

The Influence of Social Identity on Evaluation Practice: Enhancing Culturally Responsive Evaluation

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The goal for this workshop is for participants learn about and to explore ways of applying social identity theory to their evaluation practice in order to become more culturally aware and responsive to a larger variety of stakeholder groups; thus including and reflecting a wider array of perspectives. Participants will engage with their peers to more deeply understand the connection between their social identity and their role as an evaluator. Mini-lectures, activities, and group discussions will be combined to offer a comprehensive and engaging learning experience.

In this workshop participants will learn:

- the influences on and consequences of social identity on evaluation practice
- to apply a technique for exploring aspects of their own social identity and that of others
- ways to increase their cultural adaptability in order to improve their evaluation practice

Tajfel and Turner developed Social Identity Theory in the late 1970s primarily as an explanation of the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Social identity is based on an individual's identification with various social groups. Social identity is different from personal identity, which more about an individual's unique attributes. Our social identity is the aspect of our identity that come from belonging to certain groups, including those based on gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status, etc. Everyone has a unique combination of social identities: religion, gender, nationality, age, sexual preference, and so on. The difference between personal identity and social identity can best be thought of as the difference between the answer to the following questions:

- Personal Identity: Who am I?
- Social Identity: Who are we?

Social Identity Theory indicates that once we categorize ourselves as being part of a particular group we favour that group (called our "in-group") sometimes at the expense of other groups (called "out-groups"). People with whom we share a social identity we often think of as one of "us," and we think of people belonging to other groups as "them." Research by Turner and Tajfel (1986) showed that by categorizing themselves as group members, individuals displayed in-group favouritism. What is surprising is that it often doesn't matter what the group is based on; individuals build self-esteem by differentiating their in-group from an out-group on some valued dimension. This dynamic is illustrated by experiential activities in which individuals are assigned to (or self-select into) arbitrary groups. The groups are often indicated by colour names (for instance, the "blue" or "red" group) or shape names (for instance the "circle" or "triangle" group). The group distinctions are relatively meaningless, but individuals develop a sense of group (a shared identity) and seek ways to positively categorize their group. Individuals will begin

to think of themselves defined in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'. For example, "We are the Blue team" rather than "I am a member of the Blue team."

Social identity influences how we perceive and relate to those around us. We use identity to group people as part of our in-group or out-group and to make attributions about intentions and to interpret behaviours and words. Thoughts like "of course he'd do that, he's one of them, they are always doing stuff like that" rather than "of course he'd do that, he always does stuff like that" indicates that you're using social identity to categorize an individual and their behaviour. In the first statement social identity is being used attribute individual behaviour to an out-group dynamic, while in the second example the behaviour is an individual level phenomena. Concurrently, others are making their own assumptions and judgements about us based on their filters.

Not all social identities are readily apparent. There are two reasons for this. One reason is that some social identities are visible and others are invisible. For example, it is visible that I am a woman, but you could not tell my occupation or my religious or political beliefs by looking at me; those are invisible. The second reason has to do with my desire to make public aspects of my identity. There are aspects of invisible social identities that one may choose to share or make public through their appearance, actions, or speech (for example – one could openly indicate being a Christian by openly discussing their beliefs or wearing a cross) and other aspects that one may want to keep private and not share with others (for example – one could keep being a Christian private by not openly discussing their beliefs or wearing anything that would indicate they believe in the Christian faith). Choices about what to share or not to share with others can be influenced the level of comfort with the people and the situation. Choices about what to keep private and what to make public can also be influenced by what an individual thinks is a favourable or accepted social identity and what they think is unfavourable or taboo social identity. In some cases there is a significant threat associated with revealing aspects of one's social identity. This is important to keep in mind as we work in different evaluative contexts.

In order to successfully evaluate in the diverse contexts in which we work we must gain a better awareness of our own social identity and identify the possible blind spots, hot spots, and 'invisible spots' to be managed while interacting with a broad array of stakeholders. It is also important for us to be aware of how others perceive us and understand the dynamics associated with social identity in order to be effective evaluators.

Evaluators who learn how to articulate and think deeply about—and sometimes question—the various aspects of their social identities can decrease the likelihood of misunderstandings, increase their ability to be open to different perspectives, and more accurately interpret situations. Parts of your identity that matter to you may not matter to others or may matter only in certain situations. Aspects of your identity that seem insignificant to you may become huge benefits or obstacles when you are working in certain situations or with particular groups. Social identity is also connected with issues of power and privilege which can surface during an evaluation. At some time you may have experienced feeling the power and privilege associated with being a member of a dominant group, or *in-group*. You may have also

felt the powerlessness and disadvantage of being a member of a nondominant group, or *outgroup*. Moreover, membership in a particular identity group may make you part of the in-group in some contexts and part of the out-group in other contexts. Actual and perceived shifts in status and power are important considerations when it comes to working across differences. People tend to categorize each other differently, so individuals can have different interpretations of the same situation, another important consideration as we gather and interpret evaluative data.

During this workshop we will explore the following questions:

- What aspects of your social identity are salient for you?
- Why are those categories important to you?
- What are your early experiences becoming aware of those aspects of your identity?
- Are the categories you selected aspects of your self that are public or private for you?
- Are the categories you selected visible or invisible to others?
- How do aspects of your identity help you build connections with other people?
- How do aspects of your identity create barriers between you and other people?
- What aspects of your identity do you think contribute to you being, or being seen as, an effective evaluator?
- What aspects of you identity do you think get in the way of being, or being seen as, an effective evaluator?

We will also discuss ways to increase cultural adaptability in order to improve evaluation practice. One common approach is simply to get to know as many people as possible from different backgrounds. Being explicit about the evaluation process can also be a way to minimize the potential for misinterpretation. Clarifying and articulating roles, expectations, and assumptions is another way to create space for a conversation about social identity and the role it might play in an evaluation.

