



What Matters: Achieving Racial Equity in a Human Service Non-Profit Organization

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ABSTRACT

Few research studies exist on the efforts and outcomes undertaken by non-profits aiming to integrate racial equity into their organization. This article, through case study research, identifies how Metropolitan Family Service (in Portland, Oregon) has made seven key gains over the last decade: staff diversification, cultural shift in the organization, board development, data systems that support disaggregation, meaningful community partnerships, high client satisfaction, and most important, more equitable service outcomes. In addition to sharing details on these gains, this article identifies the features of how this organization believes that it has actualized these outcomes: through a range of cultural features that support racial equity, and through a counselling model that centers cultural respect and support. Both are shared in this article. The article concludes with a synthesis of advice for the non-profit field.

Keywords: Racial equity, cultural responsiveness, case study, Delphi, anti-racism, organizational change, client satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The need for racial equity is pronounced. Racial inequities are rampant in the USA, as will be profiled below, with the consequences including statistically based shorter lifespans, compromised health, lower education levels, and reduced levels of wealth and income. People of color are over-involved with punitive systems such as criminal and juvenile justice, school discipline and child welfare, and under-involved with affirming systems such as higher education, executive-level jobs and political office. The tools to advance equity are either ineffective or under-reported, with relatively few instances of positive outcomes being demonstrated across the nation. This article reviews these literatures, identifying what is known about comprehensive organizational change where racial equity and cultural responsiveness are improved, and the core ingredients becoming recognized as beneficial for the outcomes of racialized clients. With this context established, the research study that forms the base for this article and its results are shared. The study engages deeply with the change efforts undertaken in one large human service organization, Metropolitan Family Service (MFS), located in Portland, Oregon. Most importantly, three innovations surfaced by this organization may prove valuable more broadly: MFS has developed what it believes are core indicators of a culturally responsive organization, and the details of a cross-cultural counseling model that it believes are relevant and responsive to serving clients of diverse racial backgrounds. Third, the importance of the CEO's embrace of cultural affirmation as a central

feature of inclusion of marginalized communities is highlighted by this research. At the close of the article, the relevance of these actions for other human service organizations is considered. The field that is becoming known as that of “racial equity” or “anti-racist organizational change” holds an interesting configuration of knowledges about how organizations can address racial disparities in outcomes for both staff and clients of color. The prevalence of racial disparities is significant: major sectors such as child welfare, juvenile and adult justice, education, and employment have been detailing inequities for more than a generation. As these problems have become known, the field of racial disparities has emerged with some key challengers: Bell & Ridolfi (2008) critique the disparity field’s “adoration of the question” (and their chastising of excessive focus on the problem), and Shaw-Ridley & Ridley (2010) identify the ethical violation for creating the field as a billion-dollar industry with few benefits received by clients and communities (Shaw-Ridley & Ridley, 2010). Practitioners, policy makers and researchers are beginning to see evidence consolidate and promising practices to emerge. This research base is most fully articulated within public sector (such as education, higher education, child welfare, justice and hospital-based care) and much less understood in the non-profit arena where resources are tight. The literature also outlines the broad strokes of change efforts (such as the importance of a data system that identifies disparities) and deeper dives into specific change efforts such as making a diabetes program more culturally responsive. The literature remains thin with organizational-level change efforts, and particularly among non-profits.

This work is important: much research identifies the damages of racial disparities in terms of longevity, health, chronic disease, homelessness, experiences of violence, and diminished quality of life. In a positive system (such as education), students of color face barriers from penetrating the system adequately enough to receive its full benefits. In a negative system (such as child welfare), children and families of color are overinvolved and their lives more damaged by this involvement. Even harms from the less intensive experiences of microaggressions have consequences that include “stress, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, insomnia, substance abuse, eating disorders, social withdrawal, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress disorder” (p.8, Friedlaender, 2018). Whether influencing the wellbeing of staff of color in the organization or clients of color served by the organization, the consequences of racial inequities influence a broad set of life experiences: employment and quality of work life, ability to access services in an organization, the results of those services, and the ripple effects of services to families and to the wider community. In short, racial inequity narrows life opportunities and results, and services that remain culturally unresponsive to the needs of service users are going to narrow the benefits of organizational services.

Definitions are likely helpful moving forward. Racial disparities refer to the differences yielded by a system that generates uneven outcomes depending on one’s race. Racial inequities exist when those differences are “systemic, avoidable, unfair and unjust” (p. 14, Hofrichter, 2010, cited by Balajee, 2012). Racial equity, therefore, is a goal that aims to end the connection (in a statistical sense) between racial identity and one’s life chances, or “when one’s identity cannot predict the outcome” (p.1, Office of Equity and Human Rights, City of Portland, n.d.). When we discuss race, and racialized communities, we focus on the four communities of color recognized by the Census Bureau (Latino, African American, Indigenous, and Asian and Pacific Islander). Added in the local context of Portland (Oregon) is the Slavic community who are from the former Soviet Union and who arrived in large numbers as religious refugees following its collapse. Their status in Oregon is largely that of a newcomer group that faces considerable

marginalization on the basis of dominant ideologies as socialist and criminal, labor exploitation and language marginalization. They face considerable challenges gaining economic standing and stability (Curry-Stevens & Coalition of Communities of Color, 2014).

When these terms are applied in organizations, two dimensions are important: that of racial equity and that of cultural responsiveness. The processes of developing racial equity in organizations are those that identify disparities and inequities, and reconstructs organizational policies, practices and discourses in ways that are equitable. It is fundamentally about rebalancing power towards racial equity, and the concept is typically aligned with anti-racism. Cultural responsiveness (or the now-outdated term, cultural competence) centers the ability of both staff and the services themselves to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Elements of this capacity include “valuing diversity, having the capacity for cultural self-assessment, being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, having institutionalized cultural knowledge, and having developed adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity” (adapted from Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs, 1989, by Curry-Stevens et al, p.139, 2010). In essence, cultural responsiveness centers culture, and in comparison, racial equity centers power. Although the two are linked, the processes of change in each are quite distinct.

Locally, racial equity is a dynamic issue. Oregon is in the middle of a major movement towards racial equity, led by Portland and surrounding areas, which have been activated by the Coalition of Community of Color’s research (Curry-Stevens et al, 2010) and advocacy work identifying racial disparities and identifying pathways and partnerships with promising options for advancing equity. The region has been self-defined as “progressive” and these research reports have unsettled this perception. Significant awareness-building has occurred over the last eight years, along with the development of resources to assist with the task and heightened accountability expectations from funders. In response, there is a large spectrum of human service, education, health, and environmental organizations engaged in racial equity assessments and action planning.

While this is the “good news” dimension of this movement, remember it is founded on racial inequities and disparities. These research reports (among them, Curry-Stevens et al, 2010; Urban League of Portland, 2009; Coalition of Communities of Color, 2018) detail profound inequities in the region. These reports detail racial inequities in 28 different systems and institutions, and numerous measures within each. They range from incomes and education to police stops, child welfare apprehensions, and mortality rates. Roughly, communities of color typically have incomes half of those of whites, poverty rates range to triply worse, and outcomes across systems that widely range, with none being negligible. In an effort to focus the work on one measure, the Coalition of Communities of Color established a “whiteness premium” that averaged disparities across eleven systems, and found the benefit of being white was to have a 64.5% advantage over communities of color (p.117-118, Curry-Stevens et al, 2010).

The consequence of this research and its associated advocacy efforts has been to place racial equity firmly into the consciousness and practices in the region. Uptake is significant among elected leaders, institutions and foundations, with surging efforts to include racial equity in public policy, institutional policy and practice, and grant accountability practices. It is in this wider context that the organization at the center of this research, Metropolitan Family Service

(MFS), has embarked on its racial diversity and equity journey, with goals for improved outcomes for clients, communities and workers of color helping to nudge equity forwards.

MFS is a large human service organization that serves approximately 18,000 clients per year, aiming to support wellbeing and financial security with a range of services crossing the lifespan, with particular focus on low-income communities of color. Demographically, MFS's client population is 71% clients of color, with approximately half under- or unemployed, about one-third receiving social assistance, and about one-quarter facing mental health challenges. Its budget is approximately \$10 million per year, with 78% raised from grants (roughly divided into $\frac{3}{4}$ government and $\frac{1}{4}$ foundation grants), 17% from program revenues, and the remainder from investment income and private service fees. Close to 20 different government funds, mostly at the local and regional level, and a similar number of non-government funders support the organization.

These details are provided to portray the organization's clients as facing a range of challenges, and whose needs are likely to stretch beyond single intervention solutions, which are typically favored by funding structures. Atypically, MFS has an endowment and is also able to invest a percentage of its ongoing fundraising efforts, and earnings from the endowment in innovation, impact and culturally responsive work. MFS may therefore be somewhat unique in its ability to deploy resources to organizational development. This is far from typical across the nation, a fact that is relevant for considering applications of learnings to other organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review seeks to answer two main questions: what is known about comprehensive organizational change where racial equity and cultural responsiveness are developed, and what is known about cultural responsiveness within specific programs, both in terms of its benefits for clients, and elements of various initiatives. The section closes with identifying gaps in the literature.

a. Comprehensive Organizational Change for Racial Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

Public sector services have been most prescriptive in identifying the scope of changes needed to address racial disparities. The Children's Bureau (2016) synthesizes the literature shown to reduce disparities in child welfare, highlighting the need for culturally competent services to be abundant and available throughout all points of the child welfare system from prevention to permanency decisions. They also point to the importance of addressing root causes of distress such as housing cost and adequacy, employment and income security, and disproportionality of parental incarceration. Within interventions, they promote culturally responsive assessment tools, implicit bias training that affects caseworker decisions (such as reunification decisions), and ensuring that service providers have knowledge of diverse service providers, and are dedicated to learning the cultural background of the clients being served. Precursors to systems change efforts need to be adequate data systems to identify disparities and track progress, cultural competence in hiring and training, and policy analysis to ensure that these efforts are embedded in the organization.

Juvenile justice highlights the need to address implicit bias held across decision makers in the system: "Racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system are often the result of implicit bias by key decision makers" (p.28, Soler, 2014). Beyond addressing implicit bias

(typically addressed through training), a wide range of public and philanthropic initiatives have centered on the same elements: data collection and analysis regarding disparities and progress towards disparity reduction, use of objective assessment tools, involving key decision makers (including family and community) to design and oversee systems-wide reforms that includes developing plans to reduce disparities, and creating alternatives that would keep youth at home and in their local communities (Soler, 2014). Villarruel & Walker (2002) also emphasize the importance of culturally responsive services when interventions are made available to youth. To this list, partnerships with communities of color is added, as well as diversifying the system's workforce, ensuring service providers are led by people of color, and advocacy with related systems (such as mental health and child welfare) to ensure supports exist to keep youth out of the justice system (Annie E. Casey, cited in p. 75, Villarruel & Walker, 2002).

Education holds similar advice for systems change to address disparities, focusing on curriculum instruction and assessment, school leadership, policies and practices, community and family engagement, and staff development. The combination is one that places greater emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, but also includes holding the institution accountable for improvements in meaningful engagement with families, educators, and community groups (National Education Association, 2007). Oregon's education sector has prioritized similar initiatives, with heightened focus on the assets brought into the education system through the range of communities of color being served: "We believe the rich history and culture of learners is a source of pride and an asset to embrace and celebrate" (p.3, OEIB, 2014). Higher education holds similar frameworks for improvements, and stretches beyond the need for diverse service providers (in this case instructors) to include students and administrators, and extends to the importance of systemic issues such as sufficient financial aid, and an improved educational climate. Culture is also centered, with the importance of improving the curriculum, and preparing the institution for the consequences of change, along with ensuring that an institutional commitment is clear and visible (Persico, 1990, cited by Doyle & George, 2008). This contribution also emphasizes the necessity to integrate equity and cultural responsiveness into the institution's mission and policies, moving beyond ad hoc initiatives, and focusing on sustained and responsive relationships with community stakeholders.

As a whole, these contributions move the field far beyond the earlier contributions of building "culturally competent service providers." As the literature indicates, addressing inequities requires a durable and far-reaching combination of equity-oriented initiatives and cultural responsiveness. Change must occur at the highest levels of the organization, embedded in both policy and practice, and the institution must be diligent in identifying inequities and tracking progress across time. The field of human services also needs to re-embrace cultural responsiveness, which had fallen out of favor (which at the time was known as cultural sensitivity) when heightened focus on power became leading edge through the advent of anti-oppressive practice. Birthed first in social work (Dominelli, 1998, among others), and subsequently stretching to education (Kumashiro, 2000), anti-oppressive practice has influenced the range of services connected to these fields. Paying attention to power and building strategies to boost the power and influence of service users and employees of color remains important, but tending to the range of cultural variation among clients and staff is also recommended. Today, the contributions on how to address racial disparities positions cultural responsiveness in new ways. In the 1980s, the portrayal of clients of color was as "other" with

a distinctive set of cultural experiences that needed to be known by the provider, while ignoring the typically white middle class professional identity held by staff (Yee, 2002). Critique of this approach was not just the one-sided attention to culture, but also of the companion approach that ignored racism and white privilege: “much sensitivity and empathy about the cultural adjustment of racial minorities is emphasized while discussion of racism and systemic or structural barriers remains hidden” (p.36. Yee, 2002). Yee goes further: “cultural competency frameworks help to support the present dominant-subordinate relations experiences by ethno-racial minority clientele in social service agencies... focusing on the cultural values of various ethnic groups works to perpetuate stereotypes and generalizations that indirectly compare these groups to the dominant culture group” (p.40). This remains a caution for cultural responsiveness, even when it is combined with interrogating whiteness and racism, and recognizing that inequities exist within organizations through policy, practice and discourse, and need to be addressed.

b. What is known about the effectiveness of culturally responsive programs?

The first approach to review is that of bringing staff of color into the organization to better infuse the staff team with those who share racial identities with clients, and even if racial matching is not possible, staff of color hold lived experiences of racism and cultural insights into what it means to live outside of dominant cultural norms. This research is best developed in education, which is able to identify the consequences of educators of color and the academic impact on students of color. Benefits are noted in higher graduation rates, reduced discipline rates, higher test scores and stronger college attendance rates (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Dee, 2004 and 2005; Ehrenberg, Goldhaber & Brewer, 1995; Gershenson, Holt & Papageorge, 2016). The benefits of racial matching in counseling services are also clear: same race pairing yields greater understanding of client issues, and a sense of responsibility for positive client outcomes: “most reported being able to relate to issues their clients faced... allowed them to tailor interventions to make them more effective” (p.371-72, Goode-Cross, 2011). Solidarity with clients also was in evidence, due to shared experiences with racism and discrimination. Such therapists are able to provide clients with strategies for navigating white society with less damage to the client. Emotional investment holds potential to positively impact clients, although research is advised to track the benefits for clients. It is also possible that the strength of these connections might contribute to “over-investment” by the counselor and a distraction from therapeutic gains for the client (Goode-Cross, 2011). Other studies show that racial matching between staff and clients has been connected to fewer premature departures, increased use of services, improved mental health outcomes and life skills functioning as well as being retained and services for longer periods of time (Hohman & Galt, 2001). In community practice, Rivera & Erlich (2001) asserted that organizers are most effective under the following condition: “the most successful organizers are those activists who can identify with their communities culturally, racially and linguistically. There is no stronger identification with a community than truly being a part of it” (p.264).

These literatures affirm the importance of diversity among staff, and providing for an abundance of staff who share the racial identities of the clients who are served. To strengthen the stability of diversification processes in an organization, research identifies the benefits of mentoring and employee resource (or affinity) groups. Mentoring has been identified as holding the potential to develop leaders and to retain staff who find better opportunities elsewhere. Making such supports available both helps to attract diverse staff, as well as to move

more staff of color into senior positions (Benschop, Holgersson, Brink & Wahl, 2015). Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) have long been identified as beneficial to retention of staff of color, but their maximum benefit comes from the range of benefits they provide, including a space to confirm staff experiences of microaggressions, to build networks, to nourish its members, and to build influence within the organization to catalyze responses to issues (Sue, 2010). This obviously requires a willing leader, who will turn to the ERG for expertise and advice. The creation of ERGs many also be useful for white staff, who can use these protected spaces for wrestling with their defensiveness about racism and microaggressions (Blitz & Kohl, 2012).

The private sector is in the forefront of building the evidence base for the benefits of staffing diversity. Research demonstrates that diverse groups, while taking longer to make decisions, are recognized for considering multiple viewpoints and subsequently make better informed and more effective decisions to address problems (Hewlett, Marshall & Sherbin, 2013; Levine, Apfelbaum et al, 2014) and furthermore to improve business strategies and subsequently profits (Chamberlain, 2015; Herring, 2009; Kerby & Burns, 2012; Levine & Stark, 2015). Diversity and equity is also shown to assist with recruiting talented and diverse candidates (Kerby & Burns, 2012; Sue, 2010)

A small but growing set of studies demonstrate how specific equity initiatives benefit patients in health care settings. Sanchez, Ybarra, Chapa & Martinez (2016) highlight practices that foster better patient outcomes. Two related dimensions of integrated care and culturally and linguistically competent providers have been shown to reduce mental health disparities. These are what could be called “pull” factors of the institution that diminish resistance to seeking support (and overriding the delay in treatment being sought), and “retention” factors that retain a patient in the organization once help is sought. The pull factors include the organization’s reputation, the degree of information and outreach that is available, and linguistic access. The retention factors include the presence of providers who screen, diagnose and treat in culturally relevant ways, and the availability of patient navigators (or advocates) who address service barriers, link clients to community supports, and reach out to those who miss appointments. Patient navigators hold potential to reduce disparities facing Native American patients (Krebs, Burhansstipanov et al, 2013). Penner, Blair, Albrecht, & Dovidio (2014) reinforce the importance of having accountability structures in place that oversee the racial bias that health providers are prone to enact. Data that tracks quality of services and service outcomes is essential.

Additional research identifies the benefits of a welcoming and inclusive environment to support parent involvement, which is linked, particularly for students of color, to higher educational attainment:

Over 50 years of research links the various roles that families play in a child’s education – as supporters of learning, encouragers of grit and determination, models of lifelong learning, and advocates of proper programing and placements for their child...when combined with other essential supports such as strong school leadership, a high-quality faculty, community engagement and partnership, a student-centered learning climate, and effective instructional guidance for staff. (p.5, Mapp & Kuttner, 2013)

Education has also focused on addressing racial bias, recognizing that it seeps into the classroom and harms students of color. Research identifies that 96% of teachers show negative bias towards children of color (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014). Most often, educators do not recognize this bias, and when bias is not acknowledged, it worsens (Staats, Capatosto, Wright & Contractor, 2015). Education has also generated research in the benefits of youth voice. Mitra (2004) and Voight (2014) identify that youth engagement in school improvement efforts are associated with stronger school connections and experiences of belonging. Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felton (2011) identified that schools that meaningfully engage students as co-creators of curriculum and pedagogy serves to strengthen overall academic achievement. By extension, we can anticipate that service user involvement in both oversight and quality improvement measures hold potential to create greater reciprocity between staff and clients, and subsequently stronger client outcomes.

While these bodies of research are, on the surface, divergent from the field of non-profit community-based youth and family services, they are likely to prove directly relevant across time. Core elements are staff who share racial, cultural and linguistic identities with those served, organizations that provide a more holistic and comprehensive set of supports (as opposed to narrow or compartmentalized interventions), relationships where clients experience understanding and acceptance, accountability structures (including data systems and organizational advocates) that ensure some groups of clients do not face lower quality services, training that supports awareness of issues and explicit attention to how to practice in culturally responsive ways, services that have are engaged in becoming more culturally responsive and relevant, and pathways for clients to have meaningful roles in organizational quality improvement. Diversification is also re-inserting itself as a central element to both equity and cultural responsiveness. Diversifying staff means that organizations are hiring more proactively, identifying core skills they seek as related to equity, experience and understanding, and integrating both culture and structures that seek to both retain and promote into leadership roles a range of staff of color.

At the helm need to be organizational leaders who move the work forwards and imprint on the culture and motivation for sustaining a focus on racial equity. In earlier literature, supervisors had been perceived as responsible for a healthy climate includes related roles such as structures that support task clarity, attention to staff development in ways that support organizational objectives, job roles that are rewarding and supportive, and an environment of inclusion and collaboration (Bunker & Wijnberg, 1985). Recently, Walter, Ruiz & Tourse et al (2017) affirmed the importance of organizational leaders as cultural leaders and in supporting the organization's ability to address its biases.

As this literature review closes, we note that while there is emerging agreement on a range of equity-oriented structures, and features of culturally responsive programs, there remains little research on non-profit human service organizations and their progress towards racial equity. The journey includes improvements in both the equity and cultural arenas, alongside strong leadership and staffing diversification. As will be shown in the findings section, MFS demonstrates alignment with numerous elements of the features surfaced in the literature, and adds three innovations that have yet to appear in the literature. While replication is not plausible or desired (for the context will always be different), the experiences of MFS can surface possibilities and cautions for others.

RESEARCH METHODS

This case study is rooted in two IRB-approved studies run through Portland State University and the author of this article was the principal investigator in both studies. First conducted in 2015/16 was research designed to understand the organization's experience in doing a racial equity assessment, and the gains noted, along with challenges impeding progress. Second (in 2016/17) as part of a multi-partner study, Metropolitan Family Service engaged in a two-part study of how the organization interprets its assets and how clients valued these assets. An in-person Delphi study and a subsequent consumer voice study were the selected methods. Additional focus groups were conducted by MFS to develop their "relationship model" that defines how they engage effectively with a range of clients of color.

Both projects are combined for this case study research, implementing a mixed methods approach, and focused on gathering in-depth insights from both staff and clients. In the staff arena, three focus groups (N=16), three half-day consensus building retreats with long-term racially diverse staff (N=10, using the Delphi method), two interviews with key informants (the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Strategy Officer), document reviews (primarily the equity and diversity assessments, action plans and job postings), and an electronic survey of 28 staff were conducted. Thirty questions asked staff to identify progress on eight racial equity domains. With clients, a survey gathered in the input of 187 clients, a focus group (N=5), and interviews with an additional 18 clients were conducted. In order to maximize linguistic access, the survey was translated from English into Spanish and Russian, allowing 89% of the organization's client base to work in their original languages.

Recruitment took varied forms. For staff, we aimed for and achieved full involvement of all members of the executive team and the equity team, included in focus groups and interviews. For the staff survey, all were invited to participate, and we received a response rate of approx. 28%, which is just shy of an average response rate of one-third among employee surveys. In the Delphi study, the Data Administrator worked with the executive team to identify and invite staff who met the following criteria: have deep knowledge of the organization's services and culture, drawn from service user and/or professional experience; strength in working collaboratively; agreement with the goals of the study; diversity in ethnic identity, age, gender, professional/community roles, and; length of affiliation. All ten nominated agreed to participate. For clients, access to service users was typically facilitated by program staff, and there were varying degrees of willingness to share program time to administer these surveys. Participants were racially diverse, at 37% Latino, 29% white, 13% Asian, 12% Slavic, 5% Black and the remainder being Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and North African. Numbers were too small to disaggregate for specific communities. Broad representation across programs was secured, with the largest programs generating the highest participation, including a comprehensive youth education support, youth who did after school activities, family support programs, and, to a lesser degree, accessing a food pantry, parenting skill development, and financial support programs. While research staff aimed to gain access to all programs at roughly representational levels, this was not possible.

Client survey numbers fell a little short of being a representative sample, with 187 surveys creating a confidence interval of ± 6.95 , while we had aimed for 5.0. Dialogues were considerable about how to increase responses, and getting this close was an achievement. The time period (winter 2017) of data collection coincided with Donald Trump's election, and the

results for many communities of color have caused this human service organization (among others) to spend time supporting clients facing persecution as undocumented and increasingly overt and damaging racism. As a result, staff priorities shifted and client crises took much more time in programs, thus limiting access of researchers to program participants and gathering data became impossible in some program sites.

Transcripts of focus groups and interviews were analyzed using conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994), using a “mind map” recording system to support the customizing of matrices and building grounded theory, drawing from iterative, constant comparison, line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including open coding, selective coding, and identification of narrative lines. Analyses of these data reflect the credibility standards identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985): member checking, triangulation (interviews, focus groups and surveys), peer debriefing and negative case analysis. Survey data were analyzed by reviewing means, distribution patterns, and disaggregation for white and minority racialized participants.

The Delphi research was conducted over three four-hour sessions, with a nominated ten-person team, including representatives from each department and included management and line staff. The Delphi participants were charged with identifying, via consensus, the assets they believed were responsible for the organization’s effective service of clients and communities of color. The process involved generative processes for surfacing the insights of various stakeholders and subsequent rounds of dialogues and activities for identifying areas of convergence and divergence. Final activities supported establishing consensus among staff perspectives. To address the potential for undue influence being held by senior administrators, most of the dialogue sessions were separated into two groups (management and non-management).

Through the Delphi study, consensus was built on a set of ten organizational and nineteen staffing features that participants perceived as responsible for the organization’s beneficial client results, which will be identified later in this paper. Following the Delphi, a six-month consumer voice study involved hiring and training two community researchers one of whom was already a community member (Slavic) and part-time employee of the organization, and the second was a Latina with prior experience as a community researcher. As a team, their efforts focused on administering the survey that operationalized the Delphi insights. Among the surveys, 70.8% were completed by clients of color. Note that local politics and dialogue has determined that three non-conventional communities of color are recognized alongside the four standard communities of color. In total, the following groups are considered minority racialized in the region: African American, Indigenous, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, plus Slavic (defined as refugees from the former Soviet Union), Middle Eastern and North African (Curry-Stevens et al, 2010).

Checks on reliability were conducted through member checking with the executive-level staff to maximize the accuracy of the data analysis and the representation of the organizations to facilitate their discernment about “going public” with these findings. Revisions made did not compromise the integrity of the analysis.

Research Findings

While a narrative retelling of MFS's journey held potential for inclusion in this article, the scope of their intentions, activities and outcomes made it a dense story. Instead, the author (along with advice from two reviewers) decided to synthesize the journey to focus on its gains. Five categories are shared: (a) early gains, (b) longer-term gains and what contributed to these gains, (c) leadership elements that support the journey, (d) what staff have come to learn about key elements of the equity journey, and (e) the emerging counseling model that staff perceive as responsible for high valuation of the organization by clients of color.

a. Early gains

Metropolitan Family Service initially began with a diversification and staff training journey in 2006 as many do, recognizing the need to diversify its staff, and improve cultural competence among its direct service staff. It also affirmed, beyond the typical focus of organizations beginning their equity journey, the importance of culture in service delivery. Accomplishments, as detailed below, are tied to these goals.

A cautionary note exists in these early gains: overreliance on training and human resource adaptations to support racial equity occurred, and later remedied with a broader initiative. In the early days, the initiative was narrowly focused, and neglected some of the root causes that limited the efforts to diversity hiring. When the broader features of equity change are not tended, tokenistic results can emerge. This is not to say there was any intention towards limiting the organization's uptake more broadly, the two-part approach to fixing inequities (training and human resources shifts that were prioritized by the diversity assessment), and a relatively limited role for partnerships, caused neither to be profoundly successful.

Looking retrospectively with widespread data as provided in the research project allows us to discern that early gains were identified within the first five years of the initiative. While important, the larger benefits to clients, to the organization's reputation and to staffs' lived experience of the organization began to emerge after about seven to ten years of the equity initiative.

i. Training and cultural awareness

Training focused on understanding racism and white privilege, working with personal reflection and deep critical self-awareness, and deeper learning about implicit bias. The organization held a vision to help shift the awareness of the whole organization and trainings were offered to all staff and partner organizations on a monthly-basis for two years. Including all staff in this initiative was a strong idea, ensuring that staff moved along with the emerging cultural shift of the organization. Note that at the same time, leadership among executive staff is essential – if staff do not perceive themselves to experience racial respect nor see executives demonstrate such respect to clients, they are unlikely to aspire to equity-infused values of honor, respect and inclusion.

ii. Hiring practices

Hiring practices involved reducing academic expectations wherever possible, and defining that sought-after education levels could be waived if the candidate held equivalent experience. A sample of this language, used in a posting, is "degree preferred or equivalent and relevant experience required." Second languages were added as "strongly preferred." There was

additional salary compensation added for any position where a second language was needed for a specific position. These marked beginning steps in recruitment improvements and began to diversify those applying for positions.

iii. Partnerships

Early on, MFS worked collegially with an array of partners. Most significantly, some partners were culturally specific organizations (CSOs) that are organizations designed by, accountable to and service specific communities of color. CSOs delivered some training for MFS, including basic Spanish classes as staff sought to build some ability to communicate with Latino clients, and advised MFS on avenues to strengthen the cultural dimensions of their programs. This advising role was an important signal that expertise in serving communities of color rests most astutely in communities of color.

iv. Diversity Committee

The first “Diversity Action Team” adopted three goals: creating an open and safe place for staff to discuss issues related to diversity, social justice and equity; pressing forward with organizational priorities of training and hiring improvements, and; creating policies to support respect for all cultures being served. It led the creation of a set of organizational values that is integrated into every job description. The statement is titled, “Diversity” and includes the following elements: “values working in a multi-cultural, diverse environment; values and supports inclusion and program access for clients, and; supports agency goals for enhancing diversity within program areas” (MFS, 2010).

The team was largely a gathering of senior management staff, across departments. Of interest, the first organizational assessment was conducted apart from this team, led by executive staff. This decision narrowed the opportunity for a larger and more diverse group to be involved in the initiative, and build relevant capacities for deeper equity practice.

v. Early Cultural Gains

MFS has come to understand the importance of culture in establishing both services that are relevant for clients, and for creating an atmosphere that is inclusive and welcoming of a range of communities. The organization credits its partnerships with CSOs for helping to develop this understanding, and later in expanding their understanding of the centrality of culture in client experiences, and to their CEO, Judy Strand, for demonstrating this belief at an early stage of its equity work. Strand embraced the concept that she is the organization’s “chief cultural officer” (McCracken, 2009), a position advanced by organizations making gains in equity and inclusion at an Alliance for Strong Families and Communities annual conference attended by MFS. As stated by the MFS Deputy Director, Matt Bartolotti:

That doesn’t mean they need to be an intercultural expert, or that they need special or deep knowledge of any particular culture, but they must have a belief that is fundamental to themselves as a person that culture matters, culture counts, structural inequities exist and persists and we must strive to honor and elevate the value that all cultures bring in our pursuit of our personal truth or our organizational mission. We were fortunate that our CEO had just such an orientation and whole-heartedly empowered many of us at MFS to help guide the agency further down its path toward cultural responsiveness. (personal communication, 2018), While not explicit, the organization began to dig seriously into being culturally affirming of the ranges of cultures served by the organization. In Strand’s words, clients needed to be “accepted

for who they are... and feel supported by those around them.” Part of this effort was to diversify the sites where programs were offered, branching out into schools, community centers, and partner organizations around the region, as “going to where people are” was part of cultural inclusion efforts. Gaining a stronger palpable and explicit sense of what cultural inclusion means, take shape over a longer period of time and are expanded upon in the next section.

b. Longer-term gains

Longer-term gains began to appear once data systems were in place, and when the organization built sufficient capacity to articulate equity and to define the features to which they aspired. Progress at this juncture – about 12 years into their journey – is, overall, observable, energizing and self-reinforcing. While improvements can be made (and detailed in the next section), the organization has made significant progress.

i. *Client benefits*

Most importantly, and one that we must remember to set as the primary objective in a racial equity journey, MFS has improved service outcomes with clients of color. Three program evaluations confirm its effectiveness. First, MFS is closing the achievement gap in Latino students’ school performance via its early learning intervention, sustaining these benefits from 3rd to 6th grade. Second, it is improving literacy levels in young children through intergenerational mentoring, with 62% of clients being of color, and 54% being ELL. Among these students, 95% of teachers say program had moderate to strong impact on improving students’ reading and literacy performance. Third, within its programs to support financial capability, 82% are of color, with results showing that 58% increased their credit scores, 86% increased financial literacy, 43% reduced use of public assistance, and 55% have increased their income.

Another measure of service quality is that of client satisfaction. While client satisfaction does not necessarily mean that clients are benefitting or that disparities are reducing, MFS’s clients of color are highly satisfied with the organization, with an overall score of 86.5%. We calculated this through measuring how many of the 36 survey questions were given an “excellent” or “good” score by clients (which on the five-point Likert scale were the top two categories). This compares favorably with a nationwide score of 76% across institutions (American Customer Satisfaction Index, 2018). This composite score for MFS is the same when disaggregating the results for white clients and for clients of color, which is an excellent affirmation of the overall satisfaction level.

The literature shows that clients of color are likely to be more dissatisfied with mainstream (or dominant culture) organizational services (Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2007; Terwilliger, Bach, Bryan & Williams, 2013). Given that the majority of these respondents in our survey were clients of color (70.8%), we can safely assume that the nationwide satisfaction scores would diminish if the responses were primarily by clients or customers of color. When we disaggregated survey data by race, there were eight of the 36 questions where white clients rated the organization more favorably (by at least ten percentage points), and three where clients of color rated the organization more favorably. While these numbers do not measure up to standards for significance, they are illustrative of some differences that are worthy of further exploration. For example, these are statements rated weaker by clients of color:

- This organization stands up on issues that help me and people like me get treated better;

- The types of services provided are a good fit for people from my culture;
- White staff in the organization are aware of and acknowledge their privilege;
- I can count on this organization to do what is right and fair when it comes to challenges my family or community faces.

Clients in the organization value more than direct service provision. The dominant discourse in service provision is largely transactional, meaning that clients come for a service and value the individual benefits gained from the intervention. This research indicates this is an erroneous assumption. MFS clients value the range of what the organization does, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

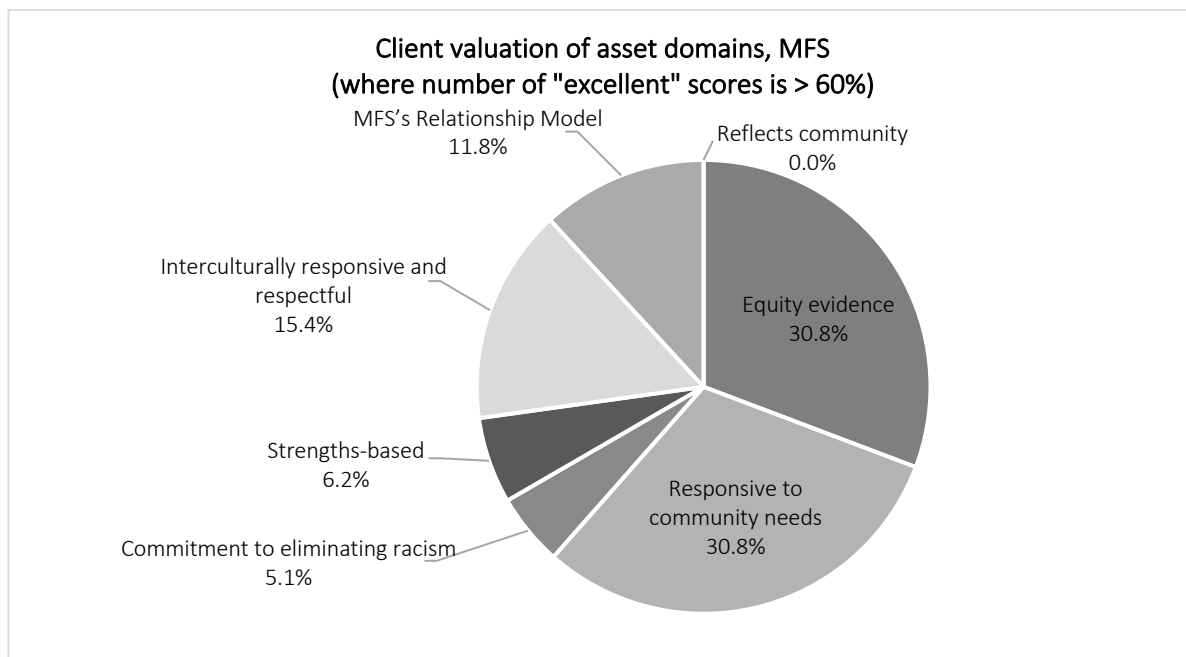


Figure 1: Balance of high scores in the Consumer Voice survey

An exception is that clients did not highly value “reflects the community” as a domain of the organization’s equity aspirations. This may indicate that the community served by MFS was difficult to identify, or that clients did not see the community or culture reflected in the organization, possibly because of the diverse range of communities served. In summary, important gains are demonstrated by these results, and while universal support for its cultural relevance, equity and advocacy is still in the distance, positive signs of progress exist.

ii. Expanded staffing capacity for equity and inclusion

Staff training continued to deepen, as the organization implemented onboarding practices that oriented new staff to the priority and substance of equity in the organization, fully across all roles. The organization also is integrating the resources profiled in this article. MFS also prioritized training part-time staff and underwrote the cost of attending training to ensure awareness and capacity building for improved practice was adequately rooted in all staff. Over the years, as a result of both training and improved hiring decisions, staff have deepened their understanding of both the upstream conditions that lead to downstream distress, and the ways that legacies of colonization, xenophobia and racism intersect with white privilege and result

in diminished life opportunities for communities of color. MFS staff are able to apply an equity analysis to understand why and how clients of color might make more limited progress towards their goals than white clients.

Additional awareness has been gained regarding the experiences of staff of color who are likely to be marginalized and face microaggressions in mainstream organizations where they serve clients.

iii. Culturally responsive programs and interventions

At the service level, the organization has been on a multiyear journey to understand diverse cultures, and to support staff in their demonstration of cultural knowledge. MFS has focused on improving its programs' cultural responsiveness, and brought seven core approaches into its work, calling this its "equity lens" in how it works with clients: (a) paying attention to who is not included in the program and whose voices are missing (and aiming to rectify omissions through additional outreach and inclusion practices), (b) being critically reflexive staff who increase their self-awareness of their biases, (c) understanding the richness and complexity of the range of cultures being served, celebrating these stories and seeing strengths in communities and clients, (d) demonstrating confidence in clients' worthiness and their ability to prosper, (e) guarding against assumptions by asking questions about the cultural dimensions of clients' lives, (f) being trauma-informed and seeking to focus on "what has happened to you?" instead of a more common approach that asks "what is wrong with you?" and (g) materials increasingly translated to expand accessibility.

In an effort to be more comprehensive and proactive, MFS decided to develop their own intervention model of how to be effective in working with clients of color. Aiming to extend cultural responsiveness in its programs, and recognizing that no single cultural group holds a dominant presence in the organization, the organization needs to work with cultural knowledge and affirmation, but the existing resources available are typically tied to a singular cultural group, such as Afro-centric counseling. To develop this model, a series of five focus groups with more than 30 long-term staff, and a staff working group to craft the text, gathered with the goal of identifying "how MFS staff use their relational assets to help service users of many different backgrounds and identities achieve their many different goals" (p.103, Curry-Stevens et al, 2018).

The nature of this exploration was challenging as MFS serves a wide range of racial and cultural groups. They knew that authentic and respectful relationships are essential to the success of clients, and particularly for clients of color, as discerned by the experiences of front-line staff. CSOs have an easier time with centering race and culture in their programs, as there is a (relatively) singular culture to focus upon. For MFS, they are aiming to center Latino, Slavic, African American, Asian and Indigenous communities, which requires a reconceptualization of culturally-centric programs. Simply adding a range of cultural customs, and hiring a diverse range of staff is not desired, as such an approach would return us to the deficiencies of cultural competence (as unattainable) and multiculturalism (as insufficient to respond to racism, colonization and whiteness).

MFS has codified their insights, creating a Relationship Model that responds to their multicultural context and integrates anti-racism approaches as well. The core elements are

included in Figure 2. The approach is characterized by recognizing the centrality of relationship, understanding the efforts needed from staff to build trust, alongside recognition that with every new client a new approach may be needed. Holistic responses to need are required, alongside a strengths-based approach. Staff need to be critically self-reflective, including unlearning biases, and maintaining diligence in connecting with clients, and continually learning both cultural and societal assets and challenges for the community. The framework also identifies the need for management to resource and support this initiative.

Figure 2: The MFS Relationship Model

Core Foundations of the MFS Relationship Model

- We believe that relationships are at the core of our effectiveness, as those we serve benefit from our ability to work interculturally;
- We recognize that intercultural work is different and in some ways more challenging than working within a shared culture, and we believe that acknowledging that is crucial to delivering quality services in an intercultural context;
- We also believe that administration and management need to respond so as to support this cultural work.

Core Practices that Require Intentional Effort

a. Intercultural Approach

- Persistence, respect and perseverance are key to intercultural work; we know it will often take more time and effort to develop the trust required for high quality intercultural relationships;
- We know that services are not “one size fits all,” so we embrace a culture of continuous experimentation and learning to ensure we’re meeting service users where they need to be met;
- Honesty with ourselves, accountability to oneself, humility, genuine curiosity and respect are essential for understanding the ways in which and reasons why we encounter challenges connecting with people from a different culture than our own;
- We know that each individual is an individual, and we don’t assume that any person is an emblem of their culture—or that we are one of our own;
- We seek to understand the whole person and consider it a moral duty to affirm their identity. This beyond the reasons for which they seek services in a way that understands boundaries, limits and when the person wants to share;
- We strive to maintain awareness of the full range political, social or other environmental contexts in which service users must also navigate.

b. Emphasis Matters

- We understand that one of the most important aspects of relationship building is thoughtfully choosing what to emphasize within the relationship. This is why we always operate on the basis of emphasizing a service user’s strengths and resilience;
- We talk about “possibility and opportunity” rather than framing situations as being “problems and crises”;
- We understand that professionalism is important, but we also believe that professionalism exists within the context of a holistic relationship and respect; as such, we judge that the way we display professionalism is what is appropriate to each individual relationship;

- We believe in the ability of every service user to thrive, even when working with them is challenging.
- c. ***Empathy Undergirds All***
- We explore possibilities, often through asking questions, rather than defaulting to providing answers and advice;
 - The most important part is to observe all the time: we strive to be respectful and aware of non-verbal communication differences so as to best understand our service users, especially where language barriers exist;
 - We strive to be non-judgmental and supportive, using an equity lens to assess and address our own bias;
 - We understand that power dynamics can be inherent in social services work, so we strive to ensure that service users feel respected and we address our privilege.

For MFS, questions remain about the adequacy of this model. To some extent, the relationship specifics have been largely unstated. Some wonder if it is possible to codify. It is also difficult to be sure that the codification effort (represented in Figure 2) is accurate. Can more privileged staff truly interpret what is useful to less privileged clients? This might point to the need for an additional research study to listen to clients about the features of their relationships with staff that are most valuable. While this was begun in the client survey, interviews and focus groups, the specifics of relationships with staff were not investigated at depth. Those who participated in its development are certain, however, that they need to reconfigure their constructs of “professionalism” in order to temper its “expertise” emphasis and have professionalism be understood in a more constrained and tempered manner. This insight aligns with critical approaches in counseling programs, where the power held by the professional service provider is understood as potentially disempowering for clients and where expert power fundamentally requires clients to be deficient (Mandell, 2007; McKnight, 1995).

The development of the MFS Relationship Model deepens the capacity to provide culturally responsive and respectful services, and this work is seen as an early contribution that will continue to be strengthened. It is currently applied to staff training and hiring.

iv. Sustaining the work: Updated assessments and action plans

When MFS transitioned their Diversity Committee to an Equity Committee, it moved solidly beyond patchwork and potentially tokenistic responses to inequity. This was an important shift that widened the scope of equity considerations, including less-recognized domains such as service user voice, community collaboration, resource allocation and contracting practices, and data, metrics and quality improvement.

In 2014-2015, MFS conducted its second organizational assessment, completing a 21-page assessment and an action plan that included the following goals: (1) disaggregate data, (2) create an equity statement that obligates the organization to sustain the work, and set annual goals including to report progress to the Board, (3) create an equity lens to assist the organization with key decisions, (4) conduct broader staff training in becoming culturally responsive, and (5) expanding Board engagement in equity. The assessment also became an intervention itself, holding more significant dialogues than the first. The dialogues normalized both critique of the organization’s practices and allowed for pride in achievements to surface.

It is important that authentic dialogues occur, and normalizing critique is essential. Staff have noticed that the presence of senior staff occasionally “chill” frank conversation, so having staff-only dialogues was also integrated. Following the formal assessment meetings, staff describe they feel more comfortable to raise issues, having been affirmed in their critique.

As is shown in the subsequent text, most goals have been achieved, and the organization is well poised, after a two-year investment in building its data system, to identifying its own racial disparities in services. Perhaps surprising is that the equity journey for MFS is now more than a decade and it is just now becoming able to discern the most important dimensions of the work – how its own clients are faring within its services.

An indicator of how well equity work is now grounded in the organization is the staff survey and responses to one survey question: “our work on racial equity is valued across the organization.” This was the most positively rated equity indicator as 65% of respondents said significant progress was made here, and additional 26% said progress had been made. The Equity Team’s work also received strong staff recognition, with 68% of respondents giving top rating to, “We have an equity team that is effective in moving equity forward” and a further 23% identify that solid progress is seen.

Without strong leadership, training to build both capacity and commitment, and reinforcement from community partners that its credibility was deepening, these gains would be unlikely.

The organization’s Equity Team is now well-poised for moving the initiative forward, benefiting highly from shifting beyond diversity to tackle issues related to racial equity and inclusion, including whiteness and anti-racism practice. On the horizon is to integrate a stronger involvement in systemic and individual advocacy, extending this commitment to the Board as well as staff. Having a budget available for this effort is important.

v. Disaggregated data systems for clients

In 2015, MFS began to develop a system to collect race and ethnicity data for clients. Their categories followed the Coalition of Communities of Color’s advice for expansive categories that are about three times more specific than those of the federal requirements for racial disaggregation, affording clients the ability to self-define their identity according to their preferences. These improvements support MFS’s capacity to disaggregate client access to services and their outcomes with clients. That said, development of this system took more than two years, and in 2018 began to generate program data that was disaggregated. In one example, MFS has become aware that among their own client base Black and Latino clients are under-accessing the Earned Income Tax Credit at levels below other communities, while Slavic, White and Asian clients are attaining access at higher-than-average levels. In response, management brought these data to program staff with a structure they call “data carousels” whereby conversations occur with staff to identify both sources of the disparity and actions that can remedy the situation. This allows for an informal, dialogue-based exploration with staff surfacing opportunities to address issues.

The organization now has a data system to ensure that client and staff tracking can be disaggregated by race and ethnicity, which is essential for any serious equity effort to be able to identify organizational disparities and track progress.

vi. Staff diversification

MFS has made important gains in service outcomes, the first of which is its diversification of staff, moving from 20% staff of color to 50% over about a decade. This is important in a region which is 30% people of color, although when focusing on families living in poverty (set at under \$24,000/year), the number surges to 46.1% of the regions' families being of color (American Community Survey, 2011-2015 data). This level was reached in 2015, nine years into their equity journey.

In terms of understanding how this gain was made, there are four factors believed responsible: the first is that the emerging culture of inclusion became more widely recognized in the community and more candidates of color were interested in applying to work at MFS. Second, recruitment improved when human resources integrated equity directly into the job call and job description, regardless of the position being filled. The language used has not improved much from the earlier gains, and now positions the equity values under the category of "Diversity and Equity:

- "Values working in a multi-cultural, diverse environment
- Values and supports inclusion and program access for clients
- Supports agency goals for enhancing diversity and equity within program areas" (MFS, 2017, unpublished)

Improvements can still be attained: a review of job descriptions reveals that more direct appeal to candidates of color can occur. Greater inclusion of equity responsibilities within the core roles of each position would assure that staff are held accountable to equity obligations in team work, collegial practices, and substantive roles. This is not to diminish the progress made, merely to signal that the journey continues in the human resources arena. Importantly, the early focus on removing hiring barriers has broadened to affirm and define the cultural climate of the organization. It is now time to extend this to include equity-related skills in each job and domain of responsibilities.

vii. Deep community partnerships

MFS credits deepening relationships with leaders of CSOs for much of their improved services. MFS partnered more intentionally and contracted more regularly with such partners when this expertise was needed. This approach was in part what led to four CSOs to invite MFS to participate in a local collective impact project that sought to identify the assets of culturally specific and culturally responsive service provision, and to leverage these assets to improve educational outcomes for children of color and to increase the likelihood that clients and their families could move out of poverty.

Sometimes, achieving strong outcomes meant stepping back from opportunities when it was clear that the community was better served by culturally specific partners, a stance that MFS has sometimes taken. In 2015, a local funder decided to rebalance its allocations, moving 30% of its funding from mainstream organizations and directing it to CSOs, one of whom was part of the collective impact project. This resulted in a dramatic loss of one-fifth of MFS's funding – a difficult period. The loss of staff positions was moderated somewhat by supporting their hire by the new grantee. Still, the CEO for MFS spoke in favor of the change publicly in order to support the new provider's transition. This is an important story, where CEO Strand demonstrated leadership according to the values of the organization, to the emerging collective

impact project which hoped for her support for the strength of all partners, and focused on strengthening MFS' culturally responsive work.

MFS has also distinguished itself for the durable and considerable commitment it has made to its racial equity journey, when it was invited to join a collective impact initiative in 2013 by four culturally specific organizations (CSOs) that have been influential in the region. It was the sole additional organization invited into this partnership.

viii. *Culture of Inclusion*

Several interconnected initiatives are woven through this section. To begin, the organization has deepened its culture of respect, bringing cultural affirmation into both the organization's general culture of welcome and affirmation, but also into specific program elements where multiple cultures are celebrated, shared, and connections are encouraged between clients in a range of cultures. A practice of staff is to avoid making assumptions and instead ask questions of clients. This, in the words of one staff, serves to combat negative stereotyping that suggests some clients are "worthless... and they experience relief and build confidence... when staff help clients prosper and believe they are worth it." Additional dimensions are the development and implementation of an equity lens, expansion of sites of service delivery, and integration of more holistic approaches to service delivery. Confirmation that equity is becoming well rooted in the organization has occurred through staff feedback (through the survey) and clients affirming (again, through the survey) that they experience welcome and positive regard. While we cannot definitely say that a culture of inclusion and belonging exists in the organization, it seems palpable from several perspectives. More details of these threads follow next.

MFS has created and begun use of an equity lens. Such a tool creates an intentional set of questions and considerations that foregrounds equity considerations in both decision-making processes and substances of interventions. This is a strategy that has been advocated within local governments as the "Equity and Empowerment Lens" (Balajee, 2012) was designed initially within the local health department and subsequent had regional uptake. The MFS Equity Lens focuses attention on whose voices are heard in the topic at hand, aiming to incorporate community input, and to make decisions that help dismantle institutional, cultural and individual racism, including building relationships with those affected by the decision and with reminders to listen deeply to affected communities. The Lens also focuses on building empowered communities, and ensuring that results are tracked to make sure that wellbeing expands because of decisions.

MFS recognizes that change needs to occur in many areas for the organization to truly be inclusive. Progress on all objectives proved impossible, given that the organization prioritized data systems improvements (a heavy lift!), training, and new programs. For example, integrating service user voice has been on the back burner. So although progress on several initiatives were stalled, creating both an equity lens, as well as a counseling model (as detailed in Figure 2) allowed for broader uptake of equity in decision-making (through the lens) and service relationships (through the counseling model).

MFS continues to expand sites where they deliver services, showing they operationalize inclusion to include making their geographic locations accessible. They also are expanding to more holistic approaches to service delivery, where they are willing to serve the whole family.

While funding often prevents this, the organization continues to raise funds to expand this possibility. An example is that a child development program also invites families to access services for financial wellbeing, food access and case management, wherever possible. The ethic of service providers is “reach out and try to equalize some things... try to give folk who we know were not given a fair shake at birth some opportunities to overcome that” (Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, 2018).

Progress is affirmed within the staff survey conducted in 2016, with 40% saying that significant progress towards equity and inclusion had been made and additional 40% saying that progress had been made. Other highlights include:

- Our organization’s executive leaders are committed to racial equity (64% in top rating of “significant progress”);
- Our work on racial equity is valued across the organization (65% in top rating);
- We have partnerships with local communities of color that help improve racial equity in our organization (57% in top rating);
- We participate in advocacy that improves racial equity in the region (50% in top rating).

These results show that staff are noticing leadership’s commitment, that staff are deeply aligned with racial equity goals, that the organization’s structures are integrating equity, and that partnerships and advocacy involvement is visible.

Not all the feedback from the 2016 survey was positive. Although only 28 of approximately 100 staff participated, experiences are solid illustrations of issues. A few challenging insights are these:

- Service based equity shows the weakest responses, with efforts to ensure staff understand the culture, history and customs of the community served being noted, but little progress notes. Linguistic access is being addressed, but few found gains being made;
- The second weakest responses are in the area of service user voice, with some progress noted in pathways for service users to provide feedback, but not in the area of the organization’s focus on racial equity.

Clients affirmed the organization’s progress towards equity. In the client survey, 88% of respondents of color said, “I see signs that the organization is working hard to include diverse people and cultures.” Another 92% said, “Staff welcome me warmly when they see me,” and 83% said, “white staff in the organization are aware of and acknowledge their privilege.” Further, 90% of clients of color rated the organization as “excellent” or “good” in the comment, “staff understand my culture.” These are very high ratings on these important cultural and inclusiveness measures.

c. Leadership characteristics

i. Cultural leadership

CEO Judy Strand demonstrated the following four leadership characteristics: modeling inclusive and respectful affirmation for staff and client cultures; building alignment among staff, donors and the Board for a vision of racial equity; supporting the equity committee and its members to press for significant organizational improvements, and; sustaining an openness to new partnerships and ideas. These tend to be transformational leadership characteristics, most

closely aligned with Kouzes & Posner's 2002 model (Northouse, 2016). While equity-oriented leadership does not necessarily align with transformative leadership, as both servant leadership and authentic leadership models can also be useful, it is well suited to advancing long-term gains. This is because it aims to support an empowered staff who align with a vision regarding social justice, and sees the organization as incrementally moving, in durable ways, towards that vision. It is also a model that espouses that one "walks their talk" and models the type of inclusion that characterizes the vision.

Strand and her senior staff have created, sustained and deepened the equity initiative. Strand's executive staff support this initiative and built capacity to lead the equity work as demonstrated through the Deputy Director's lead role in managing the second equity assessment and writing the action plan. In the words of the Deputy Director.

Top leaders embrace the importance of equity because of the people they are. Leadership sees equity as a broad, ongoing capacity building project, something that is comprehensive, bigger than a set of tools or series of trainings or organizational systems but rather something at the heart of and fundamental to the organization. (Bartolotti, 2018, personal communication)

ii. Board alignment, leadership and policy-level accountability

MFS has worked strategically and seriously with the Board of Directors to co-create opportunities to address equity issues and integrate an equity focus into routine fiduciary duties, which has been effective to move past earlier reticence (hence explaining why Board alignment did not appear as an early gain). They have subsequently formalized a serious and far-reaching commitment to equity. Board engagement is essential for achieving the most durable equity commitment, once leadership and staff have aligned on this commitment.

MFS decided not to take the easy route in reaching its Board of Directors, which is largely a policy-based board that operationalizes its governance through policy statements. Instead of preparing a statement for the Board to discuss and revise, senior staff decided to provide the Board with a facilitator who would work from the ground up, aiming to build awareness of the issues and support transformative learning on racial equity. Their equity policy, completed in 2017, includes an understanding of the root causes of inequities, principles the organization aspires to work with to reduce disparities (such as "works towards eliminating structural or institutional biases as well as individual or implicit biases that perpetuate disparities" and "challenges privilege associated with race, gender, wealth or dominant cultures"), and strategies and practices for implementation. These action items are:

- Equity and cultural responsiveness will be integrated into routine Board fiduciary functions;
- Annually, the Board will review and reflect on service user voice and needs' data to develop advocacy positioning & messaging;
- Annually MFS leadership and Board will review data from development, HR, programs, and other relevant sources to assess and reflect on strengths, shortcomings and set future goals to advance equity and cultural responsiveness;
- Board will apply an equity lens at all levels of the organization to improve community input, to inform advocacy, build relationships with communities and ensure our programs and services are relevant and meaningful to the communities we serve.

This action plan is robust and holds potential to ensure equity integration occurs throughout the organization. Its reach is wide, including advocacy engagement, community responsiveness (through service user voice and the equity lens), oversight of equity and cultural responsiveness, and monitoring of achievements and challenges.

d. Discerning key equity elements in the journey

Through the Delphi study, MFS staff agreed that there are 29 core assets that define the organization's form of being culturally responsive and equitable, and they believe that these are sufficiently present to be useful to clients of color. Officially, these 29 features are referred to as the "Delphi Assets" (identified in Figure 3) and demonstrate that a wide range of assets are perceived as essential to an organization striving to be culturally responsive.

Figure 3: Delphi Asset Lists for MFS

MFS's Organizational Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Organizations

- a. Shows evidence of progressing towards racial equity and cultural responsiveness in the organization. Priorities are in the areas of:
 - i. An annual equity assessment and action plan
 - ii. An organization-wide equity committee to plan for and drive action
 - iii. An information management system that disaggregates service and staff data by race and ethnicity
 - iv. Mandatory training in cultural responsiveness
 - v. Hiring and retention practices that support workforce diversification
 - vi. Regular and meaningful dialogue with the Board of Directors that builds commitments for equity and related policy decisions
 - vii. Budget allocation for advancing the action plan
- b. Values and seeks staff and volunteers that reflect the identities and life experiences of communities served.
- c. Invested in community success.
- d. Services adapt and evolve to remain relevant to communities served.
- e. Services are reflective of the beliefs and strengths of the communities served. As an organization, we acknowledge our strengths while being guided by the knowledge and experience of cultural specific organizations.
- f. Committed to partnerships with clients to undertake case (or 1:1) advocacy to expand racial affirmation, cultural respect, and service responsiveness in other organizations, while providing leadership opportunities for community members.
- g. Committed to a practice philosophy centered on empathy, respect and recognizing the strengths of service users
- h. Committed to building authentic relationships from which a holistic understanding of service users strengths and needs are identified
- i. Adopts anti-racism approaches to services by understanding and acknowledging systemic and individual racism and our privilege; stepping aside and supporting culturally-specific organizations when applying for contracts and delivering services; not being a silent bystander to racism.
- j. Are allies in the movements that advocate for equitable policies and disrupting currently oppressive institutions.

MFS's Staff Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Organizations

- a. Hold a vision for community success as defined by self-determination, community harmony, and prosperity.
- b. Are "culture carriers" who hold cultural expertise, not just technical expertise. Not only do they serve clients effectively with such experience, they extend the organization's cultural influence in the community and more widely.
- c. Are "cultural brokers" and work cross-culturally across agencies and sectors, and with mainstream institutions to promote cultural understanding and respect.
- d. Hold deep respect for clients, valuing the wisdom and dignity that is inherent in the community and its members.
- e. When staff do not share the identities of their clients, they acknowledge and appreciate the asset of knowing racism through direct and lived experience.
- f. Hold humility on one's own expertise and learns from clients.
- g. Respond to racism that participants experience with an immediate effort to interrupt the action.
- h. Maintains passion for the work, and the belief that their work will have a positive community impact.
- i. Deeply committed to client success.
- j. Cares for and is a nurturing supportive presence in clients' lives.
- k. Holds high expectations for clients, believing in the potential of all.
- l. Adaptable and able to identify gaps and find creative solutions to meet client needs.
- m. Maximizes availability to the client and are willing to go the extra mile. Assets are maximized when staff hold deep connections to community success.
- n. Whenever possible, speak clients' languages and make genuine efforts to understand and honor when we don't speak the same language.
- o. Strong relationships are at the center of the work, and essential for building trust.
- p. Is trustworthy and affirms for clients that all staff are trustworthy.
- q. Avoids pathologizing clients (not defined as abnormal/unhealthy).
- r. Believe in social justice and works to advance systemic change.
- s. Demonstrates courage and creativity, working "outside the box" to address challenges.
- t. Dedicated to the organizational mission.
- u. Staff exemplify and model behavior/characteristics that the organization seeks to reinforce in the community

These Delphi Assets needed a "shorthand" way to communicate the range of assets, so were categorized into seven domains:

- Equity evidence that confirms the organization is progressing towards equity;
- Responsive to community needs;
- Public and internal commitment to eliminating racism;
- Strengths-based practice;
- Interculturally responsive and respectful;
- Services provided integrate MFS's Relational Model;
- Reflects community.

In terms of aligning with these assets, MFS has recognized it needs to strengthen advocacy practice, both in individual and systemic forms. Engaging in efforts to improve the upstream conditions that lead to downstream distress is important for clients who face marginalization.

We also found that when clients of color were asked how important it was for MFS staff to “stand up to racism and discrimination that I experience due to language, culture or where I was born” 88% of respondents said it was either “totally important” or “important.” When the same survey asked clients of color to rate the organization on, “this organization stands up on issues that help me and people like me to get treated better,” the same rating was less positive at 84% but still strong. For clients who experience poverty, racism, xenophobia, and linguistic inaccessibility, finding service providers who stand in solidarity with them is essential to wellbeing and effective resistance to marginalization. The organization intends to deepen such practices. As well, the Delphi assets are being integrated into onboarding new staff, and the Delphi’s staffing asset list is informing new performance reviews and job descriptions. These lists become visionary, helping to chart staffing selection and development.

Missed opportunities and challenges

This section identifies ways in which MFS could strengthen its work. Detailed here are issues related to communications, service-based equity, and omitted equity elements that hold promise.

The organization limited its communication of findings from its second equity assessment and action plan, confirmed by the staff survey where few staff knew it had been completed or what its findings were. Limiting distribution to verbal updates during an all-staff meeting, MFS missed two important opportunities: to bring their staff along with them in the journey, to share that there is a comprehensive equity undertaking afoot. Trenerry and Paradis (2012) identify that there are five key functions of an equity assessment, and by not communicating results adequately, it narrowed the opportunity to advance all five: identify the problems and assets that exist, create impetus for serious reforms and avoid tokenistic responses, sustain a focus at the organization itself, create an accountability structure for action, and raise expectations inside and outside the organization that improvement efforts are forthcoming, and in this way, create momentum for change. Part of the challenge is in the report’s “draft” status, as the Board had not formally approved it.

In the words of a staff, and echoed in the staff survey, this creates a “shadow” over the process. If there is reticence to share the documents, the reasons need to be addressed. Other organizations have created sharable versions, in order to retain privacy when reports are overly self-revealing and hold potential to challenge the organization. This is common (as this article’s author has seen this happen more than occasionally), and it means that the final product retains an unstable status. In order to support distribution of findings and action plans, the Board needs to formally accept these types of reports, and allow staff and stakeholders to view either the originals or revised versions.

The staff survey showed lowest scores in “service based equity.” It is not surprising that client benefits might take longer to be seen, while staff perceptions of efforts and intentions might show up early. The organization is currently working on this with their Relationship Model developed in winter 2018. It seems imperative that the organization continues to deepen its capacity for culturally responsive programing, and use its new data system to support this inquiry, building insights on dimensions that “work” and “don’t work” for various communities. Part of this effort must be directed at identifying features of current practices that continue dimensions of whiteness and colonization. Engaging staff is the first site of exploration (as the

organization currently does with its “data carousels”), and subsequent deeper dives into the dimensions of philosophy, culture, theories of change, and implicit approaches within engagement that might require additional focus groups, community interviews and literature reviews. Capacity is beginning in this area, and strengthening it will be important. It is also important that the data disaggregation capacity – so intentional and effortful in its development – be implemented to identify where racial disparities exist throughout client experiences.

This warrants more discussion. The fact that ten years of change work has not yielded guarantees nor firm knowledge about the nature of client outcomes might be a solid indicator that such change work, for an organization of this size, might simply take longer. MFS has been diligent, with key elements observed, yet it still is unable to assert the reach of its services to benefit clients of color. If the experience of MFS is typical, we need to better prepare organizational leaders for the long haul.

There are four omissions in the equity initiative that could be implemented. First, minority contracting (in terms of how the organization spends its money) has not been prioritized, but holds potential to be an excellent parallel initiative with the organization’s program work on financial stability. While the organization focuses on how it prepares clients for successful economic engagement, it is missing prioritizing how it uses its own financial resources to promote economic growth among communities of color. In a recent article by the Northwest Health Foundation (2018), staff were enthusiastic to directly support economic wellbeing, by diversifying who prints their brochures, who provides meals for board meetings, and who repaints office walls. This can be considered “low hanging fruit” for racial equity.

Second, the use of employee resource groups, which are pronounced in the literature as being an effective way to support a range of staff of color, are not being used. The next section in this article identifies that some staff of color hold different perspectives on racial equity that white staff and making a space for these voices to find support and validation will be important for widening the inclusiveness of the organization.

Third is having an equity staff person who holds core responsibility in driving actions forward. While this is shared by the leadership team and supported by the Equity Committee, a committee cannot be held accountable for either progress or activities in the way that staff persons can. Holding leadership accountability would require a cultural shift which might be forthcoming. Typically, an equity staff works in tandem with a committee, as well as with the CEO and senior staff. While the organization is making excellent progress, it is important to keep these structures in mind, particularly if progress should stall. The findings from related research by this author suggests that equity initiatives frequently stall, partly due to fatigue and partly due to the diminishing of the “shiny new penny.” Invigorating the work with new structures holds potential to reconfigure the players, renew enthusiasm, and renew efforts.

Fourth, MFS has not had formal structures to integrate service user voice into the organization, which the research project’s client survey began to address. MFS intends to continue to use the client survey as an ongoing method for this. A more expansive response is urged, as without a role as influencers of the organization, clients will remain dependent on the goodwill of management to have needs tended to. While the organization has certainly demonstrated being responsive to needs, without formal processes for client input and influence at governance

levels, as is recommended in the literature (Arnstein, 1969; Beresford & Croft, 2001; Lopes & Thomas, 2005), service user voice will ebb and flow depending on executive staff commitments.

Next steps in the research

Two threads need to be followed. The first is for MFS itself, and the second is for the research community interested in better understanding how racial equity roots in organizations. MFS could strengthen knowledge of its effectiveness in two important ways. First, it should clearly identify metrics that it aims to change, and continue to track results across time. Doyle & George (2008) emphasize that determining and tracking performance indicators are essential to guiding change strategies. The organization intends to continue the client satisfaction survey, track with greater granularity the experiences of youth it serves in school settings, continue to diversify its staff, and to deepen the cultural responsiveness of its programs. More broadly, MFS aims to make effective use of its own program data and client experiences. It retains its commitment to disaggregating these data by race. Monitoring these organizational gains and challenges is essential, along with tracing its journey into the next phase of equity work, which is important for its own quality improvement, and to contribute learning to the broader field of racial equity.

Second, studies of equity initiatives need to separate the perceptions of staff of color from white staff. While we disaggregated survey results for clients, we did not explicitly aim to use more culturally responsive methods in data collection from staff. There are indicators that this is important: during a focus group, we heard a range of perceptions from staff of color. At one end of the spectrum, we heard, "I never thought that I would have seen such positive work done." At the other end, we heard, "it's tough for a woman of color to interrupt the narrative of the organization that is so affirming of itself." We also discovered that only one person of color completed the staff survey, meaning that its insights were those of white staff, and also surfacing the possibility that staff of color were reticent to participate. There was an explicit assumption during the majority of data collection that positive assessments of the equity journey would be equivalent across all staff, and we need to wonder if this is accurate. In general, our perception is that it is more difficult for staff of color to publicly critique the organization. Such would be the next step in a research study.

More broadly, racial equity research needs to extend more fully into the non-profit arena. Most organization-wide literature emerges in the private sector, where large associations have been equipped for this task. In non-profits, including health and education, most research exists for smaller-level programs (such as the benefits of community health workers) and narrow goals (such as staff diversity, or the impact of training). Important themes to trace are the following:

- What distinguishes organizations that are involved in longer term (decades and beyond) change process?
- What type of client outcomes can be expected at what points in the change process? Research must keep focused on eliminating racial disparities in access and client outcomes, and not be satisfied with organizational changes.
- What are the best methods for measuring organizational change against reductions in disparities and can we identify and rank organizational changes that are necessary for the long term but may not produce immediate results?

It may prove that models for change are difficult or impossible to create. Gonzalez (2010) attempts such a model, essentially discerning three interrelated dimensions of diversifying organizations: systemic, multilevel, and non-linear. The interplay of each creates a range of possible pathways, and within each are a set of variables that exist on a spectrum of movement towards and away from successful diversity. All can be framed as catalysts or sustaining forces, which can be positive or negative. This type of model is intellectually intriguing, but it is likely that organizations might learn more from the experience of others. More case studies will be valuable for the field.

CONCLUSION

Metropolitan Family Service continues its journey towards racial equity and cultural responsiveness. There are sustained and significant efforts underway and strong alignment with core equity goals and pathways. MFS is not only gaining ground with both proven and promising organizational change efforts, but also forging new insights into practice innovations. In articulating own relationship model, it is opening an innovation which integrates culture into a range of communities being served. The effort has begun, and needs to continue. In addition, its external relationships are deepening, particularly with CSOs. Its credibility and partnership capacity is strong, alongside its reputation in standing in solidarity with community partners.

At the same time, the organization faces challenges in a few areas, some of which can be readily addressed, and others that will pose ongoing challenges. Culturally, the organization is navigating tensions that are sometimes polar opposites: sustaining humility (about how far there is to go) and pride (in terms of both celebrating achievements and declaring gains with stakeholders) is a difficult stance for human service leaders to navigate well. It seems as though a range of perspectives about pride and humility may have a racialized dimension, with white staff holding a more prideful stance. This is not to invalidate any of the organization's gains, but more so to highlight that a cultural identity as "being culturally responsive" might become a stance of "innocence" (Rossiter, 2001) that precludes more authentic dialogues about barriers to equity. Racial equity at MFS also can benefit for providing stronger avenues for staff of color to be supported through employee resource groups and mentoring (as evidence-based additions to change efforts), to build promotional opportunities, and to be affirmed as resources for the organization's equity work. Third, the organization could prepare itself for the stagnation that can come as staff tire of the equity work and focus. This could be achieved by anticipating this stagnation and ensuring that voices of those with "more skin in the game" (staff of color, clients and community partners) are given structures "that support the voice, change commitment, and integration of such change agents" (p.215, Gonzalez, 2010). Fourth, the data system that the organization has committed to holds potential to pinpoint areas where service equity is thriving and where it is limited. The client tracking system (called "Efforts to Outcomes" or ETO) has been a multiyear development effort, and is now poised to track client results, disaggregated by race. That it is such a lengthy process is a warning to others beginning their equity journey, as both the infrastructure needs to develop, along with the commitment to use it diligently and comprehensively, as clients are encouraged and supported to disclose their racial identities with the organization. This data task is also a management and executive responsibility to "issue sell" and foster "positive attitudes and beliefs" (p.215, Gonzalez, 2010) about its importance. Finally, financial resources and workload limits the scope of equity work. The work is difficult, and when time and resources are minimal, it is difficult to retain a

comprehensive approach to equity. MFS's record of accomplishment reveals that the likelihood of the effort becoming "fakeequity" or "equity without action" (para.1, Okuno, 2016) is negligible, so that movement is not a concern, but reduced expectations would be damaging to progress.

Overall, this is a success story – of how a large, mainstream organization has built and sustained its equity journey. Key ingredients emphasize leadership commitment, board involvement, staff engagement, partnership practices, training to deepen staff capacity for racial equity engagement, and hiring practices to recruit and subsequently retain staff of color. For MFS as it enters its second decade of equity work, partnerships with CSOs has been key to invigoration, learning, accountability and deepening insights into the effectiveness of client services. It is well poised to solidify these insights, and to commit itself to being responsive to local communities facing distress, particularly low-income communities of color. Responding more directly to needs and stressors, as well as community assets and insights, will ensure its responsiveness and will foreground a strong imperative to identify and address disparities.

Finally, we close with the words of an MFS client: "I am proud to see a well-rounded grouping of cultures." This quote affirms that MFS attracts a diverse client base, and implicitly surfaces the possibility of the healing benefits of effective cross-cultural relationships, services and organizations. As the successes of MFS unfold in the years to come, there will be additional learnings to share.

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