

HOW FUNDERS CAN CENTER EVALUATION NORMS ON EQUITY

TRACY E. COSTIGAN AND RAYMOND MCGHEE JR.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a field-level look at how philanthropy can support more equitable evaluation practices to produce evidence that is relevant to community and practitioner interests, as well as funder goals. We start with a description of practices at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), a field leader in philanthropic evaluation, describing how the foundation has shifted its approaches to center equity in evaluation processes and outcomes. We then turn to the history of evaluation in philanthropy more broadly and describe what it will take for the field to move toward equity-centered approaches in evidence generation, offering examples of steps RWJF has taken toward this goal.

EVALUATION AT RWJF: AN EVOLUTION TOWARD EQUITY

During its nearly fifty years in operation, RWJF has experienced an evolution in its vision and strategies, originating with a focus on improving health and health care, progressing to addressing the social determinants of health, and then to further the achievement of health equity in the context of building a Culture of Health. In 2020, RWJF sharpened its strategies, emphasizing the role of structural racism as a barrier to health equity, magnified in the contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Black violence (RWJF 2020).

Over this period, the foundation developed its definition of health equity. As an outcome, equity is defined as *everyone having a fair and just opportunity to live a healthier life*. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty and discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care. For research and evaluation, health equity is measured as *reducing and ultimately eliminating disparities in health and its determinants that adversely affect excluded or marginalized groups* (Braveman, Arkin, Orleans, Proctor, and Plough 2017). Like other philanthropies, it took several iterations to get to these definitions because of the challenge of clearly articulating a measurable outcome that can be sensed at a visceral level and yet is filled with nuance, multiplicity, and complexity. While many in philanthropy have articulated verbal and written affirmations of equity, the greater challenge has been implementing real change to embed equity into strategy and organizational values that lead to actions consistent with these declarations. Through this evolution, RWJF's commitment to building evidence has held steady, articulated in its first guiding principle: *We seek bold and lasting change rooted in the best available evidence, analysis, and science, openly debated*.

RWJF is considered a pioneer in philanthropic evaluation, and is known for using evaluation to build evidence about program impacts: to support program improvement, scale, and spread, and to guide decision making. The foundation engages with evaluators to design fit-for-purpose evaluations to inform its own work as well as that of others. RWJF does not subscribe to one type of methodology; rather, it supports evidence generation across a continuum of methods that respond to the unique research and evaluation questions of each body of work. Although the commitment to evidence remains unchanged, specific approaches to evaluation have progressed to keep pace with RWJF's increasingly focused commitment to equity. This parallels the evolution of evaluation across philanthropy as the sector struggles with challenging questions around the roles of validity, rigor, and relevance.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION IN PHILANTHROPY

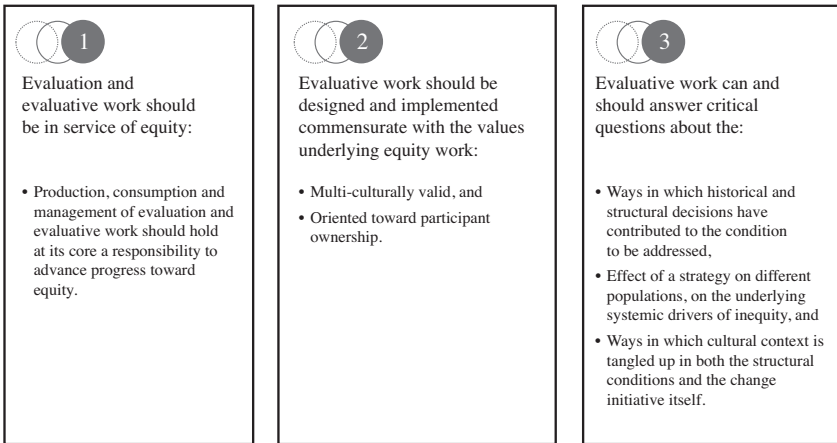
In philanthropy, rigorous evaluation of social programs has been central to evidence generation, beginning in the 1970s, as a way to measure program impact, usually at the individual grant level. In the decades that followed,

evaluation shifted to measuring broader outcomes across clusters of grants and programs. More recently, as the sector has shifted its focus to solving more complex systems-level problems, including advancing equity, evaluation has, again, shifted its focus toward informing strategic progress (Coffman and Beer 2016; Coffman 2016). Over time, philanthropic evaluation has turned more inward to examining foundations' own progress, losing sight of the communities they aim to serve. This calls to question the role of evaluation in evidence generation for practitioners and communities.

In the last few years, philanthropy is again evolving evaluation practices, in response to internal and external influences. Internally, foundations are examining operations and approaches with respect to centering equity. Concurrently, they are rethinking strategies to tackle the complexity of the systems preserving inequities. Furthermore, nonprofit sector leaders are pushing philanthropic institutions to examine their roles in perpetuating white-dominant narratives and culture despite trying to advance equity.

Externally, social justice movements challenging the structures of inequity in society have accelerated, particularly in light of the events of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which illuminated health disparities, and the groundswell of protests against long-standing racial inequity and police brutality. This has brought into focus the role of institutions and systems in preventing equitable outcomes. Communities and practitioners are asking questions about evaluation: What is its value relative to its historical origins? Who is it meant to serve? What is its relevance to advancing equity? As a result, philanthropy has been challenged to support communities in new ways, including addressing how evaluation supports evidence generation.

Finally, concepts like Critical Race Theory (CRT)¹ are appearing in the sector. CRT has had a significant influence in challenging philanthropy and those they fund to reimagine forms of evidence. Philanthropies have adopted new value and mission statements, with intentions to implement new practices that make equity a reality in strategies and practices. There is an urgent need for the next wave of philanthropic evaluation to center equity in design and measurement. Evaluation as a form of evidence must be in service to the communities and people most affected by the systems philanthropy is seeking to change. This shift also requires philanthropy to consider historical context, root causes, and status quo of the systems that drive inequities.

FIGURE 2.9.1 Equitable Evaluation Framework Principles

Source: Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). Equitable Evaluation Framework™. Retrieved from Equitable Evaluation Initiative, <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CENTER EQUITY?

The Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI 2017) has called into question philanthropic approaches to evaluation, encouraging the sector to transform evaluation to better fit with these newfound equity commitments. The equitable evaluation framework (EEF) offers three principles that have the potential to produce rigorous and relevant evidence that takes into account historical, structural, systemic, and cultural drivers related to decisions and outcomes (see figure 6.4-1).

Centering equity does not mean abandoning rigor. Rather, strong evaluation design driven by EEF principles achieves both. Analysis of equitable evaluation approaches that pits rigor versus equity is simply wrong (“A ‘Mischaracterization’ of the Movement Toward More Equitable Evaluation” [Letter to the Editor] 2020). Rather, the aim is to disrupt historic philanthropic orthodoxies around evaluation and replace them with a framing that is in service to equity. These old orthodoxies included centering on the foundation, who defined success and was the primary user of evaluation results. They also centered on the evaluators, based on traditional academic credentials, as objective experts who have the final say about meaning and impact. And they emphasized quantitative and experimental methods, which were usually the only approaches deemed sufficiently rigorous.

There is an opportunity now to shift the field away from these old orthodoxies to a new set of guiding principles that center equity in the work, while maintaining the standards of evidence generation. This includes first recognizing expertise in equal measure across the ecosystem, particularly privileging community and practitioner voices, designing and embracing continuous evidence building driven by their evidence agendas. It also means expanding the sector's thinking about rigor, encouraging fit-for-purpose mixed methods designs in the work.

Centering equity also requires evaluative work to reconsider validity, identifying the multiplicity and complexity of truth and moving away from the white-dominant culture frame that prioritizes funders' questions. The work needs to move toward expanding perspective to consider questions and test assumptions from all parts of the ecosystem. Evaluation needs to lift up the voices and perspectives of community members, organizations, local leaders, practitioners, and decision makers, and account for the context, culture, and power structures in the system. Producing valid evidence often requires expanding the scope of design and analysis.

What does this look like in practice? The EEF is not a tool, method, or rubric. Rather, it is a set of principles for reflection and learning about how evaluation practices can create the conditions to deeply examine and understand the work. It emphasizes the need to continually check beliefs, assumptions, and approaches and to continually recalibrate approaches throughout the process. It is possible to shift foundation norms and expectations around evaluation to support equity in process and outcomes while maintaining the rigor of high-quality methods and producing insights valuable to the interests of various stakeholders (EEI and GEO 2021). Moreover, given philanthropy's interests in advancing equity, not shifting in these ways creates a false sense of comfort in the evidence and will do harm to those most affected by structural inequities.

In recent years, a number of resources have been published that describe ways in which the sector is progressing to incorporate EEF principles and center equity in the work. Various examples describe concrete ways in which groups have transformed evaluation practices (for example, Annie E. Casey Foundation 2020; WestEd 2019; Forum for Youth Investment 2020, Public Policy Associates 2020; TCC Group 2021; Community Science 2021). An example of a community-generated framework designed to build meaningful evidence is the Chicago Beyond Initiative (2018), which articulates seven barriers to equity and impact perpetuated by the long-standing power

and control of funders. These include the lack of: *access* to wisdom that is missing because communities are not at the table; *information* about and *accountability* to the communities who are the subject of the research; *ownership* by and *value* to the community because funders and evaluators are centered in the work; and *authorship* credit to the community. Evaluation design must address these barriers to address equity. These and other resources offer ideas for the sector to translate these principles into practice (EEI and GEO 2021) to produce evaluative evidence that informs decisions (Lynn 2021).

RWJF's progress toward centering equity in evaluation, learning, and evidence generation has resulted in reexamining often long-standing approaches once considered best practices. This has included designing learning and evaluation plans that advance both community-practitioner interests and funder goals. It has included consideration of how opportunities are shaped, including scope and selection criteria, along with how these are shared, reviewed, and awarded. New approaches also include setting budgets for evaluations that support the effort necessary to center equity. It also means working with evaluators who are shifting their approaches: constantly checking biases and assumptions; using more mixed-methods approaches with iteration; repeatedly bringing grantees into design, implementation, analysis, and communication. And, it is imperative to clarify what equity means for each effort, both in terms of design processes and in measurement. Finally, as RWJF moves to develop evaluation around more complex strategies focused on systems change, we are being more deliberate in how we center the voices of those most affected by inequity, by giving community members the opportunity to help select the evaluators working in their communities, as well as co-design activities. In doing so, communities and practitioners are developing important lines of inquiry and measures in the evaluations. Throughout the work, communities, funders, and evaluators must feel empowered to hold each other accountable to these evaluation efforts, coming to agreements about how to raise questions at times when equity seems to be losing its place at the center of the work.

The demands of equity require philanthropy to be responsive in a variety of ways. Evolving evaluation practice to center equity is in the collective best interest, especially for the communities that have been most harmed by extractive practices of researchers and evaluators. It is an opportunity for philanthropy, through its grantmaking and field building, to expand our

vision to embrace the next generation of evidence. Integrating rigorous methods with a comprehensive design process that includes and amplifies the perspectives of those most affected by the systems under study will produce more rapid program improvements, further insight into what is necessary to produce systems change, and, ultimately, more robust and meaningful study of impact at all levels. Philanthropies individually can do this work; they can, as well, build partnerships to create more coherent funding packages and processes that support this next generation of evidence. Taken together, these actions can help philanthropy embrace more equitable evidence practices going forward.

NOTE

1. CRT views racism as a pervasive and systemic phenomenon that functions on many levels, necessitating the centering of the voices of people of color and seeking to highlight their lived experiences. K. Bridges, *Critical Race Theory: A Primer*. Concepts and Insights Series (Washington, DC, Foundation Press: 2019); and D. Stovall, “A Challenge to Traditional Theory: CRT, African-American Community Organizers, and Education,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26, no. 1 (2005), pp. 95–108.

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