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The Nonprofit Nerd (January 2017)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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THE NONPROFIT NERD

Research you can use.

This month's theme is **Using Data for Social Change.**

As we wish you Happy New Year this month, we at The Nonprofit Institute also want to say thank you to the people and organizations who are working on the front lines to ensure our community is a safe place for people of all identities, faiths and nationalities. We are committed to supporting nonprofit organizations in the days ahead, and we have much work to do.



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

This month, we are reflecting on the role of data in social change. As we try to make sense of claims of media bias, fake news and alternative facts, it is more important than ever that we commit ourselves to relying on evidence rather than opinion. But the implications of that seemingly straightforward goal go deeper than where we get our news or what we share on social media. We all rely on information to make strategic decisions about our programs, and we all face choices about what information we'll use, whether it is program performance metrics, client surveys or focus groups with our program participants. The question of what counts as evidence, and why has important implications for the people and communities we serve. We hope the resources below will help you think about and invite conversations in your organization and in your community.



NERDS AT WORK



In this issue, we are proud to feature an interview with “Nerd at Work,” Dr. Shweta Moorthy, Researcher at the [Coalition of Communities of Color](#), sharing her insights on data and research justice.

What role does data play in your organization's decision-making and strategic direction?

Data, and more broadly research, has been a crucial strategy for our organization’s mission of improving outcomes for communities of color. Culturally appropriate data and research, along with policy advocacy and leadership development, supports our collective racial justice effort to redress socioeconomic disparities of our communities of color stemming from institutional racism, and to organize our communities for collective action resulting in social

change. Our vision of ‘research justice’ centers the issues of power and equity in research processes and argues that mainstream research practices and data have perpetuated systemic inequities. Similar to like-minded organizations such as the [Data Center for Research Justice](#) (now no longer in existence), we believe that decolonizing data and research by acknowledging communities of color as being experts of their experience and having the right to research, the right to know and the right to be heard, is a crucial part of bringing about transformative change in our society. In service of this strategic direction, the CCC implements culturally-responsive data and research projects to build an important knowledge base from which to educate and to advocate. Two examples of that are [our community based research projects](#) in Multnomah County and Washington County (ongoing).

The research CCC has conducted has fundamentally changed the conversation around equity in our community. What have you learned from that experience?

We are reminded in so many ways by a variety of stakeholders (community based organizations, government agencies, universities and so on) about the impact of our research on understanding of racial equity and disparities, especially in Multnomah County. We are deeply appreciative of the acknowledgement and mindful of the need to sustain those conversations. Our vision for research justice stems from lessons learnt from research experience, especially the [Unsettling Profiles series](#) of communities of color in Multnomah County. It demonstrated that communities can use data and research, tools that have historically been the monopoly of white dominant institutions such as governments and think-tanks, to change discourses and create new policy environments. It has allowed us to envision a new role and strategy in social justice advocacy and movement-building, i.e. research.

The challenges we face in conducting research with an equity focus have also led us to begin building an agenda for data advocacy. Our research experience with existing data highlights both the paucity of data as well as the inability of existing data to meaningfully and culturally appropriately reflect the experiences of communities of color. In fact, data is often times willfully color-blind and renders invisible the experiences of communities of color. We have to continuously advocate for better data collection and research methodology practices. Based on our past research projects, we are also constantly reflecting on how we continue to equitably engage our communities of color, whom do we engage, what are the new directions in which we need to push our understanding of racial equity, and how do we better our ability to implement data-driven racial equity narratives.

How do you bring an equity lens to research and evaluation strategies?

Our equity lens to research is rooted in the recognition of inequitable power dynamics that have existed (and continue to do so) between the 'elite' researcher and research 'subjects' and the inappropriate and ad hoc manner in which communities have been mined for their experience without acknowledgement and reciprocity. Research justice means dismantling those dynamics and empowering communities as experts of their experiences. Furthermore, our research practices are informed by [Appadurai's \(2006\)](#) argument that everybody has the right to research - the right to tools through which anyone can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings. On the whole, the following principles inform our research strategies:

1. **Equitable Partnership:** Equitable community involvement in the research process including prioritizing common goals, question development, planning, collection, analysis, interpretation of data, and dissemination.
2. **Community Priorities:** Elevating expertise of communities of color, emphasizing community strengths, and addressing self-determined community priorities through research.
3. **Transformative Action:** Enabling data driven and community-generated solutions in public policy and decision making towards creating lasting change.
4. **Sustainable Capacity:** Building long term and sustainable capacity among communities of color to develop their own expertise, define priorities and propose meaningful solutions, which goes beyond a single study.
5. **Transparency and Accountability:** Commitment to a transparent research process, dissemination of findings and accountability to track implementation of data-driven and community-generated policy recommendations.

What do you think are some important considerations for our sector in using data in culturally responsive and ethical ways?

Although there are several tenets we should keep in mind, I will talk about two. First, is to know and continuously remember why culturally responsive data is important. Quantitative data, under the guise of objectivity, has centered whiteness or been color-blind. The US Census, the most popular basis of demographic research in the US, not only under-counts communities of color but also misrepresents them by collapsing certain disparate communities in broad race/ethnicity categories. To engage in culturally appropriate data collection and analysis activities, is to be mindful of the ways in which we may be perpetuating inequities in our research.

Second, is the way in which we maybe silo-ing communities in collecting and using data. We, as people, live a variety of identities and our data and research practices should honor that. This should be done by explicitly acknowledging that individuals should be able to identify the full continuum of their identity and that it's at the intersection of their identities, that unique disparities may lie. Recognizing intersecting identities is related to considering data in its granular and disaggregated form. This prevents researchers and policymakers from masking experiences within communities.

Back in 1990, sociologist [Ann Hartman](#) wrote that there are “many ways of knowing and many kinds of knowers.” What role should stakeholders play in determining what counts as evidence, and why?

When we think about 'what counts as evidence', what we are really asking is what is considered 'knowledge' and what is authoritative and legitimate. Quantitative data produced by governments, think-tanks and universities have traditionally counted as evidence. On the flip side, experiential knowledge of communities (that have historically been marginalized from mainstream knowledge institutions) have not been counted as evidence, or worse have been dismissed. There are many ways of knowing and many kinds of knowers, but power dynamics of knowledge are such that only one way of knowing and one kind of knower has been considered legitimate. Mainstream stakeholders have to

identify and acknowledge their position and role in perpetuating that inequity, and furthermore take responsibility for dismantling it. For example, traditional repositories of mainstream knowledge have to accept the validity of community experience (especially when that's all a community may have), take steps to gather quantitative data with an equity lens, and make it accessible to communities. A knowledge system that on the one hand exclusively relies on quantitative data and research for policymaking, and on the other, willfully and/or unintentionally lacks data that reflects the experiences of communities of color, is untenable. Community stakeholders, meanwhile, have to continuously push mainstream stakeholders to expand their definition of knowing and knowers, legitimize community knowledge as an authoritative basis for policy-making, and improve outcomes for our communities. **What advice do you have for fellow nonprofit leaders to encourage them in using research, data, and evaluation?**

Arguably, research and data is still a relatively new role in racial justice and community based organizations of color. That is understandable when we consider that research has historically been an elite, mostly white, (neo)colonial endeavor. I would like for our colleagues in the social justice movement in the region to think about data and research as a complementary strategy to organizing and advocacy to bring about transformative change in society. When we consider the radical vision of research justice as expanding the idea of what counts as evidence and who are the experts, we empower communities to organize against institutional racist barriers to our well being.

Know someone you'd like to see featured in the Nonprofit Nerd? Tell us who and why!



INSTITUTE NEWS

February is Black History Month, and PSU is hosting a number of [events ranging from film screenings to discussion forums](#) that are open to the community. On

February 13th - PSU's [Elevating Impact Summit](#) brings together speakers from around the globe for a lively day-long discussion about social entrepreneurship and social innovation. The 2017 theme, from ancient mythology to future technology, considers how we shape emerging industries and technologies with a lens on equity and lessons from the past. Meet leading social entrepreneurs, connect with hundreds of changemakers, and find paths to make positive impact throughout your own life and career. [Register](#) with our 20% off Community Partner discount code: PARTNER17

This year's students in NPI's [Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation](#) are well underway designing their evaluation strategies, exploring approaches ranging from statewide surveys to in-depth stakeholder interviews. Watch for details coming soon on how you can apply for our next cohort starting this fall.

March 14, 6-9pm save the date for an upcoming workshop with Young Nonprofit Professionals Network of Portland, where NPI Director Billie Sandberg will be reviewing rules for advocacy and lobbying for nonprofits. Details coming soon!



FELLOW NERDS

If you're interested in learning more about the role of data in social change, NPI recommends you get to know the great work of these fellow nerds, some of whom are based right here in Portland!

American Evaluation Association Topical Interest Groups:

Advocacy & Policy Change

Collaborative, Participatory & Empowerment Evaluation

Disabilities and Other Vulnerable Populations

Feminist Issues in Evaluation

Indigenous Peoples in Evaluation

International and Cross Cultural Evaluation

Multiethnic Issues in Evaluation

Coalition of Communities of Color

Data Center: Research for Justice (now closed, but with resources still available online)

RacialEquityTools.org: Evaluation

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Resources for Researchers & Evaluators



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