

Introduction

by Lori Villarosa



So much has been presented in foundation circles on project evaluation, it is difficult to imagine what more needs to be said. Evaluation approaches aimed at measuring social impacts have evolved in many progressive ways in the past decade or more, with significant work on participatory evaluation, cultural competency, efforts to measure advocacy and related social justice work or communications strategies.¹

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But it seems that of the hundreds of tools and reports on evaluation approaches – even those directly aimed at many of the components of their work such as advocacy or communications – many have not resonated with or even reached racial justice practitioners and advocates. Perhaps it is because challenging the structural underpinnings of racial inequity is an enormously complex undertaking, one being waged in a relatively hostile atmosphere by a relatively nascent and underresourced movement. Racial justice work is highly nuanced and cross-sectoral. It often involves battling long-entrenched and hidden policies and practices, cultural biases and cumulative negative impact. Organizations in this realm have been historically underfunded and operate in political terrain where race-based remedies have been under siege at every level and where “success” can be just as much a political liability as “failure.”

It is also possible that these evaluation approaches just have not been adequately disseminated to or examined by our field, but whatever the reasons for the gap between the desire for and availability of useful tools to measure truly transformational racial equity work, one thing is clear – it is the people working in the forefront of this movement that must take the lead in developing ways to measure real progress. The answer to the

question “How do we know if we’re moving forward?” won’t be divined through the use of ill-suited indicators imposed by funders and consultants unversed in a structural racism analysis.

But still, racial justice advocates do not need to start from scratch. The approaches mentioned above, along with “advocacy evaluation field-building,” should each provide some of the foundational frameworks. Of course, all the best practices in social impact evaluation efforts related to participatory research or culturally competent approaches are applicable to racial justice efforts – and perhaps even more so given the nuances of the issues. But still, these are all only part of the equation. One of the underlying challenges of answering the question “How does one best evaluate work aimed at structural racism?” lies in the understanding that a structural racism analysis is in itself a form of evaluation. This framework shapes the way we examine outcomes and determine the forces that contributed to those outcomes. Without a rigorous analysis of the interacting systems leading to racial disparities, both the change-oriented strategies and the assessments of progress will likely target symptoms and attitudes rather than underlying structures.

As noted earlier, even if one’s work is guided by a well-grounded analysis of structural racism, the questions that complicate any social impact evaluation emerge. Can the effectiveness of a particular intervention be accurately assessed given so many competing social impacts? If an organization is underresourced and unable to reach scale, does that indicate a poor strategy or a need to invest further? How much causation can we attribute to any specific project given the complexity of social forces affecting anything and everything? How much can evaluation discern impacts or outcomes attributable to what are, in global terms, tiny projects launched to address enormous structural issues? In their seminal 2005 publication, *The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Strategies for a Prospective Evaluation Approach*, Blueprint Research and Design named key challenges of any social justice advocacy efforts that are also of course true for racial justice advocacy: complexity of issues, role of external forces, extended timeframe, shifting strategies and milestones, and lack of clarity in attribution.²



Activists can often point to funders' use of evaluations as a mechanism to dictate the direction and flow of resources and energy in ways that undermine efforts to build a genuine social movement for racial justice. The fascination in philanthropy and government with emphasizing quantitative metrics to capture project or program impacts often leads racial projects to focus on short-term “countable” impacts, or more likely, outputs, to the detriment of any ability these projects may have to describe and analyze progress toward changes in underlying systems and structures. A campaign “win” might be fabulous if it can be documented and defended quantitatively in addition to qualitatively. But tendencies to look at quantitative impacts or campaign wins may address immediate needs for some while weakening the case for more significant changes.

In spite of these challenges, a growing number of national, regional and community-based organizations are basing their work on a structural racism analysis. Several national foundations such as Ford, C.S. Mott, Annie E. Casey, Open Society Institute, Marguerite Casey and Atlantic Philanthropies and others have been supporting individual grants or programs that have advanced understanding of structural racism during the past decade or longer. More holistically and explicitly, the Akonadi Foundation has committed its entire foundation to addressing transformational racial justice movement-building using a structural racism analysis. Most recently, the Kellogg Foundation made an historically major commitment to racial equity, which included a commitment to a structural racism analysis. And a growing number of local or regional, though perhaps less well-known, foundations such as the Barr Foundation of Boston, the Consumer Health Foundation of Washington, DC, and the Edward J. Hazen Foundation of New York have begun applying a structural racism analysis to their grantmaking strategies and theories of change. The mounting acceptance of structural racism approaches makes the search for useful evaluation tools ever more pressing.

PRE recognizes some of the cutting-edge work already done on participatory, culturally competent, social justice, anti-racist evaluation; many of the arguments of those who've developed this work should already be state of the art. (We've listed several seminal or macro resources in this volume's appendix.)

But the racial justice advocates, evaluators, community practitioners and funders who have contributed to this volume are still grappling with the question of what will best enable them to assess progress and impact in their work

Their contributions are concerned primarily, though not exclusively, with foundation-supported projects and programs addressing structural racism. Maya Wiley writes that funders

and grantees taking on structural racism confront a healthy but challenging tension of measuring the complexity of these issues and approaches with existing evaluation tools, and addresses some ways they may be adapted. John Powell and his colleagues at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, acknowledging the history of inadequate and failed policy interventions, assert that we need a systems approach to evaluation.

Rinku Sen of Applied Research Center, and through interviews, leaders of three other movement building organizations — the Miami Workers Center, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Western States Center — reflect on what measures accurately gauge progress on components of transformational change, importantly recognizing how they may differ from perhaps more easily recognized transactional wins or losses. Sally Leiderman, Maggie Potapchuk and Michelle Fine reflect on evaluation approaches they have seen and implemented in field settings. Finally, Soya Jung discusses the challenges that funders face in evaluating racial justice work and shares some of the ways they are addressing them.

We do not pretend to have simple answers to the question “How do we know we're making true progress toward racial justice?” In this volume, PRE has presented an array of perspectives and suggestions that may contribute to sharpening the questions raised by the funders, activists and evaluators concerned with racial justice. In this way, we hope to help position the field to collectively define the goals, adapt or refine existing tools or develop appropriate new ones as needed. With better evaluation tools, we can ensure that our limited financial and human resources are sharply and effectively targeted to those approaches most likely to improve outcomes in all of our communities for the long term.

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¹ www.innonet.org/client_docs/File/advocacy/fdn_rev_morariu_brennan.pdf

² www.calendow.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Evaluation/challenge_assessing_policy_advocacy.pdf