

Bringing an Equity-Centered Framework to Research: Transforming the Researcher, Research Content, and Practice of Research

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Abstract

Since the mainstream racial awakening to pervasive and entrenched structural racism, many organizations have made commitments and adopted practices to increase workplace diversity, inclusion, and equity and embed these commitments in their organizational missions. A question often arises about how these concepts apply to research. This paper discusses how organizations can build on their specific commitments to diversity, inclusion, and equity by applying these principles in the research enterprise. RTI International's framework for conducting equity-centered transformative research highlights how incorporating principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity requires a departure from mainstream practice because of historical and intentional exclusion of these principles. Drawing on methodologies of culturally responsive evaluation, research, and pedagogy; feminist, Indigenous, and critical methodologies; community-based participatory research; and theories of social transformation, liberation, and racial justice, this organizing framework illustrates what this departure requires and how research can serve liberation and social justice by transforming the researcher, the research content, and the day-to-day practice of conducting research. Centering the work of seminal scholars and practitioners of color in the field, this paper provides a holistic framework that incorporates various research approaches and paradigms intended to shift power to minoritized and marginalized communities to achieve social transformation through research.

Introduction

Since the mainstream racial awakening, in 2020, to pervasive and entrenched structural racism, many institutions and organizations have made commitments and adopted practices to increase workplace diversity, inclusion, and equity and embed these commitments in their organizational missions. A question often arises about how these concepts apply to research. Often, the application is limited to the makeup of the research team, such as the racial and ethnic diversity of staff members, or to the focus of the research, such as highlighting racial disparities in specific outcomes, such as health. But if we look at diversity, inclusion, and equity not just through the lens of people but also through the lens of processes, the inclusion of these concepts should be mandated in the application of the day-to-day work of conducting research.

In this paper, we outline RTI International's framework for conducting equity-centered transformative research (the framework is relevant to both research and evaluation, but we use the word "research" throughout). Equity-centered transformative research departs from mainstream methodologies to serve liberation and social justice. This paper links the organizational transformation via specific commitments related to diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts and the application of these principles in the research enterprise. By linking commitment and application, researchers and research organizations can clearly articulate to themselves, communities, and clients, including foundations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies, how existing commitments extend further than the immediate impact on employees' well-being, to the larger goal of advancing equity for all.

This framework draws on methodologies of culturally responsive evaluation, research, and pedagogy; transformative, feminist, Indigenous, and critical methodologies; community-based participatory research (CBPR); and equity, liberatory, and racial justice research and evaluation practices detailed in gray literature, journal articles, and textbooks. These research paradigms provide viewpoints

not considered part of the mainstream research process and anchor many principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity. The framework also includes literature on transformational change or learning, decolonization, and liberation, including liberation psychology. Sources cited in this paper come from authors seminal in their respective fields or reflect a synthesis of the approach to guide researchers and practitioners. We were also mindful of centering scholars and practitioners from minoritized or marginalized backgrounds and those at the margins of what is considered traditional academic scholarship according to Western European standards.

The aim of this paper is to integrate these paradigms and approaches into one framework to demonstrate how they build and extend on one another for the ultimate goal: improving the well-being of minoritized and marginalized communities. For example, these approaches highlight the importance of engaging communities most affected by the research in the process of research, but goals and outcomes of this engagement vary. Indigenous paradigms and CBPR highlight the importance of community-led research so that community self-determination and liberation is an outcome of the research process. In culturally responsive evaluation, scholars describe the importance of community engagement to achieve multicultural validity. The approach mainly emphasizes the broader goals of social justice and equity as an outcome and does not specifically name liberation as the goal. Multicultural validity refers "to the accuracy and trustworthiness of understandings and actions across multiple, intersecting dimensions of cultural difference" (Kirkhart, 2013, p.2). Each set of methodologies highlights important nuances that are well-served under one framework.

This paper starts with a description of elements of equity-centered transformative research. Then, it illustrates how to operationalize the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and equity in research. Finally, it provides examples to support the application of these principles and references for future self-study.

Elements of Equity-Centered Transformative Research

Mainstream research paradigms (e.g., positivism) posit that data are neutral and that the research process can provide evidence that improves our world. However, research is a social enterprise that itself can reify inequity. Evidence and data are used to define and understand problems, determine solutions, and validate existing policies or strategies (Weiss, 1979). But who is—and is not—involved in this process? How are problems defined, and what issues are left unexamined? Which solutions are developed, and which are discarded? Research operating within a system of white supremacy can preserve this system (Caldwell & Bledsoe, 2019; House, 2017). Under the guise of Western conceptions of objectivity and neutrality, principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity have been excluded from mainstream research practice (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Therefore, incorporating these principles requires a departure from mainstream methodologies.

We provide an organizing framework to illustrate what this departure requires. An integrative, holistic framework based on various research approaches and paradigms that shifts power to minoritized and marginalized communities allows us to demonstrate the application of diversity, inclusion, and equity principles in research practice. This integration facilitates principles for research practice that require (1) transformation of the researcher, (2) an expansion of the research content, and (3) a shift in the process of conducting research. By understanding these distinct elements, research organizations or individual researchers can assess and target development opportunities to start the transformation of their research practice. Each aspect should be considered when implementing research practice that advances equity, but it is critical to start with the researcher. Researchers' biases can influence the entire research process, and their values and beliefs about equity and inclusion can affect the extent to which anti-racist methods or strategies are used or implemented. These three elements—researcher, research, and researching—are explained below.

Researcher

Research is not neutral. Researchers' worldviews and values, which are shaped by their identities and experiences, including the socialization process, influence how research is conducted. Using equity-centered transformative research methods requires researchers to develop a critical consciousness, in which they uncover and understand how their worldviews and values represent dominant frames and cultural values (Feagin, 2013), including white supremacy, and how these values manifest in their research practice. In addition to self-awareness, this approach requires researchers to continuously self-reflect to understand how dominant frames and their power and privilege play out in various contexts and to be responsive to those contexts (Symonette, 2009). This ensures the validity of the research, specifically interpersonal validity, which is "the soundness and trustworthiness of understandings warranted by one's uses of self as knower" (Symonette, 2015, p. 123). To combat oppressive and racist systems, researchers must possess knowledge, skills, and values or beliefs that support self-reflection and transformation (Ladson-Billings, 1995; López, 2016). Researchers should know why and how racism and oppression exist and perpetuate, hold values and beliefs that align with equity and justice, and possess skills to implement anti-oppressive practices (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Research

For research to be in service of equity and transformation, it should focus on or be committed to examining and dismantling systems of oppression (Community Science, 2021b; Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It is not enough for disparities to be highlighted; research should acknowledge current systems that keep inequities in place and explore and address them (Andrews et al., 2019). Racism and oppression can only be dismantled by examining, diagnosing, and treating the root conditions that perpetuate them.

Researching

Mainstream research practices have been developed within a system of white supremacy and according to Eurocentric cultural norms (Love, 2020; Smith, 2017; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). In fact, current statistical methods were developed to advance arguments of racial superiority as part of the eugenics movement (Zuberi, 2001). This calls into question whether methodologies originating under these oppressive systems perpetuate practices or approaches that continue this trajectory. Embedding principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the research process requires a shift in the day-to-day research work, such as new data collection approaches and/or analytical tools.

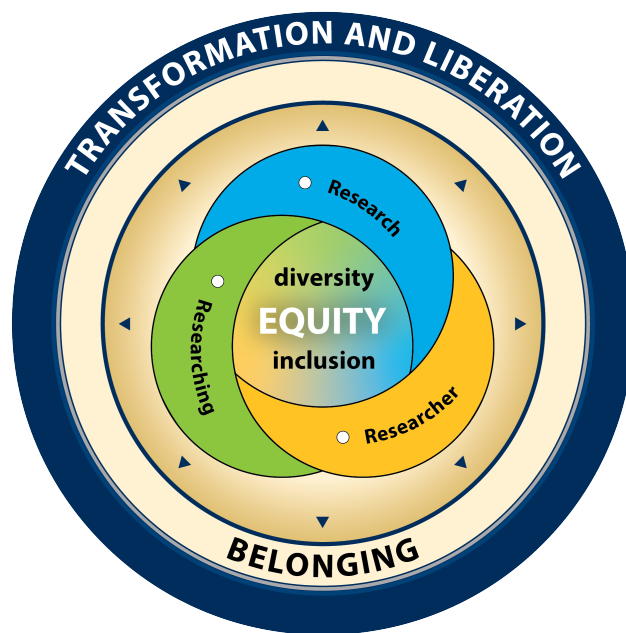
Equity Principles and Relationship to Research

In this section, we define the principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity within the researcher, research, and researching framework. We also explore their intended outcomes: belonging, transformation, and liberation. Current mainstream conceptualizations of the terms diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging arise from organizations in the United States that are committing to changes in their workplace cultures and policies. The application of these concepts to research requires thinking beyond workplaces as individual people who work at an organization (e.g., diversity as the presence of differences or equity as fair treatment of employees) and a recognition of the power of research to maintain or challenge social inequities. This paper provides new ways to conceptualize these principles.

This framework includes concepts of transformation and liberation to recognize the aspirational role of research in contributing to social change beyond alleviating immediate conditions and experiences for nondominant communities. We propose that belonging, transformation, and liberation are outcomes when we adhere to principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in research (Figure 1).

Therefore, we have deliberately placed these principles in a sequential order. However, it should be noted that these principles are interrelated and should not

Figure 1. Framework for equity-centered transformative research



be thought of as separate ideas. For example, being inclusive is a way to address power imbalances that result from systemic inequities. This framework affords us a way to highlight important distinctions in these concepts while acknowledging that there cannot be equity without inclusion; inclusion is not a meaningful concept when not considering diversity and belonging; and transformation and liberation will not occur until research practice addresses and incorporates diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Definitions

This section starts with definitions and then moves to describing each element.

Diversity



Valuing diversity requires acknowledging psychological, physical, and social differences as well as differences as a result of systemic cumulative advantages or systemic cumulative barriers to opportunities.

Common definitions of diversity in the organizational workplace literature focus on the presence of differences; differences are expressed in a multitude of forms, including race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, religion, political perspective,

and culture. The definition above recognizes that many of these “differences,” especially racialized differences, arose from valuation placed on certain phenotypical or physical characteristics for exploitation of labor (Kendi, 2016). The resulting systems of advantages and disadvantages privilege whiteness. This process of minoritization has led to diminished access to power and resources and negative outcomes across many measures of well-being.

Inclusion



Inclusion requires anchoring the voices, perspectives, and cultures of those most excluded from power and influence in the research process.

Traditional workplace definitions of inclusion focus on ensuring that people with different backgrounds and characteristics feel respected, valued, comfortable being their authentic self, and supported by the organization. The definition above recognizes why inclusion is necessary. Historically, “traditional” research approaches and methodologies have excluded marginalized and oppressed voices, diverse perspectives, lived experiences, recognition of power dynamics, and cultural conceptualizations (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007; Drawson et al., 2017; Smith, 2017). Legacies of colonialism and white supremacy place less value on cultural and knowledge systems developed outside of the Western world, which has resulted in the exclusion of these systems from mainstream research (Grosfoguel, 2013; Love, 2020; Smith, 2017). Institutions and organizations have also pushed minoritized scholars to the margin (McGee, 2021). Yet inclusion of these perspectives is necessary for building knowledge about effective solutions to society’s enduring problems and creating an organized force for social activism and change that leads to social transformation (Brooks, 2007; Drawson et al., 2017). Inclusion requires reversing mainstream practices so that communities and groups most affected by the research and those with lived experience of the systems under study lead research so that their perspectives, experiences, values, and beliefs anchor the research.

Equity



Equity exists when intersections of social identities, residence in marginalized communities, and/or experience with oppressive systems do not determine opportunities, access to resources, and outcomes in life. Achieving equity requires acknowledging, addressing, and dismantling systemic biases in mindsets, practices, and policies.

Persistent inequitable outcomes result from systemic biases and racism in interlocking systems, such as education, health, legal, and economic systems (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). The promotion of fairness and equal opportunity will only go so far to achieve equitable outcomes without the intentional disruption of current biased systems that undermine equity. Researchers should acknowledge and dismantle oppressive systems to allow for new systems that advance equity. Researchers should also employ methods that lead to the eradication of oppressive systems. For example, scholars have argued that traditional social science research methods developed by researchers in colonial academies have created and perpetuated racist stereotypes and policies that preserve racial hierarchies and inequities (Gillborn, 2010; Love, 2020; Smith, 2017; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Belonging



Belonging is the outcome of using principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity. Belonging is achieved when research serves those affected by it and the research process transforms to allow expanded views on what expertise means and to allow for multiple modes of knowledge and participation.

When researchers engage individuals or communities most affected by the research as experts in the research co-construction process, and when they use inclusive approaches to engagement that recognize and value diverse demonstrations of knowledge, expertise, and participation, those most marginalized will feel a sense of belonging (powell & Menendian, 2022). When this happens, social hierarchies between “researcher” and “participant” will no longer affect the research process. Researchers will not use the privilege conferred on them by social hierarchies to dictate the research process because they value centering the perspectives and expertise of the community and those most affected by the research.

Transformation and Liberation



Transformation and liberation are the outcomes of incorporating principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the research. Transformation is the conscious reconstruction of the status quo (beliefs, structures, policies, and practices) toward a new society. Liberation is achieved when conditions of inequity and oppression are eliminated such that all people are free.

The aim of equity-centered transformative research is to dismantle current oppressive systems and develop new equitable ones. This requires transformative change, which is the reframing of dominant attitudes, beliefs, and cultural values; the shifting of power dynamics; and the development of new policies and practices that maintain structures (Kania et al., 2018) and “govern collective, individual, and institutional practices” (Hillenbrand et al., 2015, p. 5). The intersection of all these elements underlies and reinforces oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994). For example, laws disenfranchise people who have been incarcerated and exclude them from exercising their political power and participating in civic life. Formal policies also prevent them from accessing public benefits, such as public housing, and many types of employment and educational experiences. The intersection of these policies and practices combined with unfavorable biases toward people impacted by incarceration perpetuates their status as second-class citizens (Alexander, 2010).

Systems can be transformed in service of liberation of minoritized and oppressed communities. Liberation is when all people are free of the oppressive systems of colonialism and white supremacy. To achieve liberation requires transformation at the personal and structural levels. Transformation at the personal level must occur first because one needs to be freed of patterns or ways of thinking that reflect current attitudes, beliefs, and norms to reimagine solutions (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010; Martín-Baró, 1994). At the individual level, liberation is transforming and healing from internalized oppression (Fanon, 2008), especially barriers that prevent self-determination (Moane, 2003), and experiencing a “shift of consciousness” (Morrell & O’Connor, 2002, p. xvii). This applies to all (including the researcher), not only those who experience oppression. Once personal

transformation has occurred within a community, the community can engage in collective action to bring about structural-level transformation of dominant attitudes, beliefs, power dynamics, and policies and practices. Only when power relations shift and those furthest from power lead the change will liberation happen (Lorde, 2007). Research can be a tool in this process. Research should support the creation of systems that transform how the world is envisioned, where all people are free from systems of colonialism and white supremacy and the voices, perspectives, and experiences of the most marginalized drive the creation of new systems to ensure their well-being. When individuals or communities furthest from power yet most affected by research lead the research, they will contribute to knowledge creation and knowledge systems that engender the creation of new policies, practices, and cultural systems (Love, 2020; Murray-Browne, 2019). Indigenous methodologies describe how knowledge creation serves a decolonizing purpose by rebalancing power as communities engage in self-determination (Drawson et al., 2017). The process of decolonization, “specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 21).

Application of Equity Principles to Elements of Researcher, Research, Researching

Table 1 describes the application of diversity, inclusion, equity, belonging, and transformation and liberation to each element of research. The following subsections include examples of how each concept would be applied in practice. The examples are meant to be illustrative and not exhaustive. We recommend readers review the resources cited in each section for additional study.

Researcher

Diversity



Researcher understands the importance of acknowledging and reflecting on their own biases and assumptions that influence research.

Each one of us brings a particular perspective and cultural worldview to our work that is influenced by where we were socialized, our identities, and our

past experiences. In research, this concept is aligned to positionality, which is the idea that researchers' social identities influence how they see the world and interact with others. The problem that this poses in research is when researchers are not aware of how they are imposing their worldview—the way they define reality—when engaging in research, especially when working across difference. Because we live and have been socialized in a system of white supremacy in which whiteness is privileged, we are socialized to have worldviews and norms that uphold this system (Mills, 1997).

Self-reflection is critical to engaging in equity-focused research (Andrews et al., 2019). Knowledge of oneself,

An Example of Positionality

An African American researcher is studying why African Americans frequent farmers markets at lower rates than the rest of the population. An examination of her positionality and how it affects the research would include the acknowledgment of her privilege and power that comes with her education and socioeconomic status while recognizing the marginalization she has experienced as an African American woman. Although the similar racial background she shares with participants allows her entry into the community, her perspective on what healthy eating looks like may vary from participants' perspectives. To not impose this worldview requires her self-reflection on her assumptions about healthy eating, where she comes from, and how she may influence the data collection and analysis process.

Table 1. Diversity, inclusion, equity, belonging, and transformation and liberation applied to researcher, research, and researching

	Diversity	Inclusion	Equity	Belonging	Transformation and Liberation
Researcher	Researcher understands the importance of acknowledging and reflecting on their own biases and assumptions that influence research.	Researcher values authentic partnerships with communities most affected by research, understands the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, and knows how to create an inclusive, collaborative environment when engaging in partnerships.	Researcher possesses values and beliefs oriented toward anti-racism and anti-oppression and understands how research can be used as a tool for both oppression and social justice.	Researcher's sense of self expands to include values and beliefs of communities that serve as authentic partners in the research.	Researcher undergoes their own individual transformation to support the transformation and liberation of others.
Research	Research acknowledges how social and political factors shape experiences of individuals who do not reflect the dominant culture or norm.	Research acknowledges the social and political context and culture of communities where the research is conducted.	Research aims to dismantle the root causes of systemic inequities.	When researchers use principles of inclusion during the research process and engage communities in intentional and authentic partnerships, research findings provide value to those most affected by the conditions being researched.	Research is in service of the creation of new systems that dismantle oppressive, white supremacist, and colonial systems.
Researching	Research approach privileges theories, methodologies, and processes that are rooted in groups that have been most marginalized and/or based in the culture of participants and communities in the research.	Research process is grounded in intentional and authentic partnership with research participants and communities most affected by the research.	Anti-racist or anti-oppressive research methods are used throughout the research process.	Research is conducted so that all expressions of knowledge and participation styles are valued throughout the process.	Communities and individuals most affected by the research have ownership of the research process so that they are leading the process toward their liberation.

including one's values, biases, and perspectives, is critical to knowing how and when one's biases and worldviews influence the research process, interactions with research participants, and the context in which research occurs (Symonette, 2009). Reflection is one of the first steps to take in research but should also be a continuous practice throughout the project (Andrews et al., 2019; Symonette, 2015). Symonette's (2015) self-reflection framework highlights the importance of contextualizing this reflection for each project to achieve interpersonal validity. In this framework, one first looks inward to understand the self, then at the self in relation to how others perceive them (i.e., How do I perceive others as perceiving or receiving me showing up in a world of many "we"s and "they"s?), then at the context of the evaluation or research study and how the evaluator shows up in the related work and tasks, and finally at the relationship between the researcher and the social context in which the work occurs (e.g., social norms, ways of knowing, power dynamics).

When conducting research with communities of color, one should also understand one's racialized experiences and how those have formed a racialized identity (Milner, 2007). Milner (2007) suggests that not understanding one's racialized experiences may cause harm for communities of color. For example, if researchers value the concept of "colorblindness" ("I don't see race"), they will be unable to see and give voice to experiences with discrimination and racism that people of color face. Researchers can take the following steps to examine positionality and bias:

- Engage a diverse staff of researchers on the project team; ensure staff from nondominant backgrounds have leadership positions on the project and are not tokenized.
- Use a positionality map to examine identity and positionality and how identity influences research (see Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, for a sample tool; an adaptation of this tool and accompanying reflection questions can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7459976> and <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7459987>, respectively). Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) outline how a positionality map can be useful during different aspects of the research process, such as when designing methodology

or preparing to interact with participants. Some questions to ask during this process include the following:

- What social identities and groups do I belong to?
- How might they color the lens through which I view the world?
- In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? (Milner, 2007)
- Use Symonette's (2015) self-reflection framework, Integrated Evaluator Quadrant Model, to understand and reflect on yourself "in action" in each context.
- Create a positionality statement for the project (see Castillo & Gillborn, 2022, for an example).
- Reflect on conscious and unconscious biases brought to the research before and during the research process. Andrews and colleagues (2019) highlight a few questions to surface biases: "Who or what makes you uncomfortable, and why? To whom do you give second chances, and why? Whom or what do you judge based on stereotypes?"

Inclusion



Researcher values authentic partnerships with communities most affected by research, understands the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, and knows how to create an inclusive collaborative environment when engaging in partnerships.

Researchers must value and see the benefits of engaging in equitable partnerships with communities in the research process. They must not only value the perspectives and experiential knowledge of communities and view them as equally important as the academic knowledge that researchers possess but also be willing to cocreate knowledge through these partnerships (Minkler, 2004).

Once researchers embark on these partnerships, they should know how to and have the skills to equalize these relationships that are historically laden with power dynamics. Fostering inclusion with partners requires an awareness of when power dynamics and

mistrust between researchers and participants might surface and why. It also includes methods for building trust and elevating the voice and perspectives of those who have not previously been given power in the research process (Chicago Beyond, 2019). Researchers should possess the knowledge and awareness of past and current abuses of research, such as researcher deception and exploitation, that have caused mistrust between many communities and researchers (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Washington, 2006) so as to not replicate these harms. They also must be open to and value the time it takes to build trust (Chicago Beyond, 2019) and have knowledge of appropriate strategies for building and maintaining trust. Wallerstein (1999) describes challenges of not adequately addressing the extent of community mistrust despite established relationships with community partners.

Engaging inclusively also requires an understanding of how racism and discrimination can mediate the ability to create authentic and trusting relationships (Minkler, 2004). Researchers often work across difference, especially because researchers may not reflect the racial, cultural, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds of the communities they partner with. Without reflection on their positionality or how biases might surface in their interactions with participants, researchers might perpetuate these dynamics. Possessing cultural humility, or the ability to continuously self-reflect and be willing to learn about others' perspectives and experiences, will support working across difference (Minkler, 2004). Although no one person can be "competent" in another culture, researchers should intentionally learn about cultural practices or norms to support inclusive engagement when interacting across difference (Kien, 2007). Researchers can take the following steps to foster inclusion:

- Understand the social and political context of communities. The section on inclusion in research content outlines steps to understanding the context of the specific community where the research is taking place that can support researchers' use of inclusive interactions, such as understanding racial dynamics and power differentials in the specific location or community.

- Educate oneself about the cultural norms of a community. Kien (2007, p. 6) outlines various steps and questions one can ask before entering a community. These include partnering with a cultural translator or bridge and attending community events before engaging members from the community in the research. Cultural translators or bridges are "familiar with the cultural group" or "may be able to explain basic characteristics of the cultural group" (Kien, 2007, p. 5). Recommended questions to ask oneself before entering a community include, "Who can help me understand this cultural group and some of its basic norms? Who can introduce me and help me gain entry into the group? What nonverbal communication and rules of conduct did I observe in this group? What have others learned about what it takes to work with this group? What are some of their mistakes that I should be careful not to repeat?"
- Understand how to create inclusive environments when engaging individuals and groups most affected by the research. This includes inclusive facilitation techniques (Community Science, 2021a) and understanding how interpersonal interactions can influence feelings of inclusion. Researchers should be aware of how comments or actions may subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally express a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a minoritized group, be careful not to inflict these microaggressions, and be prepared to intervene if they arise.

Equity



Researcher possesses values and beliefs oriented toward anti-racism and anti-oppression and understands how research can be used as a tool for both oppression and social justice.

Dismantling systemic racism and oppression through research requires a commitment to equity and justice. Researchers should hold specific values and beliefs to develop and apply approaches that challenge the status quo and transform systems that lead to liberation (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These values and beliefs should move beyond general platitudes of equality and justice to understand how one's own beliefs and actions perpetuate white supremacy, racism, and oppression. Bonilla-Silva (2015)

highlights how a colorblind ideology in contemporary American society perpetuates racism despite articulated commitments to equality. Therefore, it is critical to unpack one's values and examine how actions and practices align with these values. For example, white supremacy culture is evident in all facets of society, including research work (Love, 2020; Okun, n.d.). Researchers should reject a deficit ideology—the perspective that motivational or cognitive deficits are the cause of inequities—and the pathologizing of communities, value the shift of power to communities, and possess critical awareness of how research methods have been used to perpetuate oppression (López, 2016; Love, 2020). Researchers can take the following steps to develop this consciousness:

- Educate oneself on the history of white supremacy, how it came to be, how it is currently perpetuated, and what one can do to dismantle it. Numerous books (e.g., Kendi, 2016), podcasts (e.g., *Seeing White*, *Scene on Radio* season 2), and documentaries (e.g., Raoul Peck's *Exterminate All the Brutes*) on this topic have proliferated in recent years. Consultants and organizations provide numerous trainings for individuals and organizations as well.
- Understand white supremacy culture (Okun, n.d.) and how it manifests in research practice.
- Engage in anti-oppression training or ally training that supports the development of critical consciousness and values.

Belonging



Researcher's sense of self expands to include values and beliefs of communities that serve as authentic partners in the research.

Research on close relationships suggests that interactions between individuals and those with different backgrounds can result in individuals' self-expansion of their values and beliefs to incorporate the values and beliefs of others (Aron et al., 1992). Expansion of the self to include others happens when researchers start to include the needs, motivations, and values of community members or research participants as part of their own identity. When this process occurs, evidence suggests that individual

motivation transforms from a “me” to “we” focus (Finkel & Rusbult, 2008). The consequence of this self-expansion may be researchers becoming more empathetic to the needs and lived experience of community members and seeing research participants as human beings, not research subjects. Others have also argued that changing conceptions of self and others, in this case researchers and community members, is critical to achieving justice (powell, 2012). An essential mechanism in this process is enlarging the circle of human concern to a more-expansive definition of “we” (powell & Toppin, 2021). Expanding conceptions of oneself and addressing narrow conceptions of “we” will lead to research that is centered in community needs.

Transformation and Liberation



Researcher undergoes their own individual transformation to support the transformation and liberation of others.

By engaging in critical self-reflection and engaging in practices that challenge white supremacy and oppression, researchers may go through their own individual transformation (Mertens, 2017). Through this process, they can develop a critical consciousness, which is the ability to recognize and address systems of oppression, especially in their own lives (Freire, 2000). Individual transformation occurs when individuals change their worldviews or frames of reference and subsequent actions (Mezirow, 1997). When researchers begin to critically question their current research practice and identify how they have perpetuated oppressive systems through this practice, this sets the stage for personal transformation. For example, they may start to shift their worldview from research as neutral or objective to research as inherently biased. This new worldview leads to subsequent practices that shift what they have traditionally done before. Transformation can also occur as a result of engaging with communities in ways that they have not before and engaging in perspective taking—in other words, taking another person's or groups' point of view when perceiving the world (Symonette, 2009). Transformation of the researcher must occur for the research to be in service of transformation of and liberation from oppressive systems.

Research

Diversity



Research acknowledges how social and political factors shape experiences of individuals who do not reflect the dominant culture or norm.

When explaining variation in outcomes by demographic characteristics, research should provide structural explanations for why disparities are produced (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Often, research findings imply a deficit perspective or stance about groups because of the focus on disparities without structural explanations (First Nations Development Institute, 2018). A deficit perspective can be defined as a “person-centered” explanation for outcomes that relies on “motivational or cognitive deficits” of the individual (Valencia, 2002). These explanations or narratives perpetuate stigmatization of communities. Instead, the research content should acknowledge social and political causes of disparities. For example, Gross (2020) recommends that information on “structural context” such as “key policies, relationships, current and past access to resources” should be included and considered throughout a research report, not solely at the end of the discussion. Conducting a root cause analysis before engaging in the study can help identify the current and historical policies and practices that affect outcomes (see our explanation of a root cause analysis in our section on equity in research content). Some questions to ask to guide the inclusion of these factors in the study include the following:

- How did things get this way? What historical policies and practices shaped the neighborhood, community, or system where you see inequitable outcomes?
- What are current policies and practices that maintain these inequities? How do systems (e.g., education system, health care system) intersect to maintain these inequities?

Inclusion



Research acknowledges the social and political context and culture of communities where the research is conducted.

The research content should include the context of the community where the study takes place. Not only does this process help inform *how* one engages with the community (Andrews et al., 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2008), it ensures that findings and recommendations do not perpetuate systems in the community that cause harm (Bledsoe & Hopson, 2009). Moreover, a consideration of context allows the achievement of multicultural validity, which Kirkhart (2010) describes as the congruence between theory and context. Researchers can take the following steps to understand context:

- Andrews and colleagues (2019, p. 10) provide reflective questions that researchers can answer before the research study: “What are the historical and cultural antecedents of the community? (For example, what is the history of racial dynamics in the community?) Who is affected—positively or negatively—by the issue you plan to study? Why? How? How is power distributed in the community? What power differentials exist within the community? (For example, are elders treated as gatekeepers or final authority?)”
- Kirkhart (2010, p. 405) provides various dimensions of the context to acknowledge and incorporate: “Learn the history of this community and of the evaluand within it; Reflect on shared aspirations, values, and ideals and how they are represented in the institutions and governance structures of this context; Notice how power is distributed in this context through both formal and informal structures.”

Equity



Research aims to dismantle the root causes of systemic inequities.

Research often examines the manifestations of systems, such as inequitable outcomes in health or education, but less-frequently addresses or explores causes for those outcomes that are rooted in structural and institutionalized racism or other

systems of oppression (Brown et al., 2019) or detail how racism can be “confronted” (Kohli et al., 2017). Irons (2019) articulates the importance of understanding why inequities exist: to move away from identifying interventions or solutions that fix some aspects of the individual “deficiencies” to fixing the causes of inequities that would lead to improved outcomes. Research should uncover the systemic causes of inequities to provide solutions for practitioners and policy makers to transform systems (Andrews et al., 2019). This requires linking modern-day policies and practices to the history of how systems were created. Hardeman and colleagues (2022) recommend that researchers improve the measurement of structural racism to inform the development of anti-racist policies. Researchers can implement the following practices to focus research on systems:

- To identify areas of focus for the study:
 - Conduct a root cause analysis to determine the focus of the study and/or research questions to include (Andrews et al., 2019). The *Youth Researchers for a New Education System (YRNES) Report* (Bacha et al., 2008) illustrates an example in which a diverse group of youth in New York City conducted an inquiry on youth’s perspectives on public schools through a participatory action research project. The youth conducted analysis and identified systems, ideologies, attitudes, goals, and policies that perpetuated inequities in the New York City school system.
 - Reframe a program, theory of change, or logic model to include systemic factors (Community Science, 2021b) to drive the program theory, study measurement, or both.
- To study or analyze oppression or racism in measurement or analysis:
 - Use factor analysis to analyze root causes (Hawn Nelson et al., 2020).
 - Ask participants about their experiences with discrimination or oppression within the social condition or program being studied to surface root causes.

Root Cause Analysis

Conducting a root cause analysis requires researchers to define the problem or condition that is the focus of the research project and identify the current policies, practices, resource flows, and narratives or mental models that maintain the conditions or inequities (the trunk of the tree) and their historical antecedents (the roots). A version of this activity can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7460008>.

Belonging



When researchers use principles of inclusion during the research process and engage communities in intentional and authentic partnerships, research findings provide value to those most affected by the conditions being researched.

Evidence or information generated by the research creates knowledge necessary to improve conditions or issues participants most care about, including bringing about transformation (Brush et al., 2020). CBPR is an approach to research that engages communities as equal partners in the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). CBPR is grounded in the principles of “self-determination, liberty, and equity and reflects an inherent belief in the ability of people to accurately assess their strengths and needs and their right to act upon them” (Minkler, 2004, p. 684) Wallerstein and Duran (2010) highlight how the health research field has documented the impact of CBPR on “system-change outcomes such as policy changes, practice and program changes such as greater sustainability and equity, and community capacity and empowerment outcomes” (p. S43). Their conceptual logic model of CBPR, developed through a systematic literature review, also details changes in power relations, transformed social and economic conditions, and a reduction in health inequities when CBPR is used (Wallerstein et. al, 2008).

Transformation and Liberation



Research is in service of the creation of new systems that dismantle oppressive, white supremacist, and colonial systems.

Laenui (2000), as described in Chilisa (2019), illustrates how research can participate in the dismantling of colonialism by supporting communities as they use their own knowledge

systems and theories to imagine new systems and possibilities that can be a blueprint for transformation. Research-generated findings and knowledge can be in service of communities' collective action toward liberation and decolonization by supporting the analysis of current conditions and the development of solutions. For example, research can help unpack current inequities in the system and the root causes of these inequities, supporting community members' liberation from internalized notions that their current situation is the fault of their own shortcomings and instead understanding the failure of a rigged system (M. E. Hall, 2020). This can only occur by redistributing power to communities so they own the research process and use methodologies and knowledge systems indigenous to them (Chilisa, 2019; Love, 2020). For example, the Young Women's Freedom Center (YWFC) youth participatory action research project examined the impact of institutional systems on women, girls, and transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals in San Francisco (Melendrez & Young Women's Freedom Center, 2019). YWFC believes that "those most impacted are best positioned to guide the work of the YWFC and to transform the world." The knowledge created by research may not always be in service of liberation and transformation and therefore requires an intentional commitment and focus (Laenui, 2000; Murray-Browne, 2019). For example, the researcher can ask if their research aims to envision a new system and dismantle colonial systems (Murray-Browne, 2019).

Researching

Diversity



Research approach privileges theories, methodologies, and processes that are rooted in groups that have been most marginalized and/or based in the culture of participants and communities in the research.

Knowledge systems, frameworks, and methods of inquiry exist in many cultures, but using traditional research methods privileges those from the Western-dominant perspective (Hall & Tandon, 2017). Incorporating frameworks and approaches from nondominant cultures or marginalized groups should be part of the research process, especially when the

research is conducted in communities that do not reflect the dominant culture (Tillman, 2002).

In addition, research should be responsive to communities by centering their cultural systems throughout the process (Hood et al., 2015; Trainor & Bal, 2014). Conducting research is not neutral; it is inherently situated in a cultural context. Because doing research is often conducted from the perspective of the dominant cultural context, though, it is difficult to notice. Culture can be defined by "a cumulative body of learned and shared behavior, values, customs and beliefs common to a particular group or society" (Frierson et al., 2002, p. 63). Literature on culturally responsive evaluation and research outlines numerous considerations for how culture can be considered throughout the research cycle. Researchers can take the following steps to privilege nondominant cultures or frameworks:

- Engage in self-reflection to understand the social systems where the work is taking place (Symonette, 2015). One can ask, "Whose ways of being, doing, or engaging matter and are thus privileged? Who authorizes or decides, and how?" (Symonette, 2015, p. 125).
- Ask questions to guide reflection during the implementation of day-to-day tasks:
 - Whose worldviews are our research reflecting or prioritizing?
 - Are frameworks and instruments aligned with the culture and context of communities or based on researchers' cultural lens?
 - Does the evaluation design fit the cultural context and values of communities?
- Use instruments or measures that reflect cultural norms of communities. Whenever possible, use instruments that were validated with communities participating in the study, or adapt current measures or instruments with help from community leaders (Hood et al., 2015; Public Policy Associates, 2015). Chicago Beyond (2019) highlights how measures for outcomes are rooted in cultural norms that may not be appropriate for different communities. It suggests asking, "What are the commonly used metrics for this type of work, and what inequities, historical or present, are

built into them? What assumptions are built into how these metrics are used?” For example, Chicago Beyond questions measuring “overcrowding” as an outcome for participants from a culture that values living with extended family or measuring “wealth accumulation” from families with norms of sending money to extended or immediate family.

- Use culturally responsive approaches to collecting data that privilege cultural traditions of communities in which the study is taking place. J. N. Hall (2020) describes an approach to focus groups that is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing through a “non-Western” approach called Fa’afaletui when conducting research in a New Zealand Māori community.
- Use theoretical frameworks that are rooted in the cultural systems and context of communities. For example, Community Learning Theory originated within the context of experiences of the Chicano Movement of the 1970s. The theory builds on multilingual and multicultural assets in the learning process, acknowledging the importance of relationships and trust that provide the foundation for change (Vargas, 2008). It can be used to understand community-led movements and empowerment approaches in the Chicano community.

Inclusion



Research process is grounded in intentional and authentic partnership with research participants and communities most affected by the research.

Indigenous, feminist, and culturally responsive evaluation approaches underscore the need for collaborative partnerships with individuals or communities most affected by the research and those with lived experience throughout the research process, especially when they are themselves participants in the research (Drawson et al. 2017; Hood et al., 2015). Approaches such as CBPR and empowerment evaluation provide frameworks for how researchers and evaluators can engage communities in the research process. These approaches are oriented toward community empowerment and self-determination to achieve outcomes of transformation and liberation (Miller & Campbell, 2006; Wallerstein, 1999). In both of

Collaboration Engagement Matrix

One way to identify the different roles community members can play in the research is to use a collaboration engagement matrix to identify where in the research process they will have decision-making authority. Ideally, they are engaged at all points, but most importantly, they should be engaged in the direction and focus of the study. An example of a collaboration engagement matrix can be found at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7465721>.

these approaches, collaboration should be equitable and community members should participate fully as decision makers in all aspects of the research process to determine what is studied as well as what and how data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported. Decision-making is different from consultation with communities about the research process (Arnstein, 1969). In consultation, communities provide input, but researchers or funders have ultimate decision-making authority. Decision-making requires the transfer of power so that community members can make decisions about the study, especially the focus, with support from researchers. Creating clear expectations for these relationships and how partners will work together (e.g., establishing memoranda of understanding) will help partnerships be successful (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, 2011).

Various dimensions can indicate the quality of community engagement in the research process and whether these approaches attain the intended goals of empowerment and self-determination (Miller & Campbell, 2006). One dimension is the degree of inclusiveness of the engagement. Researchers should be aware of the diversity of who is represented in these partnerships, including racial and ethnic diversity, if applicable, and other dimensions, such as age and lived experience, which may contribute to variance in perspectives (Aguilar-Gaxiola et. al., 2022; Wallerstein et al., 2008). In evaluations of programs or initiatives, it is important to include both program implementers and program recipients when considering those most affected by the research project. Researchers should also be aware of power dynamics within groups of community participants, ensuring that groups furthest from power are centered in this process. Often, those with the most

power, time, or resources are the ones who participate most in these spaces despite the intention to engage everyone.

Researchers should forge relationships with the community intentionally, even before the research study starts (Bledsoe & Hopson, 2009; Drawson et al., 2017) and should sustain them after the projects are finished, if possible; these relationships should not be viewed as mainly a “transactional” enterprise (Aguilar-Gaxiola et. al., 2022, p.7). Researchers can take the following steps to create intentional partnerships:

- Ask questions to guide reflection when engaging participants and community members in the process (the following questions are taken or adapted from Andrews and colleagues [2019] and Nelson and Greenberg [2017]):
 - Are we exploring what matters to communities or what participants want to know?
 - Have researchers identified how answers to research questions will benefit communities?
 - Are we involving communities in the process and respecting their reality?
 - Are we prioritizing the needs of communities or constraints on budget, time, and so on?
 - How much time will key collaborators or community members need to invest in the research project?
- Use participatory research approaches, including action research or CBPR, to engage participants in the research process.
- Create structures and processes to support intentional partnerships in which decision-making is shared and to create inclusive environments where participants are fully valued.
 - When communities or those affected by the research represent various racialized or minoritized identities, ask these questions to ensure those furthest from power are centered (the following questions are taken from Stewart [2017]):
 - » Who is in the room? Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?

- » Have everyone's ideas been heard? Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?
- » Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong? Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?
- Ensure all aspects of the evaluation process are accessible to communities, noting language needs and accommodations. Follow principles of universal design and inclusive meetings and facilitation.
- Create structures and systems to support two-way communication.
- Provide capacity building and training for community partners to partner authentically.
- Develop a common understanding of research terms and processes.
- Develop agreements to guide partnerships.
- Build flexibility into the project to allow for meaningful community engagement throughout all stages of the research.
- Budget for compensating community members and/or organizations for their time and expertise.

Equity



Use of anti-racist or anti-oppressive research methods throughout the research process.

Mainstream research methods can perpetuate oppression and racism by failing to unmask the role oppression and racism play in outcomes. They can also perpetuate harmful narratives and stereotypes about groups that continue to dehumanize and erase. How and what researchers collect data on, and how they analyze and report data, influences what they understand about conditions they study. For example, the practice of using race as a predictor of outcomes (e.g., health or poverty) perpetuates the notion that race is a cause of differential outcomes, which in turn perpetuates cultural deficit narratives and stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that much of social science research is “damage centered,” documenting the damage and pain of nondominant communities, which intensifies

stigmatizing narratives. Researchers can take the following steps to embed equity in the research process:

- Ask reflective questions to inform aspects of the research process (the following questions are adapted from Kien [2007] and Nelson and Greenberg [2017]):
 - How might choices made based on this analysis perpetuate stereotypes, injustice, or a savior complex?
 - Are we focusing our analysis on participants who are exemplary to elevate communities' assets?
 - How do we use language to actively name oppression?
 - How do we use language to humanize and not stigmatize communities?
 - Will the findings place a stigma on a certain group or give the group power to access resources and improve their situation?
- Use a “desire-based” framework that “interrupts” narratives of damaged communities so research can serve as a tool for empowerment while also documenting the systems of oppression (Tuck & Yang, 2014).
- Use a mixed-methods approach to researching racism and inequity, using qualitative data to unpack counternarratives that often plague studies solely examining disparities (Mertens 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
- When examining outcomes, explain why race is being used in the study and ensure the definition of race is a sociopolitical, not biological, one (Boyd, et al., 2020).
- Ensure overrepresentation of groups systematically excluded from research or data collection efforts to ensure adequate sample sizes when disaggregating data. Data collection and disaggregation practices continue to “other” certain groups, such as Native American and American Indian communities, because of small sample sizes (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2020). These practices marginalize certain communities because they are not represented in the data, and therefore, policies and programs are not created to address those communities' concerns or issues.
- Use an intersectional lens to unpack how racism and other oppressive systems interact (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
- Refrain from using white outcomes as the “norm” or standard to which outcomes of people of color are compared (Andrews et al., 2019) because this comparison fails to recognize structural barriers that created these outcomes. Instead, focus on improving outcomes for all groups.
- Consider the denominator and model selection for quantitative analysis (Castillo & Gillborn, 2022) and be transparent about the limitations and implications. For example, Castillo & Gillborn (2022) outline various instances in which researchers concluded that police were not racially biased toward Black people, but these findings were skewed by who researchers included in their study sample. Variable selection should also be purposeful. Castillo & Gillborn recommend that researchers ask critical questions when creating models, especially variables that “control away” racism. Because racism and discrimination affect socioeconomic status, when controlling for socioeconomic status, the model also controls for effects of racism. Being intentional and transparent about these decisions allows research consumers to understand how racism affects the research process.
- Ensure research products and processes do not perpetuate stereotypical narratives about certain groups. Use asset- and strengths-based narratives that counter deficit narratives (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017).

Belonging



Researchers value all expressions of knowledge and participation styles throughout the research process.

This outcome is similar to mainstream definitions of belonging. In this case, it pertains specifically to participants' sense of belonging in the research process. When communities are included as authentic partners in the research or even lead the research, this can challenge traditional academic notions of what is considered knowledge and how it is expressed

to include theories or methods indigenous to the participating communities (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Research processes grounded in communities' local or cultural knowledge systems and ways of being can contribute to their sense of belonging in the research process.

Transformation and Liberation



Communities and individuals most affected by the research have ownership of the research process.

Liberation occurs when members of a community experience personal transformation and work toward structural transformation through self-determination and collective action. Research can be in service of transformation and liberation when individuals or communities most affected by the oppressive social conditions that cause inequities can create knowledge and work toward the solutions they have identified. For this to occur, they must own the research process and direct the research toward the types of knowledge they want to create about the systems they want to transform and what those systems should look like (e.g., policies, practices, values and beliefs). Marginalized and nondominant communities should have the power to generate solutions that directly affect their lives. Additionally, they have the most intimate knowledge of oppressive systems, which privileged groups do not (Brooks, 2007). When they have ownership of research, they create new knowledge that can aid in the process of transforming the most-oppressive systems that affect their lives (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

Ownership of the research process includes deciding the focus of the research; participating in decision-making about the design of the study; engaging in data collection, analysis, and interpretation; communicating the research findings; and developing policies or practices based on the research findings (see Framework for Community Decision Making in Study Planning and Implementation at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7459914>). Researchers should work in partnership with communities involved in various stages of the research process, providing technical expertise throughout, such as providing training on research methods, so community

members can lead or co-lead aspects of the process to ensure their research interests and worldviews anchor the process (Collins et al., 2018).

An example of a participatory process detailed in Melendrez and Young Women's Freedom Center's (2019) youth participatory action research project demonstrates how youth can lead and participate in using research to examine harmful systems and develop solutions. The project examined the effect of institutional systems on women, girls, and transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. Women, girls, and transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals led the research process, engaged research participants in the review of findings, and oversaw how researchers represented them. Researchers trained three youth organizers for 3 months on research methods, and all researchers received a certification in collaborative institutional training with topics in research, ethics, compliance, and safety, which enabled youth researchers to be co-investigators in the study.

Conclusion

Integrating principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the research is an unlearning process. It requires a departure from mainstream research methods taught in colleges and universities across the United States and the type of research funders seek. The researcher, research, and researching are fundamentally transformed once principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity are integrated in the foundation of the research endeavor, and the application of these principles will contribute to belonging and transformation and liberation.

This framework offers alternative definitions of diversity, inclusion, and equity to acknowledge social dimensions of research and its role in contributing to oppression and white supremacy. The inclusion of transformation and liberation articulates how research can contribute to social movements that aim to transform current systems that continue to oppress communities. Framing the research approach in alignment with these concepts allows research organizations to connect their commitments to

transform workplaces according to these principles to the day-to-day activities of research.

The strategies presented in this paper to embed principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in research are by no means exhaustive, nor are the examples prescriptive. They are starting points for researchers to explore approaches and provide an aspirational guide for the trajectory of their research practice. For example, this framework can provide a guide for how one can progress by focusing first on diversity, then moving to inclusion, and then moving to equity. However, a nonnegotiable element of an equity-centered transformative research approach is partnering with communities or individuals most affected by the research throughout the research process. Without this partnership, transformation and liberation cannot occur. Communities or individuals most affected should have the agency to direct the changes that will affect their lives.

As funding and governmental agencies ask for research to center principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity, they should acknowledge the need for communities to be part of the process and support

the use of these approaches. One example of an investment in this approach is the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute Science of Engagement initiative, which seeks to build an evidence base related to community engagement for clinical research. The Equitable Evaluation Initiative, which seeks to transform foundations' evaluation practices, also values community engagement as a critical pillar of an equitable approach. The hope is that with continued investment and support this approach will no longer be ancillary but will be an integral practice for all researchers.

This integrative, holistic framework based on multiple methodologies and approaches demonstrates how the research process can create knowledge and evidence in service of social transformation and liberation. Although the goals of transformation and liberation are aspirational and may be unattainable in one lifetime, if the field acknowledges that research can reify inequity and creates a new normal in which all researchers embed principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in research, we can collectively move toward that goal.

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