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Organizational Development

What the Heck Does “Equity” Mean?

A clear definition of equity would seem paramount to galvanizing philanthropy into action around this increasingly used term—but the field is only beginning to explore what it really means.

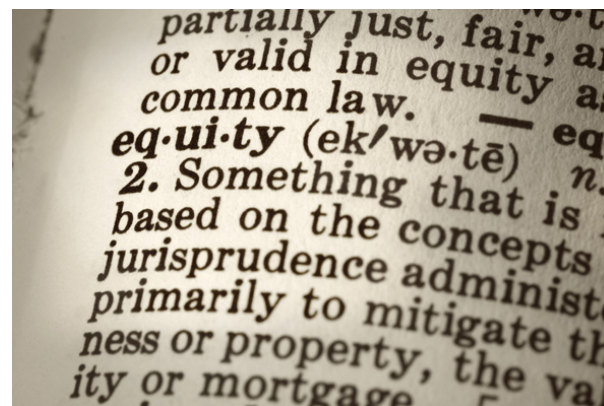
By [Kris Putnam-Walkerly & Elizabeth Russell](#) | Sep. 15, 2016

The term “equity” is spreading like wildfire in some philanthropic circles. It is showing up more and more in organizations’ mission and values statements. It is making its way into the titles of conferences, plenary and breakout sessions, and meetings at the national, state, and local levels.

At a recent gathering of organizations working on issues surrounding boys and men of color, someone lamented that the word “equity” was being co-opted by organizations that didn’t really understand what it means or how to go about achieving it.

“Equity” is one of those terms that everyone seems to understand at some visceral level, but few people share the same definition. This is particularly true in philanthropy.

We [recently conducted](http://putnam-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/Equity-Field-Scan_Layout_FINAL.pdf) in-depth conversations about equity with 30 staff members of 15 foundations whose peers named them as leading “equity work” in the field. We found that funders not only are confounded by



the definition of equity but also highly desirous of one that resonates—both within their organization and for the field as a whole. Very few foundations had a clear definition of what equity meant to them internally, and absolutely no one saw any common definition emerging from the field anytime soon.

Yet having a clear definition of equity (or at least a working definition) would seem paramount to galvanizing people into action around equity-related work. Indeed, foundations that had a clear definition of the term—however unique to that institution—seemed to have more evolved theories of change, frameworks, and plans around equity than foundations that didn't.

Why is a shared definition so hard to come by? Merriam-Webster's “[simple definition](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity)” of equity (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity>) is “fairness or justice in the way people are treated.” But then, what exactly is fairness? How do we define justice? If these concepts are not absolutes, but shaped by each individual's worldviews and experiences, then the definition may be a perpetually moving target.

Some funders are leading the exploration of what equity is and *isn't* in philanthropy. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide* (<http://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/>), for example, describes equity as distinct from “diversity,” which is a numerical representation of different types of people. It also distinguishes equity from “inclusion,” which the foundation defines as “the action or state of including or being included within a group or structure ... [Unlike diversity,] inclusion involves an authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging.” Under this thinking, inclusion may be a definite step toward equity—and [many grantmakers are embracing it](https://ssir.org/putting_grantees_at_the_center_of_philanthropy) (https://ssir.org/putting_grantees_at_the_center_of_philanthropy)—but even those who feel included may not experience equity.

We believe equity is also different from “equality,” in which everyone has the same amount of something (food, medicine, opportunity) despite their existing needs or assets. In other words, whether you are two feet tall or six, you still get a five-foot ladder to reach a 10-foot platform.

So if equity is not diversity, inclusion, or equality, then what is it? It describes something deeper and more complex. It is about each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed—access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on where we are and where we want to go. Nonet Sykes, director of race equity and inclusion at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, thinks of it as each of us reaching our full potential.

Health-focused foundations have also put the notion of equity under the microscope in recent years, and have begun looking at social determinants of health, such as poverty, food security, homelessness, and education levels. What factors prevent certain populations from achieving the same level of health as other populations? Questions like these help us get to the root of what equity means.

University of California San Francisco’s Paula Braveman has come up with a number of useful definitions related to equity. She writes **in one report** (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3863701/>): “Health equity means social justice in health (i.e., no one is denied the possibility to be healthy for belonging to a group that has historically been economically/socially disadvantaged).” In **another report on defining equity in health** (<http://jech.bmj.com/content/57/4/254>), she writes: “In operational terms, and for the purposes of measurement, equity in health can be defined as the absence of disparities in health (and in its key social determinants) that are systematically associated with social advantage/disadvantage.”

Yanique Redwood, CEO of Consumer Health Foundation in Washington, DC, builds on Braveman’s work to envision equity as both an outcome and a process—the latter, an idea borrowed from American Public Health Association President Camara Jones. “We see health equity as an outcome whereby you can’t tell the difference in health or life expectancy by race, and also as a process whereby we explicitly value people of color and low-income communities to achieve the outcome we seek,” Redwood explains. Seen this way, the most equitable way to define “equity” may be to leave the definition to individual communities.

Philanthropy’s search for meaning in the word “equity” shouldn’t reflect badly on the field. Understanding equity is somewhat like the proverbial blind men describing the different parts of an elephant they touch but failing to “see” the whole animal. True understanding will come by gathering multiple perspectives. As one program officer at a national foundation so astutely put it, “The fact is that we don’t know what equity looks like as a society, because we’ve never actually had it.”

Philanthropy likely will not come to terms with a common term any time soon, but just the fact that foundations are deeply considering equity and openly discussing it as learning organizations is a promising development for the field.

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