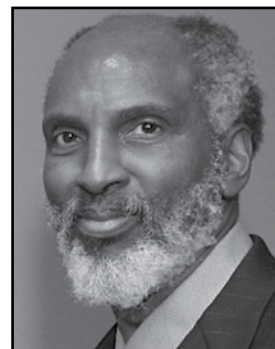# Systems Thinking, Evaluation and Racial Justice

by john powell*

As racial justice advocates and theorists, we need an evaluation approach that acknowledges what we know from a history of inadequate or failed policy interventions. We know that what works on a micro level may not be able to be scaled up; what appears promising in the short term may have no impact in the long term, what helps in the short term may in fact harm in the long term, and even policies that are far removed from the traditional concerns of racial justice advocates can either ameliorate or exacerbate racial disparities.

In short, a systems approach to evaluation is needed, because racial conditions must be seen as not simply an outcome of certain attitudes or policies, but as dynamic interconnected processes that are part of a larger socioeconomic and political system that creates racial meaning and constrains or enhances well being for everyone. Attitudes can be important, especially as they relate to policies and practices. But even when focusing on attitudes, it is often more useful to examine unconscious attitudes in society rather than conscious attitudes of individuals. (For example, many whites now support the idea of racially fair policy, but reject any effective way to implement such policy. Such resistance is often the result of unconscious anxiety about the policy itself.) That's why we must be willing to evaluate success in overcoming structural racism by outcomes of the interactive systems and not the intent of individual or the stated goal of particular policies. The efficacy of a policy can only be adequately understood by looking at how it interacts with other policies and the environment to advance desired outcome. To achieve such understanding, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity has begun to move toward more rigorous systems science-based methodologies for understanding both disparities and opportunities.

Consider the current financial crisis in the black and Latino communities. An individual approach to understanding and addressing the crisis locates the failure and therefore the repair in the individual. The problem is then addressed at the individual level by locking up a few unscrupulous lenders or providing financial literacy to individual borrowers. Neither of these steps can begin to examine or fix the system. Nor do they reflect an understanding of how the black and Latino community is connected to the larger community and indeed the global network. If the failure of the credit market is a systems failure with a strong racial footprint, then the individual efforts will likely prove inadequate.

While our understanding of structural racism is full of insights from systems thinking, our methods of evaluation have not caught up with these insights, and our theories of change are still far too often based on a view of racialized conditions as isolated and individual rather than systemic, group-based and interconnected. As our language becomes more steeped with systems concepts, we need to apply these new lessons in a deliberate and rigorous manner.

Feedback Loops

The interaction of institutions and processes can change the dynamics and function of a system. A system can take conditions and information to produce changes in the system. These changes are called feedback loops. One must be careful not to confuse a single event or outcome with the dynamic nature of a system. Instead of looking at single events, it is often more productive to look at patterns over time. The efficacy of a policy can only be adequately understood by looking at how it interacts with the environment and with other policies, and the extent to which it produces desirable stable patterns. This approach will shift our focus to relationships over time instead of looking at concrete separate indicators or a single domain at a fixed moment in time.

For example, a relational view of integration by race and class has implications not just for the marginal groups but also for

the dominant groups. Our actions take place in systems that are adaptive. The response or adaptation can be delayed at one point and accelerated at another. This can cause us to under- and overestimate that long-term change. What might look like a big change, the end of formal segregation, may turn out to be less significant over time as systems respond, adjust and react. As a result, racial justice advocates have to understand the endurance of racial hierarchy and exploitation in the U.S. despite a number of important advances such as school desegregation that were seen as major steps toward ending racial injustice in America.

This suggests both strategic interventions and monitoring and understanding the systems' response. To do this effectively requires an examination of relationships, reactions, feedback and evolving outcomes, as well as maintaining a sensitivity to the larger environment that produces dynamics where these processes are occurring. It requires ongoing processing and adjustments to this new information. This also requires a much more subtle notion of racial meaning and practice. Such an approach would generate a number of questions that would help us as we think about evaluation, including the following: What are the dynamics of race, class and gender policy in the U.S.? Where and how is the work of challenging racial hierarchy being done? Does the work being done reflect our stated values? And finally, what would a structure or system that is just require?

A temporary success may actually set in play dynamics that will undermine long-term success and stability. The short-term integration of schools by race or class may set in motion longer resegregation caused by white flight through the use of housing or other non-school mechanisms. This requires evaluation over an extended timeframe to better understand the dynamics that might not be obvious in a single snapshot. It also requires looking at patterns that might be emerging. A systems approach also focuses our attention onto the group instead of the individual. This suggests a different approach to implementation as well as a new approach to evaluation is necessary.

Systems Thinking and Evaluation

Within a structural theory of racialization, a systems approach to evaluation becomes a necessary part of our activism. A systems approach to evaluation for racial justice implies a willingness to grapple with the following ideas:

1. We must expect that interventions will have unintended effects and that these unintended effects will occur far in both time and space from the original intervention. This suggests that the racial impacts and outcome of all policies need to be taken into account (as it is unlikely that any policy will be race-neutral) and that we must broaden the evaluations of racial justice interventions themselves both spatially and temporally.

2. We must accept that structural adjustment and resistance is a part of nearly all interventions in a complex system. We do not make a single intervention and then stop. We must see how the system and actors in the system respond and make the necessary adjustment.

3. We must begin to make better use of the full range of systems methodologies at our disposal for both evaluation and program design – including qualitative mapping methodologies and modeling.

4. Evaluation must focus on relationship and patterns. Some important relationships might be outside of the initial boundary used for understanding the problem.

Funders and advocates need a theory of change that is sensitive to catalytic interventions and positive and negative feedback in response to these interventions.

Unintended Consequences

In systems thinking, there are no side effects, only intended and unintended effects. Without trying to take into account the unintended consequences of a policy and examine what their effects on the systems are, the evaluation may end up being misleading or wholly inadequate. The evaluation must focus on outcomes over time, not simply intentions or inputs. But even here we must be careful. What might appear as an outcome might in fact be an unstable state that is supporting a new undesired pattern. Our evaluations must be sensitive to possible change including retrenchment and instability. One common mistake is to see the system or environment as relatively static and nonrelational. Not only is this incorrect, but the very intervention of well intended policy can accelerate the dynamics of an environment. Because a dynamic system can adapt, there can be movement without substantive change or a dynamic equilibrium.

When we focus on a single dimension in a system, we often fail to see how a system might adjust that will undermine our effort or produce negative outcomes, sometimes to devastating effect:

▲ In Portland, Oregon, an attempt to control urban sprawl led to policies that ultimately had a negative impact on the housing experiences of communities of color because they contributed to the creation of spiking housing costs and a climate friendly to gentrification in the inner city by changing the demand without paying attention to supply. This can be seen as an unintended, but predictable outcome.

- Nationally, in many regions with small, fragmented jurisdictions, school desegregation efforts have been shown to correlate to relocation of whites and middle-class families (white flight), sometimes resulting in greater isolation for low-income students of color after the initial effort to integrate.
- After accepting the validity of substantial research showing that living in a high-poverty community depressed the life chances of residents, the federal government adopted a number of programs to help people move away from such areas. Many of these programs focused on the dynamics of poverty while failing to take into account the dynamic relationship of race, school and jobs. Because of racial dynamics, poor whites were more likely to land in middle-class communities while poor blacks were more likely to land in distressed, low-opportunity communities. Studies of some of these relocation efforts have shown that because these programs focused on a single indicator – high-poverty neighbors – without considering other indicators such as schools, jobs or stability, the programs did not have the intended consequence.
- An effort to reduce class size for children of color in California by mandating reduced class size for all students backfired because the increased demand for teachers across the board pulled many experienced teachers away from low-income schools, reducing the experience and quality of teachers in these locations.
- Although the full dynamics and impact are still not well understood, the current subprime mortgage fiasco may be traceable, in some small part, to efforts by the administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to increase black and Latino home ownership. This push, in concert with changes in banking laws, set up the conditions for a highly racialized housing and banking catastrophe.

Because racialized conditions are part of nearly every area of life, it is a near-certainty that most public policies – even ones that purportedly have little to do with race (new zoning in a commercial district, a change in tax policy, and so forth) – will affect racialized impact and access to opportunity. This means program designers should attempt to predict the impact of the full range of policy proposals on racial equity and inclusion. Evaluators, meanwhile, must look critically at programs and policies to determine their racial effects.

Expanding Evaluation Boundaries

The past 50 years have seen no shortage of policies intended to reduce income and employment gaps that persist along racial boundaries. Yet we have seen little movement, and many gains such as those realized in the immediate wake of the 1960s War on Poverty programs were quickly reversed. Why?

Neither segregationists nor integrationists would have believed a time traveler from today telling them that ultimately the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision would not make a difference in the degree of integration of many schools, yet many school districts have segregation levels near pre-Brown levels. Why?

In systems thinking terms, we refer to this as policy resistance, the tendency for the effects of a policy to eventually undermine itself through balancing feedback, and it is the standard behavior of interventions in a complex system.

Furthermore, not only do policy interventions tend to undermine the goal of the policy, but this tends to happen with many years separating the policy and its effects. This tilts evaluators and policymakers toward using policies that show a short-term positive effect, but lose that effect over the long term. When combined with philanthropy that funds outcomes and results based on short timeframes, we end up with organizations that are very good at fixing problems, but not in a sustainable way.

Often evaluators want to focus on what did and did not work in a particular intervention over a short time rather than on the system as a whole. For example, they may examine a failed intervention for students and try to isolate specific factors to assign blame for the failure such as "curriculum not appropriate, didn't hire enough staff, treatment drop-out was a problem." A systems evaluation is much more interested in relationships and the effects intended or not, in how the dynamics of this particular system produced this unwanted outcome and how the particular program affected system structures.

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itself. This means paying special attention to paradoxical effects, and being willing to expand the timeframe of our evaluations.

Stories about how change is occurring, even if incomplete, nearly always capture the dynamics of a system better than even the most sophisticated multivariate tools which simply show correlation, but leave the how and why of the correlation unanswered.

The Kirwan Institute has moved toward a multidimensional analysis for its opportunity-based housing analysis and mapping. Recognizing that where you live is often the anchor for many other disparities (access to employment, education, exposure to crime or toxics, social/community capital, etc.), we have strongly urged policymakers to consider multiple indicators of opportunity and to site low-income housing in areas of higher opportunity. However, what we have not adequately done yet is examine the dynamic nature of how those various opportunities interact over time.

We must monitor outcomes over time and across domains. In accessing the stability of the outcome or change, one must be sensitive to processes that can destabilize or undermine the outcome. The more processes support an outcome, the more stable the outcome is likely to be.

Because systems transmit information and react through feedback loops, understanding, anticipating and responding to changes in systems requires identifying and monitoring these loops along with outcomes. Stakeholders, including funders, while using more conventional evaluation models, must have a theory of change and a sophisticated understanding of what drives or retards change in a system. These perspectives can help inform the focus of interventions, and aid in the identification and monitoring of the feedback loops. In other words, stakeholders must come to a fuller understanding of race and how it is shaped by and, in turn, also shapes systems.

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