



# Structural Racism and Critical Participatory Evaluation

by Michelle Fine \*

Structural racism projects are bold, ambitious initiatives dedicated to documenting and transforming a thick overgrowth of policies, practices, traditions and ideologies that have justified and naturalized racialized injustices.<sup>1</sup> Whether implemented in government, schools, prisons, worksites or communities, such interventions are typically resisted or contained; domesticated to “fit” into existing arrangements. In the language of Rinku Sen, executive director of the Applied Research Center, most of these projects set out to be transformational and end up transactional (see page 40). Vibrant political visions too often shrink to technical solutions. This short essay advances critical participatory evaluation as an essential tool to hold institutions accountable for racial justice and research validity.

The language of randomized clinical trials and experimental designs dominates the evaluation field today. Represented as the gold standard of validity, these designs equate distance with objectivity, local context as a variable to be controlled and individual-level quantifiable outcomes as the primary form of evidence.

Participatory evaluations on structural racism challenge these assumptions theoretically and, for the purposes of this essay, scientifically. Here I want to describe critical participatory evaluation as research projects grounded in questions of racial injustice and power, informed by critical race<sup>2</sup> and feminist theory, with commitments to research validity and social change. These evaluations may be designed as experiments or quasi-experiments, surveys, interviews, ethnography, observations, focus groups and/or multiple methods. What distinguishes critical participatory evaluations is the intentional attention to four validity claims:

- ▲ harvest the *expertise* of communities of color;
- ▲ frame *questions and constructs* in terms that contest naturalized racist inequities;
- ▲ document *multiple layers* of structural racism and
- ▲ design projects that are deliberately *accountable to the goals and constituents of racial justice*.

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\* Thanks to Brett Stoudt for detailed and generous feedback.

We now turn to consider how these validity claims were addressed within an evaluation research design of a college-in-prison project, undertaken at a maximum security prison for women.

## Participatory Evaluation Behind Bars

In 1995, President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act which effectively stopped the flow of federal dollars that had enabled women and men in prison to attend college. At Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF), a New York maximum security facility for women, a vibrant 15-year-old college program closed, as did more than 340 other programs nationwide. A familiar racialized trilogy – education denied, mass incarceration and cumulative disenfranchisement for African American and Latinos<sup>3,4</sup> – was reinscribed in American history.

Within months of Clinton’s act, a group of women at BHCF organized with community volunteers, local universities and the prison administration to restore college courses. Established in 1995, College Bound, the facility’s college program, has since been supported by a private, voluntary consortium of colleges and universities. More than a third of the women in the prison are enrolled in college; many others in GED and pre-college courses. In 1996, a group of prisoners recommended, and state officials approved, a participatory evaluation of college in prison.

Our evaluation team of seven from “inside” BHCF and five “outside” evaluators from the CUNY Graduate Center met monthly across four years. We read critical race and feminist theory and research methods, and crafted a multilevel/method evaluation assessing five levels of impact:

1. the politics and history of race, incarceration and higher education in New York;
2. the implementation of college within the prison environment;
3. community alliances with College Bound;
4. interpersonal dynamics within the college between faculty, officers and students, and
5. the impact of college on individual students in prison and after release, and their children.

Our methods included:

- ▲ a longitudinal analysis of College Bound records;
- ▲ focus groups with students, dropouts and adolescent children of prisoners;
- ▲ interviews with released women who had attended college while in prison;
- ▲ interviews with corrections officers, politicians, community allies and advocates;
- ▲ surveys of faculty and university administrators, and
- ▲ a longitudinal analysis of 36-month recidivism rates for women who participated in college while in prison versus a comparable sample of women who did not attend college while in prison.<sup>5</sup>

Across levels and methods, the evidence confirmed substantial positive impact of college in prison. The recidivism analysis conducted by the New York State Department of Correctional Services found that prisoners who participated in college while in prison had significantly lower recidivism rates (7.7%) than those who did not participate in college (29.9%). Exposure to college encouraged women to contribute to their communities in prison and out. College Bound lightened the state's tax burden of incarceration, supported the education of two generations, diminished reincarceration rates and contributed to post-prison public safety.

Our final report, *Changing Minds*,<sup>6</sup> was distributed to every U.S. governor and all the New York state legislators, with endorsements from the political left and right. Support for college in prison and, even more, for college as an element of re-entry programs, grows. In 2008, we launched Rebuilding Communities of Color through Higher Education After Program, a two-generation critical participatory evaluation of College Initiative, a post-prison college program at CUNY. Collaborating with Columbia University's Center on Institutional and Social Change, we are also tracking the racialized institutional impact of re-entry college programs on local communities, criminal justice policy, colleges and universities.

Our design for this evaluation parallels *Changing Minds*. In both cases, the evaluations are crafted to speak back to policy reform and to be of use to the prison reform and higher education movements. By documenting effects on institutions/policy, students and children, the research has revealed the breadth and depth of positive impact and it has exposed another layer of deeply racialized barriers to higher education for former prisoners, including financial aid forms that require applicants to "check here if you have a drug felony," challenges to the transfer of college credit from within prison, parole and curfew issues, lack of child care and so forth.

## Validity Claims

The collaborative *Changing Minds* evaluation team sought evidence of impact and obstacles at five levels:<sup>7</sup>

*Racial politics of education and mass incarceration:* The denial of higher education to prisoners was simply one more policy assault on communities of color. To understand contemporary conditions of prisons as racialized sites of state containment of black and Latino communities, we read and chronicled the track marks of federal and state criminal justice policies on communities of color.

*Prison dynamics:* Prisons are, fundamentally, inhumane institutions. The BHCF administration at the time, however, modeled an extremely complicated management strategy with elements of feminist and antiracist commitments. The longer our project survived in the contentious context of prison, the more it seemed essential to document the contradictory strands of institutional support for and resentment of College Bound expressed by state bureaucrats (who favored college because it reduces disciplinary problems by shifting prison culture) and the correctional staff.

*Tracking the relationships affected by college in prison:* Focusing within the prison, the racial, classed and gendered interpersonal dynamics among correctional officers, faculty, community members, victims' rights groups, the students and their children were crucial to demonstrating shifts in prison culture, to explain the reduction in disciplinary incidents and to capture the ironic culture of participation that defined College Bound.

*Evaluating individual impact:* We designed the project most obviously to document the two-generation impact of college in prison on the women and their children.

*Documenting the sustainability of cross-racial and cross-sector alliances:* In retrospect, the positive impact of college on prisoners, their children and the prison environment was relatively easy to document. It was more difficult to figure out enabling conditions for sustainability, a vexing question for racial justice projects. We knew that the life of the project depended largely on access and generosity of multiracial community networks of universities, civic associations, churches, synagogues and mosques and women's groups committed to education behind bars. To inform both policy and community organizing, we therefore added an analysis of these community resources, assets and alliances that held the prison accountable to education for prisoners, most of whom had been denied adequate education prior to incarceration.

Critical participatory evaluations rooted in the expertise of those most disenfranchised and accountable to these same communities, can puncture false arguments about costs, public safety, morality and “what’s good for the children”; demonstrate the racialized consequences of mass incarceration and denial of higher education, and lift up new frameworks for investing in and rebuilding urban communities.

Critical participatory evaluations, by design, kick up complex power dynamics – in prison or not. Our fruitful experience at BHCF and afterward shows, however, that meaningful inroads into structural racism can be made if evaluators identify and ask the hard questions that can get at manifestations of structural racism, all while seeking advice from – and recognizing expertise in – those most affected by their evaluations. They can work hard to identify and realize accountability by making findings known to not just funders and grantees, but to broad constituencies. By adhering to these principles, evaluators can contribute to the shaping of public policies far more responsive to communities in need.

## Possible Next Steps

Here are some steps funders might take to support critical participatory evaluations within, and across, grantees to strengthen their racial justice efforts as well as determining progress:

- ▲ Create a visiting participatory advisory board for racial justice, including scholars, activists and persons who intimately know the relevant issues, who would travel across projects, consulting with evaluators and project directors to think through design, outcomes and products of use within, and across, sites.
- ▲ Convene their racial justice projects and evaluators to ask the hard questions that may feel “delicate” within each setting but we know to be fundamental across grantees.
- ▲ Support participation-building by funding grantees to organize (formally or informally) an advisory group of those most affected by injustice, or a hybrid advisory group comprised of very differently situated persons. The group would help shape the research questions, outcomes, design and products of individual grant assessments to be sure that the work speaks to the experience of everyone in an organization/project/community, not just elites.
- ▲ Help grantees to democratize expertise and augment their racial justice impact by asking them to specify where expertise can be found and to articulate strategies to increase impact validity.
- ▲ Facilitate a workshop among grantees to identify “translation” outcomes that move between traditional outcomes that an organization may gather and more textured outcomes

that might reveal the impact of a racial justice project (e.g. between student test scores and students’ developing a sense of critical engagement in social issues).

- ▲ Encourage broadened accountability by asking grantees to build accountability practices to guide their relationships to groups and issues in the organization and also to community/organizing groups associated with the issue but not within the organization.
- ▲ Make critical participatory evaluations public so that the findings and also the process can be shared with other funders and projects working on racial justice concerns.

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- <sup>1</sup> Lawrence, Keith. “Rethinking Crime and Punishment for the 21st Century: Can We Develop a Criminal Justice Paradigm That Advances Racial Equity and Democracy?” Draft working paper presented at Open Society Institute forum, March 16, 2007. [www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/roundtable%20on%20community%20change/REFRAMING\\_CRIMINAL\\_JUSTICE\\_PAPER\\_REVISIED\\_JAN7\\_2008.pdf](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/roundtable%20on%20community%20change/REFRAMING_CRIMINAL_JUSTICE_PAPER_REVISIED_JAN7_2008.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas, eds. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. New York: New Press, 1996. Print.
- <sup>3</sup> Fine, Michelle and J. Ruglis. “Circuits of Dispossession: the Racialized and Classed Realignment of the Public Sphere for Youth in the U.S.,” *Transforming Anthropology*. 2008: 17, 1, 20-33. Print.
- <sup>4</sup> Woodson, Carter. *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Las Vegas: IAP, 2010 (reprint). Print.
- <sup>5</sup> Fine, Michelle, Maria Elena Torre, Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, “Missy,” Rosemarie A. Roberts, Pamela Smart and Debora Upegui. *Changing Minds*. 2001. [web.gc.cuny.edu/che/changingminds.html](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/changingminds.html).
- <sup>6</sup> Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart and Upegui.
- <sup>7</sup> For discussion of the politics, ethics and dynamics of collaboration, see Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre. “Intimate Details: Participatory Action Research in Prison,” *Action Research*, 2006: 4, 3. <http://ARJ.sagepub.com/content/vol4/issue3>

## Critical Participatory Evaluation and Structural Racism

| VALIDITY                               | FORM OF KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS  | THREATS OF POLITICAL VISION SHRINKAGE   | DESIGN FEATURES TO ENHANCE VALIDITY   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Expert Validity</b>                 | To what extent does the research design harvest, reflect and enact the <b>critique, knowledges and expertise</b> of communities of color?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Reliance upon external “experts”</li> <li>▲ Ignoring local wisdom from elders, community leaders and youth</li> <li>▲ Colluding in the assumption that distance = objectivity</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ To cultivate and legitimate marginalized knowledges, participatory action research team of co-researchers/advisory board comprised of those most affected by structural racism <i>and/or</i></li> <li>▲ An advisory group of diverse/differently positioned constituencies where power dynamics are interrogated</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Ecological Validity</b>             | To what extent does the research track the <b>multiple levels upon which structural racism operates</b> – history, racial formations, ideology, institutions, interpersonal and personal? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Failure to document the historic forms of oppression and struggles of resistance that have shaped current conditions</li> <li>▲ Exclusive focus on one level of evidence, e.g., individual outcomes</li> <li>▲ Decoupled individual level outcomes from racialized opportunity structures, histories and ideologies</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ A multilevel evaluation study focused on various routes through which structural racism saturates, and racial justice could circulate</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Construct Validity</b>              | To what extent does <b>critical race theory inform the key theoretical and empirical constructs</b> of the evaluation: both the problem and the capillaries of impact?                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Ahistoric or decontextualized definitions of the “problem”</li> <li>▲ Failure to document circuits of oppression through which racism moves across sectors</li> <li>▲ Exclusive reliance upon individualistic outcomes and language (e.g., “at risk”)</li> <li>▲ Failure to attend to intersectionality</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Work with community leaders to consider if, how and the extent to which traditional indicators can be incorporated into the design – and what other measures might be assessed to provide a thick analysis of how racism reproduces and how it can be interrupted</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Accountability/ Impact Validity</b> | To whom is the evaluation accountable? To what extent are <b>communities of color and antiracist partners primary audiences</b> for the material?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Critical decisions to be addressed early in the design: Who has access to data, interpretations? Who has veto power? The right to provide a dissenting epilogue?</li> <li>▲ Claims of institutional privacy, confidentiality and anonymity can control/limit access to the data</li> </ul>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Multiple products: white papers, testimony, public service announcements, spoken word performance of the data, academic texts, monographs, post card campaigns</li> <li>▲ Multiple audiences: policy makers, formerly incarcerated adults/families, advocates and the most affected communities of color</li> <li>▲ Policy research on follow-up issues, e.g., college after prison</li> </ul> |