

Beyond Demographic Identifiers and Classification: A Search for Alternative Approaches to Quantitatively Evaluating Educational Equity

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In April 2022, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) released its first ever Equity Action Plan to advance equity across their policies, programs, and partner base. This action plan entails five priority areas, the fifth of which is to: "...incorporate racial and ethnic equity and diversity into policy, planning, and learning" (USAID, 2022, para. 3). This essay addresses the question of how USAID, along with other international development agencies and practitioners, can institutionalize equity, particularly in its evaluation and data collection processes. I argue that as interest in addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)¹ increases in the U.S. and parts of Europe, Western conceptualizations of equity need careful examination regarding their cultural appropriateness, lest we impose these values on other regions of the world. Furthermore, we need to be wary of pushing "conventional" methods and metrics used for evaluations of the outcomes.

In the Global North, equity is typically assessed on a large-scale through collecting data and disaggregating results to look for significant differences between demographic groups like race and gender. Underlying this approach is the notion that there should be fair distribution or parity in outcomes between groups. However, the key methodological assumption is that we have individual identifiers enabling us to create demographic groups. Such categorization makes this practice and approach inappropriate to many communities who may be under duress and/or who for the sake of personal protection, need to maintain privacy through non-disclosure. For example, I have worked with international partners who expressed their inability to include questions about ethnicities in a survey. Even if the surveys were anonymized and questions were made optional, the respondents could still bear the risk of political persecution by answering such identifying questions. One finding from focus groups in the USAID 200-day equity assessment corroborates this concern:

"efforts to understand our partners and beneficiaries must be done responsibly in a manner that will not cause unintended consequences/harm for marginalized individuals; for instance, answering a question on gender identity could put respondents at risk in certain country contexts" (USAID, 2021, p. 11).

¹ Other acronyms for DEI include EDI, IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity and access), or AIDE.

However, this is followed by a recommendation to “include targeting more granular forms of data collection in programming and planning that account for marginalization within a country context...These include, but are not limited to, data collection on disability and on the full spectrum of gender identities and ethnicity” (USAID, 2021, p. 11). Although the recommendation continues to suggest that “efforts could include appropriate data protection and privacy protocols within the technology solution design” (ibid), I argue that relying on technology-driven protocols for privacy does not resolve the root problem of the potential cultural inappropriateness of collecting identifying data on marginalized populations. Instead, I review other ways to conceive of equity, along with a culturally responsive methodology that does not require the Western-centric criteria to quantify equity.²

Concepts of equity

At its etymological root, equity means fair and even. Embedded in the principles of equality and justice, equity is premised upon the assumption of a natural human hierarchy (Lewis et al., 2021). It was not until the 18th century that moral equality was introduced in the West, establishing that all human beings are created equal. Since then, many theories on the philosophical nature of moral equality have been advanced. One of the most cited is John Rawls’ *Justice as Fairness*. He adopted a prioritarianist view of equity consisting of equal access to opportunities and a difference-based consideration of the most disadvantaged (Rawls, 2001). In the past two decades, capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) have opened up new ways of answering the questions regarding equity. Namely, Sen (1999) addressed the equity of individual freedom to social, economic, and political participation; Nussbaum (2000) enlisted the core elements in basic human capabilities and rights. Their work has garnered a paradigm shift to the improvement of individual capabilities, or what an individual can do or can be, rather than what they have done or have become (Robeyns, 2005).

These dominant conceptions of equity, however, have overshadowed non-Western equity frameworks. Although eliding women, Confucius in the 5-6th century BC proposed “有教无类” (education without distinction). This notion calls for the development of citizens, ethnic minorities, and slaves who were excluded from aristocratic education into well-rounded individuals (Mu et al., 2013). In Islam, there is not a separate theory of justice since the Qur’an itself assures justice as a natural outcome so long as the rulers and people comply with divine rules (Mirakhor & Askari, 2019). Bedouin concepts of equity are grounded in preserving honor, pride, and peace (Wolf, 2000). On the other hand, Amazonian conceptions of equality flout the absolute equivalence among people; instead, they emphasize on respect, individual differences, and partiality over equality, fairness, and justice (Walker, 2020).

Within the field of education, the production of the term equity has exponentially increased since 2005 (Jurado de los Santos, 2020). As it gains in popularity, the concept itself has gotten muddled in debates over whether equity should be applied horizontally (i.e. equal treatment of equals) or vertically (i.e. unequal treatment of unequals) to areas

² I purposefully constrain this essay to only discuss *quantitative* and not qualitative evaluations of equity.

like school funding (Toutkoushian & Michael, 2007), and whether the goal is to strive for equality in opportunity and treatment versus equality in outcomes (McCowan, 2016). Levinson et al.'s (2022) recent essay dissected the competing and often contradictory ways in which educational equity is framed: "equality of educational *resources* across comparison sets, equal *distribution* of educational outcomes across populations, equal *outcomes* for every learner, equal educational *experiences* for each child, or equal levels of *growth* or *development* for each learner" (p. 2). The myriad applications of equity serve as a reminder that the multi-faceted concept of equity needs clarification before even broaching the question of how to operationalize and instrumentalize an evaluation of equity.

Alternative approaches to quantitatively evaluating equity in practice

In practice, quantitative evaluations of equity often measure proportional equality through testing. Conventional norms in the U.S. assume and apply social categories such as race and gender – which are perceived sources of disparities across a wide array of societal outcomes in the U.S. – to identify the least-advantaged groups. Individuals are then ascribed to these groups largely through self-reported identification. However, I contend that there may be, and must be, alternative evaluations of equity for instances where responses to demographic questions can place an individual at risk of personal persecution. I provide three examples below.

Collaboratively search for culturally relevant and acceptable forms of identification

First, I argue that a researcher entering and evaluating equity in another culture could begin by collaborating with partner organizations to assess context-specific metrics relevant to local structural inequalities. These questions are appropriate to ask about the particular culture. For example, in certain parts of the Middle East where ethnically minoritized individuals (compounded by the intersectionality with other minoritized identities) can face persecution for what they report, what are the alternative forms of equity that a partner organization care more about? The principle of equity is known to be valued and prevalent throughout Islam; Rahim and Mohammed (2018) pointed out that justice and equity, which respectively align with the Islamic concepts of *adl* and *qist*, appear 174 times in the Qur'an. Moreover, many of these references relate to distributive justice between the rich and poor – a value that undergirds Islamic economics (Choudhury, 1983; Hashmi, 2010). To this end, perhaps questions about financial capabilities to meet basic necessities may not only be of relevance and interest, but also more culturally respectful to the host countries and partners.

Changing the focus from group identification to individual capability

When demographic identification of any kind is not possible, another option might be to deviate from the dominant difference-based approach to the alternative capability approach to examine relationships between relevant variables and individual capabilities. Capability theory approaches justice through the question of what is an individual potentially capable of, and how can they reach that goal? According to Robeyns (2005), "what is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be" (p. 95). The theory, however, has been critiqued for being too individualistic and insufficient in addressing groups or social contexts and structures (Robeyns, 2005). For example, some have argued that the

utilitarian individualism underlying capability theory elides the “structures of living together” (Stewart & Deneulin, 2002, p. 66) and is inappropriate for examining societal well-being (Gore, 1997). An alternative approach to evaluating equity in ambiguous contexts is to reconcile the debate and mediate social context or groups via individual capabilities. Then, we can proceed to analyze the association between individual capabilities and equity in the domain of interest. For example, a study of educational equity drawing on survey data could include a set of questions about human capabilities such as health, nourishment, community participation, and access to resources. An analysis could then entail the assessment of significant differences in educational outcomes based on average capabilities. In theory, there should be no correlation between the two if systemic equity exists in that context.

Finding proxies of the constructs underlying systemic inequalities

Similarly, another consideration might be to measure the constructs underlying structural inequities as a proxy of demographic identifiers. Inherent to the U.S. practice of racially disaggregating data is the knowledge of systemic injustices that stems from the classifications such as race, gender, sexuality, disability status, and parental education. We know, for example, that people of color, women, LGBTQ+, those who have a disability, and first-generation students, are groups that experience more negative outcomes in the U.S. But underlying these systemic inequalities are feelings of unbelonging or experiences of marginalization and discrimination. Rather than asking for demographic identification, for instance, researchers can include a set of validated survey items measuring social belonging and assess equity based on differences in the levels of societal belonging and inclusion.³ This comes with its own limitations, such as bias from self-reporting and relying on subjective perceptions, as opposed to “objective” demographic categories. However, if demographic categories like race are social constructs anyway, how objective are they really?

In conclusion, this essay reminds researchers that a concept like equity, along with the ways it is assessed, is not universal. As Levinson et al. (2022) reminded us, it is imperative to first clarify what we are valuing and seeking when we aim for educational equity. And as these Western-centric DEI values are exported, we must go further to reflect on the cross-cultural appropriateness of these practices and push ourselves to consider other ways of evaluating the goal of equity at scale.

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³ Cordier et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of literature on measures of social inclusion and found that the *Social and Community Opportunities Profile-Short* best captured the construct of social inclusion.

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