

Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper

This framing paper is a product of the Equitable Evaluation Project (now the Equitable Evaluation Initiative) and was published in July 2017. Its original intent was to set the stage for an invitational roundtable in August 2017 where findings and implications and potential next steps were explored focusing primarily on philanthropic domestic evaluation practices.

The EEI Team believes that shifts in evaluation purpose and practice do not solely rest in philanthropy but among evaluators and nonprofits as well. Although this paper touches on those points briefly there is additional research and writing forthcoming to explore them more explicitly.

This paper was co-authored by Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Luminare Group.

As the number of foundations and nonprofits taking an equity stance continues to grow, we (evaluators, foundations and nonprofits) need to examine the “fit” of our existing evaluation approaches with the principles and values that underlie grantmaking and efforts designed to advance equity.

Our premise is that evaluators have a moral imperative to contribute to equity. Evaluators who work with foundation and nonprofits who are working on equity have a special obligation to ensure that their evaluation practices don’t reinforce or even exacerbate the inequities that efforts seek to address.

We think meeting this vision requires critical thought about all aspects of the evaluative process—the questions we ask, the methods we use, the teams we assemble, and the ways we support the use of data and sense-making around findings. Our answers to these questions have substantial implications for foundations, their non profit partners and the evaluation field.

EQUITY APPROACHES IN PHILANTHROPY

Building on a long history of work by social justice groups, philanthropy is showing a burgeoning interest in equity. Several things are revealed when a closer look at how philanthropy is responding to this call is taken.

- **Foundations are taking approaches to advancing equity that reflect different theories of change**

and levels of attention to the drivers of inequities. The foundations included in our scan are taking one, or sometimes more than one, of the following approaches in their equity work:

Comprehensive change: Building an equity focus into the whole foundation both internally in its operations and culture and externally through its grantmaking. Efforts focus on re-engineering many aspects of how a foundation works, with the goal of reflecting principles of equity in policies, practices, procedures, and people.

Systems change: Addressing the systemic barriers that create inequities. Grantmaking focused on systems change commonly supports advocacy, community organizing, and civic engagement, supporting power building among communities so that they can better shape the systems that affect them.

Targeted equity: Choosing a specific population or aspect of inequity as the programmatic focus (e.g., income inequality, racial inequities; Latinos, Native Americans, African Americans). approaches or locations).

Diversity and inclusion: Aiming for greater diversity and inclusion in staffing, funding, or decision making. Some foundations emphasize expanding the proportion of people of color among foundation leaders, board members, staff, and grantees. Others focus on how funding decisions are made and who makes them (e.g., sharing decision making power with affected communities).

Equality: Improving access to, or quality of, systems or services for all populations. This “rising tide raises all boats” approach is based on the expectation that improved systems or services for everyone will improve outcomes for those experiencing inequities.

While many of these approaches may be a good starting point, not all are likely to shift power imbalances and reduce inequities in education, health, wealth or any other complex social problems philanthropy seeks to address.

- **Funders are institutionalizing their equity work to varying degrees.** As the list of approaches illustrates, on one end of the spectrum, foundations are undergoing wholesale organizational restructuring to reflect principles of equity in all aspects of their work. On the other end of the spectrum, foundations are experimenting with equity work in ways that do not also fundamentally change the way they operate and fund.
- **Equity work in foundations often focuses either internally or externally—and less often on both.** Many foundations have begun their equity journey committing considerable resources and time to examining their own organizational processes, practices, and policies. Others have focused externally on how their grant strategies and relationships promote equity, putting dollars toward addressing policies and systemic barriers that reinforce inequity—and sometimes making grant decisions in collaboration with communities of color.

Our intent here is not to judge the approaches that different foundations have taken; it is to point out that different approaches have different implications for the evaluation questions that get asked and results that can be expected.

EVALUATION AND EQUITY IN PHILANTHROPY

The evaluation field has also been exploring its relationship to equity. These advancements taking place among evaluators are built on the same principles of inclusion and social justice that underlie equity-focused grantmaking. To cite a handful of examples:

- The American Evaluation Association has given some purposeful attention to this topic through, for example, adoption of a Cultural Competence Statement in 2013 and a 2014 annual conference theme focused on Visionary Evaluation for a Sustainable, Equitable Future.
- There is a growing practice of evaluation approaches like participatory and empowerment

evaluation that explicitly account for the power imbalances and inequities that conventional evaluation approaches can reinforce.

- The increasing use of systems thinking in evaluation is helping evaluators to understand how to identify and evaluate changes related to the systemic drivers of inequity.
- Fellowship and internship programs like the Graduate Education Diversity Internship Program (GEDI) and Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity (LEEAD) are aiming to increase the diversity of the evaluation field itself.

But just as foundations are taking different approaches in their work on equity, so too are evaluators. Evaluators may have diverse teams, for example, but still fail to use culturally competent practices. Others may use culturally competent evaluation practices, but pay little attention to evaluating the systemic drivers of inequities. Still others may examine systemic drivers but fail to include affected communities in defining the focus or approach to the evaluation, or in the interpretation of data and sense-making. There is not yet a consistent understanding in the field of common standards of practice around what evaluation practice that holds equity as a value and may work in service of equity might look like.

Evaluation seems to be among the last organizational functions to be examined and revamped through an equity lens. Foundations who commit to a focus on equity but fail to consider how their evaluation approaches might need to shift are at risk of limiting or impeding their efforts and ultimately their success..

Over time, the philanthropic sector has developed a set of evaluation “orthodoxies,” or tightly held beliefs about evaluative practice.¹ Orthodoxies are often invisible, masquerading as “common sense.” They are believed to be foundational and affect the undercurrents of organizational culture. Both foundations, their non profit partners and evaluators have shaped the orthodoxies around evaluation. Many of the current orthodoxies act like a drag on equity efforts, and in some cases, reinforce inequities. Our research uncovered the following orthodoxies in foundation and non profit culture around evaluation that are inconsistent with equity work.

See working orthodoxies on following page.

¹The Monitor Institute brought the term “orthodoxies” into the philanthropic sector’s thinking on evaluation through a large-scale project to redesign foundation evaluation to improve use. They define orthodoxies as “deeply held beliefs about ‘how things are done’ that often go unstated and unquestioned. You can find them everywhere—in the mind of an individual, the protocols of an organization, even the best practices of an entire industry.”

Working Orthodoxy

Description

The foundation defines what success looks like.

Typically in a foundation, the board or program staff define what constitutes success for strategies with little input from grantees or groups affected by inequities. In some cases, these definitions of success are based on organizational models and literature that have been informed by racial bias and that fail to account for patterns of historic and structural discrimination. Resources then flow to organizations whose priorities, performance, and capacity reflect these definitions. Additionally, attention to outcomes linked to these definitions of success without parallel attention to how those outcomes are achieved can blind foundations to whether their approach helps to build power and agency or maintains current power arrangements.

Grantees and strategies are the evaluand, but not the foundation.

Foundations almost exclusively focus the evaluation lens on their grantees or their programmatic strategies. Rarely is the evaluand the foundation itself, its practices (beyond stakeholder perception surveys) and strategies. While foundations have begun to examine their own diversity and ask about the diversity of their grantees staff and boards, and the diversity of vendors, more fundamental questions about how they have incorporated equity into strategy development, funding priorities and funding mechanisms is lacking.

The foundation is the primary user of evaluation.

Evaluation questions often focus on the foundation's conceptualization of impact and what the foundation needs to learn to make better choices about who and what to fund in order to achieve greater impact. This results in evaluation findings that often offer no real value to the "subjects" of the evaluation (grantees or the communities they serve) and puts decision making about how to move forward in the hands of the foundation alone.

Evaluations should provide generalizable lessons.

Evaluations are often designed to provide synthesized, generalized findings that hide unique context, differential outcomes, and historical and structural drivers. This can lead foundations toward the illusion that generalized approaches work similarly in any community or for any group.

Evaluators should be selected based on credentials that reflect traditional notions of expertise.

Evaluators are selected and managed by foundation staff based on a particular set of criteria that typically include academic credentials, subject matter expertise, methodological approach and skill, and history with evaluations of a similar type. These criteria are not necessarily good indicators that evaluators are prepared to evaluate equity efforts. They also restrict the expansion of the evaluator pool as well as potentially the development of new evaluation frameworks that better reflect the principles of equity.

Evaluators are the experts and final arbiters.

External experts have long played an extractive role in communities, exhibiting greater commitment to disciplinary conventions and desires of the funder than to the community "under the guise" of the evaluation. Most evaluators (and often the foundation client) both frame and make final decisions about most every step of the evaluation process, including questions, methods, data collection instruments and processes, learning or interpretation events, the format and frequency of deliverables, and how evaluation lessons and findings are disseminated. Shifting the relationship between funder, evaluator, and evaluation participants to be more equitable, and to create evaluative processes that imbue social change agents with data and value their insights which inform their own strategies (and that of the foundation), requires a nonconventional evaluator (compared to the larger field) with specialized training, an explicit values framework and a different approach to evaluation design and management.

Working Orthodoxy	Description
Credible evidence comes from quantitative data and experimental research.	<i>Certain kinds of data and evidence have come to be viewed with value and legitimacy in philanthropy. Many foundation boards have come to expect simple quantitative dashboards, and those with particular academic backgrounds often value experimental research designs regardless of their fit to the situation. The field has come to treat with suspicion what is often called “self-reported data” and to dismiss even systematically collected and analyzed qualitative data as merely “stories.”</i>
Evaluators are objective.	<i>Evaluators often interpret data and draw conclusions in isolation and without attention to bias. This results in a hierarchy of experts who “know more and know better” than those who are experiencing the work directly, or than those who bring a different cultural and historical orientation to knowledge and data. Additionally, interpreting and drawing conclusions from data without the participation of those engaged in and affected by the work inequitably takes ownership of knowledge and decision making power out of their hands.</i>
Evaluation funding primarily goes to data collection, analysis, and reporting.	<i>Evaluation budgets often fail to adequately support time needed for relationship building, appropriate testing of culturally competent instruments, or participatory planning, data collection and interpretation, and sharing of lessons. This under-resources evaluation approaches that represent the best fit between evaluation and equity.</i>

A CALL FOR EQUITABLE EVALUATION

We believe that evaluators of philanthropic efforts have a moral imperative to approach their work in ways that contribute to equity. We believe this is even more essential for those engaged in efforts specifically related to equity. This includes a commitment to three principles:

1

Evaluation and evaluative work should be in service of equity.

→ Production, consumption, and management of evaluation and evaluative work should hold at its core a responsibility to advance progress towards equity.

2

Evaluative work can and should answer critical questions about the:

→ Ways in which historical and structural decisions have contributed to the condition to be addressed

→ Effect of a strategy on different populations

→ Effect of a strategy on the underlying systemic drivers of inequity

→ Ways in which cultural context is tangled up in both the structural conditions and the change initiative itself.

3

Evaluative work should be designed and implemented commensurate with the values underlying equity work:

→ Multi-culturally valid

→ Oriented toward participant ownership.

If we do not work in this way, and if foundations do not support evaluators to work in this way, and non profits do not or cannot resource this type inquiry, evaluation practices risk reinforcing or even exacerbating the very inequities the change initiative seeks to address.

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