S CENTER FOR THE APPLICATION OF PREVENTION TECHNOLOGIES (2016)
Engage in building the pipeline of culturally responsive evaluators.

To build the pipeline of culturally responsive evaluators, it is important to first define the characteristics of culturally responsive and competent evaluators. Articulating what exactly makes an evaluator “culturally competent,” however, can be subject to debate. Attributes of cultural competence do not lend themselves to a “checklist” or a formula. Rather, the multicultural knowledge, attitudes, and skill sets that evaluators bring to their work can best be viewed as evolving “human” skills that are developed over time and with practice. Some of these characteristics are presented in Figure 3.

As a key example, Social Policy Research Associates evaluated the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Evaluation Fellowship program to build the pipeline of diverse evaluators (a partnership with Duquesne University and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, now known as Equal Measure). The RWJF Fellowship Program provided many rich lessons for the evaluation field. A common theme that surfaced among the evaluation field leader interviews was that, no matter how effective a single program like the RWJ Fellowship program may be, field-level changes are unlikely to occur without a more coordinated and sustained approach on the part of private philanthropy, government agencies, graduate schools, and professional associations.

The following are some recommendations that field leaders offered for building the pipeline of diverse evaluators:

- **Partnerships of universities, evaluation firms, and funders should act on the issue of the lack of diversity in the evaluation field by disseminating key findings and strategies and by lending support for initiatives designed to diversify the field.** Because sustainability of any individual fellowship program is an ongoing concern, pipeline program leaders and funders should continue to serve as thought leaders on these issues, through dissemination of project lessons and through leveraging knowledge. Further, evaluation field leaders said that major funders’ (such as RWJF) continued involvement in providing support for pipeline programs is crucial.

- **Funders should collaborate to create a more comprehensive approach moving forward.** It would be useful to convene meetings of funders and field leaders to examine lessons learned from programs such as the RWJF Evaluation Fellowship, RWJF New Connections, the AEA Graduate Fellowship, and the Annie E. Casey Expanding the Bench Program and to develop an action plan to diversify the field. Such a meeting should include funders, such as the California Endowment and the Kellogg Foundation, who have historically worked to increase the pipeline of diverse evaluators. One goal of such a meeting could be to think through how the RWJF Fellowship might be replicated on a regional basis. For instance, local community-based foundations might partner with local universities and evaluation firms in order to replicate the Fellowship model.

- **AEA and RISE can play a role in advancing the field by partnering with other professional organizations.** Evaluation is a key part of many different fields, including public health and education. AEA could coordinate with other professional associations, such as the American Public Health Association (APHA) or the American Educational Research Association (AERA), to think through how to professionalize evaluation within these fields and increase the pipeline of diverse evaluators.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING CRE AND THE EVALUATION FIELD

- **Experience in diverse communities.** While an evaluator may not necessarily be of the same cultural background as the communities they are evaluating, cultural competence involves a broader world perspective, often gained from experience living or working with different cultural groups.

- **Openness to learning about cultural complexities.** Culturally competent evaluators exhibit humility about what they think they already know and are open to in-depth understanding of the nuances and complexities of inter- and intra-cultural influences and variations.

- **Flexibility in evaluation design and practice.** Rather than coming in with prescriptive evaluation strategies, culturally competent evaluators realize limitations to established approaches and are willing to adapt to honor different cultural contexts.

- **Rapport and trust with diverse communities.** Culturally competent evaluators prioritize relationship building with diverse communities, rather than viewing them solely as data sources. Relationships are viewed as mutually beneficial.

- **Acknowledgment of power differentials.** Culturally competent evaluators acknowledge the various power differentials possible in an evaluation, including those between the evaluator and those being evaluated, or between the commissioning entity (often a foundation) and those being evaluated.

- **Self-reflection for recognizing cultural biases.** Culturally competent evaluators take the time to become mindful of potential biases and prejudices and how they might be incorporated into their research.

- **Translation and mediation across diverse groups.** Culturally competent evaluators are skilled in translating jargon-laden evaluation findings to those who may not be trained in evaluation, or have high levels of education, literacy, or English-language fluency. Likewise, evaluators must also be adept in communicating cultural paradigms and community voice back to funders.

- **Comprehension of historical and institutional oppression.** This knowledge is critical for designing evaluations that integrate how historical and current social systems, institutions, and societal norms contribute to disparities among different communities.

- **Make the case for CRE and diverse staffing and their value in rigorous research.** The “real fight,” explained one field leader, is to explain to evaluation firms the “added value, methodologically, of diversity to their research projects.” Further, although progress has been made at building buy-in for CRE and participatory evaluation, there has also been something of a regression in the field particularly given the funding climate and a shift in emphasis toward increased accountability and experimental evaluations (particularly at the federal level). This field leader argues, “If you have a more diverse staff . . .you’re more likely to get at solutions that will address social inequities, systemic racism and the rest of it.”

- **Be cautious about connecting pipeline programs for evaluators of color too tightly to particular methodological approaches.** In the current funding climate, there is an increasing emphasis on “rigorous” experimental evaluation designs, and it is important that evaluators who come out of pipeline programs be versed in the principles of many different types of evaluation designs. Exposing evaluators to these different types of designs will help to make it easier for them to find work in the field. It is also important that CRE not be positioned as incompatible with more experimental approaches, but rather as an essential tool in the evaluation toolbox. One field leader explained, “You can be culturally responsive and do an evaluation for the federal government. . . . We should be saying to people, these things can happen side by side, they can be integrated.”

- **Integrate CRE evaluation knowledge and expertise into graduate school programs.** Several of the field leaders emphasized that the majority of graduate school programs in public health, education, and social work continue to lack a strong focus on evaluation and its role in helping to promote program improvement. Graduates of these programs, particularly those from nontraditional backgrounds, often do not know that the field of evaluation exists, and they do not build the skills and knowledge to do evaluation within their programs. A critical step in strengthening the pipeline for diverse evaluators is to make knowledge of and exposure to evaluation a key part of graduate school education in social science fields.

In conclusion, the convergence of interest in AEA’s, RISE’s, and many public and private funders’ focus on stimulating high-quality culturally responsive evaluation creates an important time for evaluators, researchers, and practitioners working with boys and men of color and other diverse populations to closely examine the extent to which the knowledge generated are authentic, rigorous, and useful. Ensuring that appropriate principles, frameworks, methodologies, and staffing are brought to bear on the evaluations of prevention and intervention efforts will be an important way to advance our collective knowledge for the advancement of the well-being of boys and men of color.
Endnotes

1 The Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation (http://www.eval.org/ccstatement) represents six years (2005–2011) of work by the task force. Over the years, interest has grown on the topic of CRE through the development of the Multiethnic Topical Interest Group, the Indigenous Peoples in Evaluation, and the inaugural business meeting of the Latina/o Responsive Evaluation Discourse Topical Interest Group (LA RED TIG) in 2015.


3 RISE for Boys and Men of Color is a $10 million field advancement effort that aims to better understand and strategically improve the lives, experiences, and outcomes of boys and men of color in the United States. RISE spans five fields (education, health, human services and social policy, juvenile and criminal justice, and workforce development) and focuses on four populations (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans).

4 Ten principles undergird the RISE theory of change and its strategic activities. These principles respond to longstanding needs, challenges, and opportunities in academic research, community-based and youth-serving organizations, government and policymaking, and media. More information is available on the RISE website: http://www.risebmoc.org/about#principles.


7 Publications developed as part of the Diversity in Health Evaluations series commissioned by the California Endowment include:

- **Voices from the Field: Health and Evaluation Leaders on Multicultural Evaluation**, offers different perspectives on multicultural evaluation and how to advance this approach in the health field.

- **Multicultural Health Evaluation: An Annotated Bibliography**, highlights key literature on the theory and practice of multicultural evaluation.

- **Shifting our Thinking: Moving from Traditional to Multicultural Evaluation in Health**, documents proceedings from a roundtable convening of funders, evaluators, and grantees recently held at the California Endowment.


15 The following field leaders, who serve on the RWJF Fellowship Advisory Committee, were interviewed: Jim Corrigan, Ricardo Millet, Tina Christie, and Tom Kelly.
RISE is a joint initiative co-led by Equal Measure and the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center.