

## **Defining Cultural Relevance in Early Childhood Measurement**

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## Introduction

Early Childhood Precision, Innovation, and Shared Measurement (EC PRISM) is a team dedicated to improving early childhood measurement, within The Institute for Child Success (ICS). Our mission is to empower organizations in the early childhood field to accelerate their own impact by harnessing measurement and evaluation practices to fit the needs of their communities. We translate our expertise into customized tools, resources, and individualized support. One such resource is the IMPACT Measures Tool, a free repository of early childhood and parenting measures. The goal of the IMPACT Measures Tool (hereto referred to as IMPACT) is to provide a free and open resource to the field, which allows for searching, comparing, and accessing a variety of measurement tools. An additional goal is to highlight that there is no single “perfect measure” that works across the field; rather, there are a range of options with various strengths that may be appropriate for different communities and contexts. IMPACT is not affiliated with any specific assessment or publisher but serves as a non-affiliated resource for the field.

IMPACT’s unique, science-driven scoring system rates each measure on four key categories: usability, cost, cultural relevance, and technical merit. We believe that by assigning values to areas traditionally ignored in measure development, IMPACT can help raise awareness of the complexity of measurement in the field and increase transparency of the quality of measures that are available. We acknowledge our responsibility to help move the field forward in the ongoing pursuit of equity reformation in data and measurement. Therefore, in this project we sought expert opinions on our cultural relevance score so that we may continue to hone and improve IMPACT over time.

## Methodology

In February through April, 2022, EC PRISM staff conducted interviews with ten individuals using design-thinking principles. Individuals were asked to give up to one hour of their time before

the interviews to review IMPACT resources including (a) the IMPACT website, (b) print materials including our Scoring Guide (c) a 5-minute video clip explaining our scoring components, and (d) an abbreviated table of the scoring psychometric components. Interviews lasted one hour and were conducted in English over Zoom. Participants were awarded a \$500 honorarium for their time and contributions to this report.

## **Participants**

Participants were recruited for their expertise in cultural relevance in measurement, their historic knowledge and understanding of the evolution of IMPACT, and their leadership in the early childhood field as recognized by EC PRISM and EC PRISM's partner networks. Participants were from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender, age, professions, and geographic regions within the United States. Among them were one home-based childcare provider, one community-based program provider, one foundation officer, and seven applied researchers. All researchers had applied experiences in developing culturally grounded measures, reviewing measure compendia, and/or providing direct service to underrepresented cultural groups.

## **Interview Questions**

A list of ten questions (Table 1, below) were adapted according to participants' experiences and backgrounds (e.g., measurement terms with practitioners versus service community characteristics with researchers). Interview questions were vetted by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)-informed professionals.

Table 1. Interview Questions

<b>Questions</b>
How do you define culture relevance within measurement?
How do you think culture is best captured within measures?
What information can IMPACT gather and/or integrate into the cultural relevance score in order to deliver that value to our users?
What are the challenges the measurement field needs to address in working toward this information defined in the first two questions?
To what degree are our definitions of cultural relevance as we have discussed today specific to one culture?
How would you suggest evaluating cultural relevance as a universal theme across the field of measurement? What is most important?
What are your thoughts on how we approach any scores that may be more or less related to the themes we have already discussed?
Please describe the community you serve. How do you reach them?
What data do you report to your stakeholders? What data would you like to report? What do they need?
What other feedback, general or specific, may you have or like to discuss regarding the IMPACT Measures Tool?

## **Synthesis**

EC PRISM staff documented participant responses. Once all interviews were complete, data were reviewed and synthesized into themes delineated in report findings. Themes reported by participants cannot be generalized to all cultural groups or groups of individuals from different communities. It is particularly important to note that we recruited for and conducted the interviews in English.

## **Findings**

All participants indicated that the early childhood field is highly engaged in the study of its systems' anti-racism, equity, and cultural relevance. They also noted the field is working to define cultural relevance and understand its implications for the measures and data informing these systems. All participants that identified as researchers debated the merits of universalism versus relativism in considering cultural context and measurement. Practitioners were most aware of client and staff discomfort with some measures related to their own culture and socioeconomic status. All participants were interested in promoting IMPACT and understanding how IMPACT staff plan to connect with groups at the forefront of cultural relevance in assessment. These themes are discussed in more detail, below.

### **Defining Cultural Relevance**

Participants all agreed culture is a critical context for assessment and data collection. They acknowledged the challenge in defining cultural relevance within measurement to be inclusive of all cultures. The greatest challenge is a matter of perspective: one's perspective of culture, and therefore what is culturally relevant, is dependent upon one's own developmental age, community, and language of origin at a particular moment in history. In other words, culture is lived experience, and lived experience must be at the center of defining cultural relevance.

### **Cultural Relevance in Measurement**

All participants noted the importance of lived experience in defining cultural relevance in measurement. Lived experience can be defined as a person's beliefs and knowledge about the world gained through direct interactions with people, institutions, systems, and environments. Participants paired different combinations of lived experiences (e.g., language of origin, geographic location of residence, age and events as witnessed, developmental construct's saliency within culture or subculture, relationships with etc.) as critical to cultural relevance in measure development, validation, and adaptation and translation.

Practitioner participants were seeking measures that reflected child experiences that were meaningful to families in their programs. Researcher participants highlighted that not all measures reflect all individuals' or groups' lived experiences. They also indicated cultural values influence whether measure scores mattered at all to the evaluated person (e.g., child, parent, teacher, etc.). For example, if you are evaluating attachment, and the culture does not value attachment, an attachment score is meaningless to that culture's members. To address these factors, researcher participants indicated measurement scores are most culturally relevant when the measures are developed and utilized within the same cultural group. Some believed cultural relevance in measurement could be achieved using cultural brokers in measure adaptation, translation, and administration.

Cultural brokers are individuals that act as bridges between identified cultural communities or groups of interest and a person or persons outside that cultural community or group. In measurement, cultural brokers are often a member of the identified cultural community of interest. They are usually deployed by researchers to adapt and translate measures to their cultural community. Sometimes, depending on language and context, cultural brokers are asked to translate data back for researchers outside these communities to analyze. This practice seemed widely accepted among participants as a means for conducting and contextualizing universal measures. However, one participant believed the practice of cultural brokering to be a fundamental misstep in applying what we have learned in cultural relevance and culturally grounded measurement.

### **Universalism versus Relativism within Cultural Relevance**

Participants' thoughts on cultural specificity within measurement suggest the importance of relativism and culture-specific measures in contrast to universalism and implementing measures across cultures. Relativism relates to the notion that values, knowledge, and truth exist in relation to culture, context, and time.

Relativism in measurement indicates there is no absolute measure for all, based on the influence of culture, context, and time. Relativism exists in contrast to universalism. Universalism is the notion that some constructs or truths can be applied to all independent of group or culture. Universalism in measurement suggests that based on these truths, there is utility for assessing any individual on any truth-based construct regardless of culture or group. Thus, measures that are universal are absolute and have purpose. It is clear to see why this debate persists regarding promising practices and cultural relevance in measurement.

### **IMPACT's Cultural Relevance Score**

Participants were interested in the variety of elements represented in the IMPACT's cultural relevance score (on IMPACT, all four categories' scores are comprised of various sub-scores. Visit [IMPACT's scoring page](#) for a breakdown of each sub-score.) The cultural relevance score is calculated by the following sub-scores: demographics, method bias, item bias and psychometric group differences, and norming recency. Thus, a higher score indicates a greater likelihood that a measurement tool would work for many cultures (i.e., universalism), but does not indicate whether a measurement tool would work for a specific culture (i.e., relativism).

Participants all believed the groups they served would be captured in the elements as presented. There was interest in more granular details for points awarded within scores and additional education was offered by our scoring experts during the interviews. The overwhelming sentiment expressed by all researchers interviewed was that rating method bias (i.e., measure developers reporting of their considerations for communities being assessed during the development of their measure) in the score was a critical scientific element. One researcher noted how important this is but how rarely it is done or reported by developers.

All IMPACT cultural relevance score sub-scores were deemed appropriate and necessary by all participants. Many participants identified elements that they thought of as more or less important to their own work, particularly language and regionality. Participants wished to filter based on these elements during their use of IMPACT on our website.

### **Website Experience and Education**

We also received feedback on their direct use of IMPACT. There was interest in more education to identify measures that were developed within their cultural community of interest (e.g., locating measures based on race and ethnicity) versus validated within a sample. There were also requests for more information on the individual measures' pages. For example, knowing whether a measure scored poorly because it did not consider a metric at all, or because the data was present but was poor. Participants noted that this level of detail may be useful for some but overwhelming for others. Participants also acknowledged the information was accessible in the resources linked on the IMPACT website.

Participants raised concerns about mismatches between cultural relevance scoring and community acceptance of measures. For example, one participant noted that a measure of parent-child relationships was well rated for use with her community but did not administer well in her work with families that were under-homed. Another participant noted that a different measure of parent-child relationships was validated with the cultural community she served, but that parents did not like it and home visitors refused to use it. Thus, cultural relevance concerns remain.

### **Cultural Relevance Concerns**

After confirming with participants that IMPACT's cultural relevance score provides valuable information and that the tool reasonably addresses possible cultural contexts and communities, participants noted there are still questions in the field. Three are addressed below.

### ***Who are the measure developers and who do they represent?***

There are many measures, but participants noted there are not nearly enough measures developed by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

***What measures are being used and why?*** Participants reminded our team that systems-level decision makers have historically turned to researchers, mainly from predominately white, northeast academic settings, to inform their measurement choices. That being said, local representatives do sometimes choose their own measures and tools and our participants see this as the most promising practice for promoting culturally relevant measurement but requires that both systems- and local-level decision makers have training in scientific concepts (e.g., the importance of developers' psychometric testing and reporting for cultural groups) to make culturally relevant selections.

***How and when to advocate for universal versus relative measurement?*** Historically, universal measurement has been the standard for program evaluation in part because it allows for comparisons across individuals, programs, and systems. That is, you need to use the same measure to create comparisons. Many of the researcher participants saw the utility of universal measurement for individual, program, and system level analysis over time. All researcher participants agreed universal measures should be interpreted in context and combined with other relative measures to present a culturally relevant data story.

### **Recommendations to the Early Childhood Field**

These findings emphasize the importance that the early childhood field continues to prioritize cultural relevance in measurement. Obtaining culturally relevant and culturally grounded data is the only way to understand a community's belief and attitudes, and to make decisions (e.g., on service delivery) that are both equitable and effective. Based on our interview findings, EC PRISM recommends:

**Support the development of measures for and by members of BIPOC communities.** To understand and assess measures for cultural relevance, the field must increase the number of measures from BIPOC developers. The field is attempting to define cultural relevance and solve the universal versus relative measurement debate while drawing from measures that were overwhelmingly developed from a singular cultural lens that is already biased toward universalism. Once the field of measurement has grown to a point where more, if not every, developmental construct has a complimentary or adjacent measure for every BIPOC community, then we may be able to (a) define cultural relevance more completely, and (b) answer whether, where or when universal or relative measurement is most appropriate.

**Continue to promote white and BIPOC collaborations in research.** Research-based organizations and journal publications are expanding their recruitment to BIPOC focused communities and international scholars. We encourage scholars to continue to come together and share ideas about how to compare, contrast, define and contextualize measures for as many developmental constructs as possible. Such a focus will simultaneously influence both measurement outcomes and ways to think about developmental outcomes. This creates the opportunity for a broader representation of culture(s) and promotes anti-racism.

**Amplify anti-racist anti-biased measurement practices in existing research and stories of BIPOC people locally and abroad.** In addition to more measure development, there is a well-established body of literature established by BIPOC scholars and historians studying within their communities of origin. These works need to be amplified in the field and reviewed for their stories, documented achievements of their communities, and for their measure modalities. In turn, EC PRISM can incorporate these measures into IMPACT and invite scholars to use IMPACT to

continue to educate the field. Other organizations with other compendia can do the same.

***Support wraparound education services to educate program and systems level professionals in the need for culturally relevant measures.*** The need for culturally relevant measures is a multi-disciplinary, multi-level problem. It is critical that program and systems level decision-makers receive education to understand and demand culturally relevant measures, and that in the interim, they be supported in their journey to tell comprehensive, culturally relevant stories of their populations.

### **Recommendations for IMPACT**

IMPACT has a responsibility in all these recommendations to address the inherent inequities in the journey to clarifying cultural relevance in measurement. EC PRISM looks forward to integrating ideas from participants that were the foundation for this report into our future work and outreach. We plan to act on the following recommendations:

***Continue to add measures that prioritize specific cultures and languages.*** We will draw from our networks and continue to seek opportunities to identify early childhood measures from BIPOC developers to include in IMPACT. This may include broadening our definition of “measurement” as we learn how BIPOC communities define measurement. We will work toward a site that is an inclusive repository.

***Continue to refine the Cultural Relevance score.*** EC PRISM will use the interview data to (1) annually evaluate our cultural relevance score during our Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) review (2) develop internal materials to advance our commitment to anti-racism within our organization and services and (3) develop external materials to educate early childhood professionals on culturally relevant practices in measurement (e.g., the use of cultural brokers).

**Educate users on the definition and purpose of IMPACT's cultural relevance score.** As the field becomes more aware of cultural relevance in measurement, we expect our website users to become more critical consumers. We will meet this demand by expanding upon our webinar trainings and discuss how IMPACT's cultural relevance score indicates the degree to which a measure would work for many (i.e., universalism), but does not indicate whether a measure would work for an individual (i.e., relativism). We will suggest data that creating a rating system may inadvertently perpetuate measures are “better” or “worse” for everyone (which is again a sign of universalism.) We will continue to assess ways we can address this in meeting each user's needs.

**Sustain our relationships with the interviewees and grow our network of professionals committed to culturally relevant measurement.** Through the interview process and our ongoing outreach about cultural relevance, we continuously learn about professionals in the field doing culturally grounded work. We will continue to seek their knowledge and highlight their networks of measure developers as we enhance IMPACT and serve the early childhood community.

## **Conclusion**

The early childhood field is highly engaged in the study of anti-racism and equity in its systems. In systems where data driven decision making is the mechanism for change, culturally relevant data is critical for addressing anti-racism and equity. At the heart of culturally relevant data, is culturally relevant measurement.

The challenge between universalism and relativism appears to be central to the debate on improving the cultural relevance of measures. On the one hand, embracing universal measures allows for accountability at the system level, by creating easy comparisons of who is succeeding and who is failing in improving the impact of programs and policies for children and their families. On the other hand, relativist measures acknowledge and document cultural values and differences, and hold those

differences as measures of accountability for those communities. IMPACT seeks to highlight the strengths of these measurement perspectives and address them in our education and outreach.

EC PRISM believes in the applied world of measurement. Our perspective is that “what one measures is what one values.” The field may continue to debate the value of universalism and relativism in measurement, but we recommend that the field create opportunities for both. Participants in our interviews reported that culturally relevant data practices include consulting the community on their values in order to inform measurement and that in the absence of this, inequity persists. EC PRISM wishes to continue as an active partner in this space, to inform users about measurement selection and to support new culturally relevant measures as they emerge in the early childhood field.

We wish to acknowledge our participants, Dr. Elizabeth Pungello Bruno, and The Brady Foundation for supporting this project, many of whom have been involved with the work of IMPACT from its initial stages. We look forward to sharing our future growth with you, and rising to the challenges of this work together.