

Moving Towards Socially Just Assessment

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Erick Montenegro and Natasha Jankowski's Occasional Paper entitled *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* (2017) along with works by other authors over the last year including Bourke (2017) and (Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017) caused us to pause and consider the multiple intersections of assessment, equity and inclusion, and social justice in the field of student affairs as well as the variety of terms used to encompass this concept. As we discussed these intersections in preparation for a session on addressing bias in assessment for the 2018 ACPA Annual Convention, we began to unpack the very process of assessment – recognizing how siloed the “assessment” and “diversity, equity and inclusion” conversations and practices tend to be in the field of student affairs and in practice on campus.

The first realization we came to was the profound impact that **culture** had on the process of assessment. Culture is the aggregate of values, beliefs, assumptions, languages, and behaviors of a group of people. These elements of culture impact every step of the assessment process from the design of assessment projects and questions through data analysis and interpretation. To perform effective assessment, we need to better understand how culture affects that work.

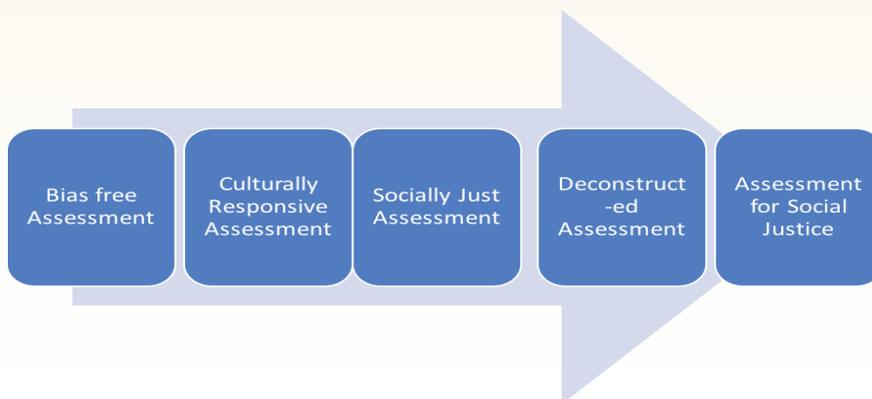
Our second insight was that assessment was built on a specific set of **philosophical assumptions** which impact how assessment is implemented. Assessment emerged from research methods, primarily quantitative methods. These methods, predicated upon a paradigm that privileged separation between the knower and known, supposedly facilitated an objective examination of a phenomenon. This positivist paradigm is flawed, as true objectivity is not possible. Individuals interpret reality based their own experience; this interpretation colors how they make sense of the world. In addition, individuals, through relationships with others, socially construct knowledge and this social construction is based on the individual interpretations of the individuals involved. While there are clear distinctions between research and assessment, these research traditions and methods impact how practitioners conduct and view the assessment process and associated results. Understanding this interpretivist and constructivist paradigm of reality affects how assessment is implemented, but also the nature of the data gathered from assessment methods.

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A third observation we came to was that undergirding both culture and individuals' interpretation of reality, are **systems of power and oppression** present in US society. Societal beliefs of white individuals are different than black individuals. As individuals who identify as white, we will be treated differently - than individuals from other racial/ethnic identities - and we will be afforded privileges, whether we recognize them or not. This treatment affects our interpretation of reality and how we socially construct knowledge. Thus, it influences how we engage in assessment. Our interpretation of assessment results may be different than an interpretation by someone who does not identify as white. As a result, assessment cannot be an objective process. When we engage in assessment, we must not only take into account the individual nature of reality and social construction of knowledge, but also how power and oppression influence each of those.

Reflecting on these elements of culture, assessment's philosophical assumptions and methods, and the systems of power and oppression, we began to view the various terminology and concepts in the field as existing on a continuum, characterized by increasing levels of individual action to address.



The first level of the continuum is **bias free assessment**. The goal of this approach to assessment is to recognize and address bias throughout the assessment cycle. This may entail ensuring response options in demographic items in an engagement survey used to predict retention are exhaustive and not exclusive. This approach may also take into account the fact that not everyone has the same experience.

The next level on the continuum is **culturally responsive assessment**. In this approach, individual culture is taken into consideration when gathering data. One example may include offering data collection for retention exit interviews in Spanish or orally for deaf individuals. Culturally responsive assessment will also ensure that a variety of data collection methods are used as individuals express their learning in different ways. When gathering data to determine why students stay at an institution, methods may include survey, interview, journals, ethnographic essays, etc. Data will also be disaggregated by demographic group to see how results may be different across groups. But, caution is taken not to treat any social identity (such as race/ethnicity) as a “cause” for any differences.

The next level of the continuum is **socially just assessment** and is built on a critical paradigm that considers agency, power, and voice, among other elements. The difference with this level is that not only is bias being addressed and culture taken into consideration, power differentials are acknowledged in each step of the assessment process. An example might be an assessment of retention that seeks to understand the impact of campus climate on student's continuation at an institution.

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Deconstructed assessment is the next level and not only takes into account systems of power and oppression but intentionally moves to expose social structures that contribute to power and oppression. An assessment of retention that examines influence of climate would also investigate structures such as how student complaints of microaggressions are addressed or what impact the local political climate may have on student experience.

The final level is **assessment for social justice** and is an aggregate of the previous levels. Not only does the assessment process address bias, is culturally responsive, but it also exposes and seeks to understand the impact of social structures on power and oppression, but the focus of assessment itself is social justice. The topics addressed serve to understand and remedy inequities in higher education and within specific institutional contexts.

We've only touched on the surface regarding the intersections of assessment, equity, inclusion, and social justice that have been advanced by the writings referenced earlier. To further the conversation in the field, some higher education organizations are collaborating to explore these intersections further and explore action steps to foster social justice through assessment. Campus Labs, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), NILOA, Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, the ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation, and the NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community, The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) are teaming together on the Assessment for Social Justice Project. The vision for this project includes a series of webinars exploring this topic as well as a podcast series with the scholars and thought leaders who have been writing about and exploring these important topics. The culmination of the project would be a virtual summit bringing together interested individuals to develop concrete, achievable, action steps for fostering social justice for assessment in the field generally and for practical application on their campuses.

For details on the third webinar in the series as well as a list of partners in this project, visit: <http://www.campusintelligence.com/types/upcoming-webinars/deconstructed-assessment-using-assessment-to-foster-social-justice/>.

References

- Bourke, B. (2017). Advancing toward social justice via student affairs inquiry. *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, 2(1).
- Heiser, C., A., Prince, K., & Levy, J. D. (2017). Examining critical theory as a framework to advancing equity through student affairs assessment. *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, 2(1).
- Montenegro, E. & Jankowski, N. A. (2017, January). *Equity and assessment: Moving towards culturally responsive assessment* (Occasional Paper No. 29). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

The Assessment for Social Justice Project is an endeavor to expand the impact of assessment in higher education. See https://www.cas.edu/blog_home.asp?display=82 for additional resources.

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