



SEVEN WAYS TO MAKE EQUITY RESEARCH MATTER MORE



Researchers who study inequities often hope to help reduce them.

But can they?

Yes, NEPC Fellow Elizabeth Moje, Dean of the Marsal Family School of Education at the University of Michigan, [argues in a recent essay](#) in *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*.

But, she writes, if they are to do so, some important things must change: “I believe that research can make a systems-level difference but that social scientists must take a step back and reconsider the methods used, the voices privileged, and the practices for teaching (or learning from) a new generation of scholars.”

In her commentary, Moje lays out seven steps that social scientists should take if they want to maximize the chances that their work will decrease inequity rather than merely describing it.

1. **Diversify:** Like others before her, Moje argues that the ranks of social scientists need to grow more diverse. However, that’s only part of the solution. Researchers also need to incorporate diverse communities into their studies—not just as informants or data points, but as partners: “In other words, ask the people who have had experiences with inequalities to participate as co-researchers at every step of the research design.”

2. **Avoid assumptions:** Researchers need to interrogate their own views, incorporating multiple perspectives into every aspect of their research designs.
3. **Collaborate across disciplines:** In graduate school, students are often encouraged to embrace the norms and perspectives of their disciplines. While these lenses are critical for researchers to understand, they can also be limiting. Moje urges social scientists to take a broader view: “Learn to speak across disciplinary discourse communities and in so doing, learn to question assumptions embedded in prized disciplinary practices.”
4. **Integrate methods:** Sometimes, mixed methods is misunderstood to mean merely tacking on an interview or two to inform a largely quantitative study, or creating a couple of charts quantifying how many interviewees referred to XYZ theme. Researchers need to eschew these superficial efforts at mixing methods, Moje writes, instead creating studies that are “iterative and longitudinal, with cycles of qualitative and quantitative analyses, always targeted on reforming systems structures, practices, and discourses.”
5. **Don’t be a control freak:** Social scientists spend a great deal of time and effort to isolate the phenomena they are studying by controlling for—or setting aside—coexisting factors that have the potential to impact their outcomes of interest. With equity-focused research, however, Moje suggests that these other factors should be front and center:

Instead of trying to assess whether strategies work regardless of race, for example, design studies to assess whether strategies work because of race. Center identities associated with unequal and inequitable treatment, rather than attempting to control identities to find the transformational strategies that work for ‘everyone,’ which is, in effect, code for the people already at the center.

6. **Take an expansive view:** Systemic inequities are rarely limited to a single system: For example, many of the inequities that plague schooling also play out in housing, in the labor market, and in the legal system. For this reason, Moje says equity researchers should aim to understand, explore, and ultimately transform multiple systems.
7. **Broaden your objectives:** Too often, feasibility studies examine interventions that are Band-Aids or life rafts. The Band-Aids don’t stem the bleeding—they just provide a little protection to the gaping wound of inequality. (Think, for instance, about programs that provide students from low-income families with free test preparation for the ACT or SAT without aiming to change a system that privileges their more affluent peers). Similarly, the life rafts don’t address inequality’s sinking ship—they just rescue a select few (e.g., scholarship programs that reward small groups of students from low-income families who have excelled despite the unfair obstacles they’ve faced, leaving the remaining students to continue to bear the burden of the status quo). Instead, design feasibility studies that aim to transform systems (not people or practices) by making them more equitable rather than figuring out whether an intervention “works”

under current, inequitable conditions.

Moje acknowledges that her recommendations are not easy to implement, but she urges researchers to try:

What is the work of social scientists who want to make the world a more equitable and just place? Should we seek to understand, to shift frames, to test the feasibility of interventions, or to radically reconstruct the social world as we know it? I argue that social scientists need to do all of these things, and to do that, we need to change our discourse to focus on transforming the systems of power and oppression that allow inequalities to exist. If we change our aim and adjust our research practices to focus our aim, then we might hit the target we seek.

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