Equity-focused evaluation examines the experiences of social groups with different levels of advantage/disadvantage, and the conditions and structural factors that shape those experiences. The topic of equity-focused evaluation has emerged within the field of international development evaluation because of an increased emphasis on equity in the achievement of international development goals. However, empirically based theoretical and practical guidance on equity-focused evaluation is limited. There has not been a detailed examination of how equity—the conceptual root of equity-focused evaluation—is defined and differentiated from similar concepts in the field, despite having important implications for evaluation design, methods, reporting, and use. There has also been limited guidance on how to address the social determinants of equity (i.e., factors that enable and act as barriers to equitable outcomes) in evaluation practice—despite being a theme central to the concept of equity. Contextually and culturally responsive equity-focused evaluation practice necessitates a focus on the social determinants of equity because they inform the how and why of current conditions and are situated within and/or a product of history, culture, and context.
In this dissertation, I examine how international development organizations conceptualize and differentiate equity from similar concepts and the extent to which and how they recommend addressing the social determinants of equity in evaluation practice. This study is a descriptive content analysis of evaluation guidance documents from a sample of international development organizations. The findings suggest that key features that distinguish equity from similar concepts include the fact that equity is viewed as both the process of eliminating barriers, compensating for historical disadvantage, and treating people according to their level of need and an outcome of that process. Findings indicate that the degree to which organizations provide recommendations on how to address the social determinants of equity in evaluation practice varies greatly and improvement is warranted—especially as it relates to the interpretation of findings and conclusions within the context of the social determinants of equity. A summary of recommendations on how to address the social determinants of equity in evaluation practice is presented to inform future evaluation practice and research.