

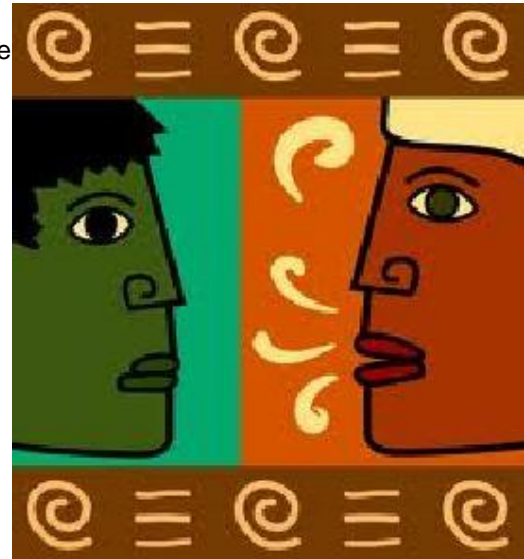
Including Other Voices through Culturally Competent Evaluation

A few years ago the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center set out to strengthen the cultural competency of our tobacco control evaluation efforts. As it has been a while since we focused any training and conversations on this, and because many new evaluators and project directors have come on board, it may be a good time to recall what culturally competent evaluation means and what we can do to achieve it.

Evaluation activities take place in our diverse communities. Some activities we even call "face-to-face." We interview individuals, talk with groups, observe behavior, and try to make sense of the information we gather. In all these interactions and activities, culture is at work--the culture of the data collector, the culture of the agency that conducts the tobacco control campaign, and the culture of the environment and the people that are at the center of our research.

If evaluation is conducted in a culturally competent manner, it generates and interprets data in a manner that includes the voices and cultures of the people or groups who are likely to be affected by the policy.

To achieve this, however, requires us to constantly monitor our decisions and assumptions. If we operate on auto-pilot we tend to default to what we know--- that which is most familiar and comfortable to us. We frequently see this evidenced in the public opinion intercept survey---one of the most commonly used methods to collect information. Often, intercept surveys produce highly selective samples because interviewers tend to approach and speak to people who look friendly, speak English fairly well, and are of the interviewer's own peer group. This of course introduces a bias into the data because only a select group of people will be represented in the sample.



Recognize your own biases

Inclusiveness requires a special effort. First, evaluators and data collectors must recognize their own cultural biases, and by "culture" we mean not only ethnic background, but also other characteristics that define large groups of people such as social status, sexual orientation, level of education, professional affiliation, alternative lifestyle, etc. Recognizing one's own culture (which is generally multifaceted and combines some of the mentioned groups) enables us to see our own bias or understand the lens through which we see the world. To do evaluation well, that lens needs to be cleared as much as possible.

At the same time, we need to approach cultural situations and groups that are different from us in a way that minimizes distance, be it by working with cultural brokers who can help us get access to and interpret another culture for and with us, or by gaining as much knowledge as possible about the culture we are encountering (preferably both of these approaches are at work). Let's try to learn the other's language, and not just in the linguistic sense.

TCEC has developed a number of resources to help facilitate this process. One quite obvious (but not the only) barrier between data collectors and individuals may be that the person or group targeted for an evaluation activity may not understand the questions and instructions because his/her English is limited. Recognizing the need for data collection instruments in different languages, TCEC has had a select number of instruments translated into Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Hmong and has made them available on the TCEC website.

Tips about cultural norms of priority populations

In addition, with the help of some tobacco control projects, TCEC has developed a number of "Culture in Evaluation" guides intended to help evaluators work with various priority groups (check out the "[Culture in Evaluation](#)" series on our website). These tools contain background information about the cultural characteristics of each population group plus evaluation tips that can help bridge the gap between the evaluator and the evaluated. So, especially if you are working with priority populations, these tools can give you ideas about how to approach and engage communities in your evaluation work.

The guides cover aspects such as the role of tobacco, cultural norms to watch for, elements that trigger resistance to tobacco control efforts, attitudes towards survey-taking, and effective communication strategies. Reading these practical compilations of tips can help evaluators and data collectors gain a better understanding of the cultural environment, how to ask questions appropriately, and approaches for interpreting answers. The guides that are currently available cover African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, LGBT, Low Socio-economic Status, Native American/Alaska Native, Rural, and Substance Abuse Facilities populations.

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