

Communities of Practice: A Process for Evaluating Racial Justice Work?

by Maggie Potapchuk



We know that efforts to eradicate structural racism are consistently met with resistance, so that advances in one area (such as education) may result in backward movement in another (such as housing). In order to more effectively respond to the “repositioning of the color line rather than its erasure,”¹ collective action that crosses issue areas and communities may be far more effective than works of disparate organizations. As a practitioner, advocate and long-time consumer of evaluation, I’ve come to believe not only in the value of communities of practice (CoP) – groups of people dedicated to shared learning and practice – for action against structural racism,² but also in their potential for fostering meaningful evaluation of racial justice efforts.

To effectively create deep systemic change it’s critical to know how other organizations are contributing to the change process and analyzing sector data. It makes sense to share observations and work collectively to track long-term shifts. If we move from programmatic evaluation to collective evaluation focus, organizations can hear more observations of the changes and collectively address how racial justice work is implemented as well as attacked.

This concept is untested, but it strikes me that the use of CoPs to evaluate racial justice work might address many of the challenges of such evaluation and contribute to significantly greater understanding of how we’re doing in our quest for racial justice. Together, groups could begin to collect and disseminate qualitative and quantitative data and stories to inform whether progress is being made. These data might include, for example, assessing strategies to increase the impact in other institutions/sectors and tracking short- and long-term outcomes across organizational efforts.

Since many organizations are schooled in traditional antiracism training which typically does not include a systems thinking approach or analysis, one of the first steps for working cooperatively on strategy and collectively evaluating work requires a shared analysis of structural racism.

Evidence shows that CoP, in some ways a relatively new tool, increases knowledge management through shared learning and relationship-building.³ Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, who first coined the CoP term and concept in 1991, describe CoPs as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”⁴ While a few CoPs in the U.S. focus on social justice,⁵ I am aware of none evaluating structural racism work.

One emerging community to watch, however, is Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Community Roundtable, established by the City of Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative in 2009.⁶ The roundtable members represent community-based organizations, business, philanthropy and other public entities. Their goal is to eliminate racial disparities in all areas, while specifically focusing their efforts on educational equity. They are coordinating strategies, developing partnerships and sharing resources to increase community support for racial justice. Though roundtable participants are not explicitly evaluating their collective work, Julie Nelson, director of Seattle’s Office of Civil Rights, told me, “I believe that ultimately, our success can and should be measured by changes in community conditions. The point of convening this group is to develop aligned strategies and measure our progress towards our goals.”⁷

Shared Approaches

Meanwhile, FSG Social Impact Advisors, a non-profit consulting and research group in Boston, recently reported about 20 efforts⁸ that developed shared approaches to performance, outcome, or impact measurements involving numerous organizations. Though their work is not focused on racial justice issues, perhaps these techniques could be fruitfully adapted to the collective work of racial justice organizations. One methodology, called Adaptive Learning Systems, may hold some promise for CoPs evaluating racial justice work. It provides “a collaborative process for all participating organizations to learn, support each other’s efforts and improve over time.”⁹ Participating organizations using this method define the measures which can address the obvious

power dynamics between funders and grantees. Any movement in this direction, however, would be challenged by shortcomings of existing evaluation tools that lack a structural racism lens or systems thinking approach and also by a shortage of capable evaluators who have a structural racism analysis.

What would foundations that may find it valuable to encourage CoPs to evaluate structural racism efforts need to consider? Evaluation related to structural racism needs to be about resident accountability, taking into account long-term outcomes collectively as well as identifying the direct impact of interventions across issues, sectors, institutions.

Any type of collective evaluation or CoP needs to be home-grown, that is, developed without foundations determining membership, process, outcomes, or strategy. Participating organizations need to cocreate these components, which may include radical strategies to create structural change.

Foundations must trust the expertise, practices and accountability of grantees and their constituents and members, refraining from limiting strategies by defining how change occurs based on their worldview. At the same time, foundation board and staff members must look inward, creating equitable and inclusive funding organizations with a structural racism analysis. As Willard Bass of the Institute for Dismantling Racism said in his survey about this topic, “It is critical for foundations to adopt an understanding of racism as institutional and systemic so that funding requirements do not create unrealistic expectations by funders. Because to have such an understanding brings with it the acknowledgment that the work of dismantling racism is the work of transformation that requires time to build and organize relationships.”

If we are to work toward a long-term outcome of racial justice — and an intermediate outcome of race/ethnicity as no longer an indicator of disparity trends — then our organizations need to be working differently together, exchanging information and data and supporting each other’s contribution to the transformative change process for racial justice. To develop such new ways of working, CoPs are one path worth exploring.

Next Steps

Investment by funders is essential for collective evaluation effort to work. In the immediate future, grantmakers can:

- ▲ assist racial justice organizations in preparing to work in CoPs by supporting an assessment of the extent to which

they are evaluating their work, and, if they are, what their capacity is to evaluate with a structural racism analysis;

- ▲ support logistical coordination to facilitate the creation of a shared measurement collaborative or CoP, and
- ▲ address directly the tension of balancing investment in evaluation and funding experimentation with no evaluative data with grantees.

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- ¹ Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, *Structural Racism and Community Building*. Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2004. pp. 25-28.
- ² Potapchuk, Maggie. “Building Capacity and Cultivating Interdependence Among Racial Relations and Racial Equity Organizations,” unpublished document created for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, November, 2008.
- ³ For more information: http://cpsquare.org/wiki/Measurement_and_assessment
- ⁴ For more information: www.ewenger.com/theory/
- ⁵ A few examples: Spirit in Action – www.spiritinaction.net, Campaign for Community Values – www.communitychange.org/our-projects/communityvalues and Movement Strategy Center – www.movementstrategycenter.org. Potapchuk provides a process to think about how to collectively work together: *Cultivating Interdependence: A Guide for Race Relations and Racial Justice Organizations*. Washington: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2004.
- ⁶ For more information about City of Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative: www.seattle.gov/rsji/
- ⁷ Nelson, Julie. Message to Maggie Potapchuk. 25 May 2010. Email.
- ⁸ Kramer, Mark, L. Vaidyanathan and M. Parkhurst. *Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact*. Boston, MA: FSG Social Impact Advisors, July 2009.
- ⁹ Kramer, Mark, L. Vaidyanathan and M. Parkhurst.