



Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit

Tool 11: Emancipatory Boundary Critique

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Boundary judgements are assumptions, formed through observations and evaluations, as to what is considered relevant to the study of an issue, and consequently should be included in the definition of the problem at hand, as distinguished from what may be left out.

In the context of research partnerships, boundary judgements include assumptions about how research might best be done, who should do what within a research partnership, and what equity (or partnership) might 'look like'. Accordingly, the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool aims to promote reflective and dialogical practices regarding such assumptions. It looks to support the less powerful (often Globally Southern) members of a research partnership in critiquing and revealing assumptions that underlie the 'boundaries' of a research project and/or partnership.

Research boundaries are heavily influenced by inequitable histories, including histories of colonisation, during which scientific or 'expert' knowledge was considered superior to practical (Indigenous) knowledge. However, there is increasing awareness that recognising different types of knowledge equally, is a prerequisite for both excellence and equity in research partnerships.

Why use the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool?

Using the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool addresses equity by:

1. Opening-up ideas, put forward by Globally Northern research partners, to critique by Globally Southern research partners.
2. Optimising socio-cultural appropriateness of research methods and tools, so that they are fairer to research participants and/or frontline workers.
3. Situating different types of knowledge as equally valid and 'expert' knowledge as imperfect and in need of lay critique.



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When to use the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool?

Phase	Rating	Descriptions
Planning	•••	This tool is ideal to use in the planning stage of a research partnership, when decisions are being made about roles and responsibilities, research questions, study design and resource allocations.
Implementing	••	Emancipatory boundary critique can also be effectively used, to interrogate proposed solutions to problems that arise during research implementation .
Disseminating	••	This tool might be used to critique actions or strategies proposed for disseminating research results.
Sustaining	•••	In the sustaining phase of a research partnership, use emancipatory boundary critique to discuss solutions proposed to overcome problems that arose in earlier stages of the partnership.
Ratings ••• Designed for this stage •• Can be used as is in this stage • Can be adapted for use in this stage		

How long does it take to use the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool?

The time required to use this tool effectively will depend on the nature of the boundaries being interrogated, the number of people involved in the critique, and the depth of the discussion.

Minimalist approach

- A single idea, such as a solution to a research problem, could be critiqued through a 30–60-minute group discussion.
- Partners from the Global Northern might ask themselves the Emancipatory Boundary Critique questions to improve self-understanding of their assumptions.



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Intensive approach

- To critique a substantive idea, such as a study designed by Globally Northern partners, the tool might best be implemented through a half or full-day workshop.

What other resources do you need to use the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool?

- [Emancipatory Boundary Critique matrix template](#)
- Face-to-face or virtual meeting space

Tips for using the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

To prepare for using this tool, it might be useful for the facilitator/coordinator and/or participants to read:

- Ulrich, Werner. 2005. "A mini-primer of boundary critique." Werner Ulrich's Home Page. https://wulrich.com/boundary_critique.html

How to use the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool?

- Introduce the 'object' of the boundary critique, which will usually be an idea or proposed solution, related to the research partnership or topic. For example:
 - The research partnership as a whole.
 - Research topics or questions.
 - Study designs.
 - Research budgets.
 - Divisions of roles and responsibilities.
 - Strategies proposed to overcome problems encountered in the field.
 - Strategies for achieving research impact.
- Explain that all 'objects' have boundaries, which are determined by boundary judgements. The boundary judgments people make are determined by their:
 - Selective consideration of observations or 'facts'- only some observations will be considered, while others are excluded.
 - Valuation of what they observe or consider a fact.



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- Explain that like all other objects, the boundaries of the object of your critique (e.g. the research partnership), are based on selective consideration of facts and selective evaluation of those facts. Considering alternative observations and/or valuations can reveal new possibilities to enhance, and assumptions that limit, equity.
- Ask participants to discuss the five questions in the Emancipatory Boundary Critique matrix (also listed below). This could occur in one group, or if there are more than six participants, in small separate groups.
- Complete the matrix as the discussion occurs.
- At the end of the discussion, consider if any of the alternative judgements, observations or valuations should be adopted. Change the object (e.g. research partnership) as required.

Suggested questions to explore when using the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

- What boundary judgements (assumptions) are embedded in this idea/object?
- What observations are these boundary judgments based on?
- What valuations are the boundary judgments based on?
- What alternative observations, valuations and judgments are possible?
- What are the equity implications of these assumptions?

Tips for using the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

- Critique is sometimes confronting. Keeping an open mind and holding a positive, learning-oriented attitude is essential if participants are to get the most out of the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool.

Expected outputs and outcomes from using the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

Outputs may include

- Dialogue about the underlying assumptions and possible consequences of a research solution.
- Modified research designs.
- Redistribution of resources.
- Fresh allocation of roles and responsibilities.



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Outcomes

- Using this tool should lead to improved understandings between partners, including better understandings of the importance of local knowledge and expertise that is contributed by Southern partners.

Completed example of the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

Object of critique ([download the completed example](#))

Research topic suggested by the Northern partner: "How can pro-social behaviour be fostered to enhance entrepreneurship in a rural African community?"

Boundary judgements, observations and valuations

What boundary judgements (assumptions) are embedded in this idea/object?	What observations are these boundary judgments based on?	What valuations are the boundary judgments based on?	What alternative observations, valuations and judgments are possible?	What are the equity implications of the boundary judgments?
1. There is not enough prosocial behaviour in the rural African community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited entrepreneurship in rural Africa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the rural African community are not pro-social enough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africans are already pro-social. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The judgement assumes deficits in the Southern. This is inequitable and could be psychologically harmful to the community (e.g. they may internalise the negative connotations).



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2. Pro-social behaviour determines an entrepreneur's success.

- Entrepreneurial success is linked to pro-social behaviour, in Europe

- Associations observed in Europe are valid in Africa

- Enhancing entrepreneurship requires high level funding and support.

- This is inequitable because it places the onus for success on the individuals who should benefit, rather than governments that have a responsibility to provide for their citizens' livelihoods.

3. Entrepreneurship is the best solution to poverty in rural Africa.

- Unemployment is high
- Governance is poor

- People need to help themselves because African governments are not helping their populations.

- Government needs to help the people make a living

- This assumption situates individualistic solutions as best and sidelines other possible solutions such as job creation, that may be more effective or acceptable to the rural African populations the study results will impact upon.



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References and further reading for the Emancipatory Boundary Critique tool

- This tool has been adapted to the research partnerships context from https://naturalsciences.ch/co-producing-knowledge-explained/methods/td-net_toolbox/emancipatory_boundary_critique_final and Ulrich, Werner. 2005. "A mini-primer of boundary critique." Werner Ulrich's Home Page. https://wulrich.com/boundary_critique.html