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Inciting Social Change Through Evaluation

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Abstract

This chapter summarizes and presents several current insights into our current understanding of structural racism. It then argues that evaluators have a role and a responsibility to step further into the arena by explicitly addressing structural racism in our evaluation projects. Lastly, drawing on our work at BECOME: Center for Community Engagement and Social Change, it outlines three strategies evaluators can adopt too, as we suggest, “step further into the arena.” © 2020 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

“As citizens of this democracy, we—all of us, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and others—bear a collective responsibility to enforce our Constitution and to rectify past violations whose effects endure.”

– Richard Rothstein

Overview

Rothstein’s (2017) statement refers to the “effects” of the U.S. government’s policies, structures, and practices that have intentionally and systematically created a racial caste system in this country and any social complacency that allows those results to persist. These decisions and subsequent laws have racially segregated this nation, causing psychological, physical, educational, and opportunistic barriers to the progress of people of

color. Given evaluators' work within sociopolitical contexts and lens around impact toward the public good, we must directly address and make a move to change these ills structurally. In this case, "our" refers to evaluators of every color, socioeconomic status, discipline, and setting.

Evaluators are in a unique position in this society in both skillset and network. We have a rare skillset of critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and communication that we can use to develop and share deeper insights on structural racism and connect them to practices on the ground. On one hand, we are often connected to leaders within organizations, corporations, academic settings or communities, and on the other, have access to those most affected by the programs or policies those leaders put in place. Additionally, we have an explicit charge to aid decision-makers in guiding programs, services, and organizations. Given these strengths, we can use our leverage to make large shifts toward structural equity.

This chapter presents information to show the pervasiveness of structural inequity and racism in the United States. We argue that every evaluator, no matter the setting or discipline, has a responsibility and role to play in sparking *and* fueling a persistent fire to manifest social and structural change toward social equity.

Our Historic and Current Context

As more and more literature surfaces (Alexander, 2010, Coates, 2015, Kendi, 2016, Rothstein, 2017), it is becoming the consensus view that racism is a deep-seated tradition in the United States. The description of historic and current acts of racism in American life as "tradition" is not stated with lightness given the meaning and value of that term to people of color and all people in our country. However, it is appropriate when we reflect on the way racist beliefs, behaviors, policies, and structures have been preserved, valued, and passed on through American generations. Racism is embedded in this country's fabric, from people who were enslaved, building the nation's capital, to corporations that are supported by policies and political structures in their exploitation of those incarcerated today. It is baked into nearly every system of government, and it is intertwined with daily living. While instances of how racism lives in our society are too numerous and complex to be covered here given the scope of the current chapter, we present a few quintessential examples.

In 1876, ten African American men were murdered by the Red Shirts, a "white supremacist" group led by Benjamin Tillman. This massacre led to the election of Mr. Tillman as a Senator, who ultimately served 24 years in office (Rothstein, 2017). This incident was and is not rare—others who identified with hate groups have assumed Congressional status. As of 2020, the sitting U.S. president openly denounces protest against racial inequity. In 2018, in Illinois, a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi was a Republican congressional candidate. With their vote and formalized power, people like

Tillman have created structures and policies that have formally segregated cities across the United States, constructed barriers to homeownership for communities of color, created slums, spurred fear, and solidified distance between communities.

These harmful acts have had lasting and insidious effects. For instance, there are many highways named after known racist senators. Statues stand in honor of political figures whose policies and beliefs led to massacres and murders of people of color. These designations further support complacency and uphold ethnic and racial biases that maintain social power for one group of people while maligning the value of others.

Examples of Intentional Racial Obstructions in African American Communities

While there have been intentional racial obstructions to every community of color in the United States (e.g., Japanese internment camps, forceful separation of immigrant families, human rights abuses against migrant workers), in this section, we describe specific acts taken against African Americans as a proxy and example of the holistic offense and affront against communities of color. Specifically, we call attention to the effects of segregation and a subset of the myriad examples of how city, state, and national institutions perpetuate racism (Rothstein, 2017). This includes policies and associated institutions' roles in disparate incarceration rates and subsequent freedoms, educational barriers, and the child welfare system's role in weakening family structures.

Segregation alone has caused increases in African American poverty, contributed to greater racial economic disparities (Ananat, 2011), hindered academic performance (Card & Rothstein, 2005), incited community violence (Peterson & Krivo, 1993; Rothstein, 2017), and created housing insecurity and increased foreclosures (Rugh & Massey, 2010). Most studies uncovering these effects have controlled for other barriers, isolating segregation as a *causal* factor. African Americans have not been the sole focus for segregation; European Americans have also been "forced" to live in racially homogenous areas after being denied mortgage loans for places designated for African Americans. Thus, the effects of segregation are not merely experienced by African Americans. European Americans have also been denied the benefits associated with living in diverse areas. However, people of color bear the most deleterious effects of segregation.

Through institutions, such as the Department of Justice, both presidential and congressional leaders have established policies that deliberately and unconstitutionally lead to racial disparities in incarceration. More African American men were in prison in 2011 than in the 1850s and many due to nonviolent, benign "crimes" such as carrying marijuana. Also, more African American men are currently imprisoned for such offenses than their European American counterparts, despite similar rates of use and dealing. Once

they serve their time, previously incarcerated individuals continue to face hardship. For instance, there are still laws in some states that revoke the right to vote for those who were incarcerated. After returning home, these individuals face limited state resources, such as food stamps and housing assistance (Alexander, 2010). Given that African American men are imprisoned at higher rates than other populations, they are more likely to be denied state rights and resources in such states after imprisonment. This dynamic contributes to disproportionate representation in voting across communities.

African American communities also face constructed obstacles in the education system. Governments have established tax structures that impede low-income communities from acquiring high-quality education. Accordingly, many African American students face restricted access to high-quality education that is sufficiently resourced, thereby placing them at a disadvantage for college access (Blanchett, 2006). Many teachers and school professionals take more punitive action against African Americans than their European American classmates, such as suspensions and arrests (Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2018), which also negatively affects the likelihood of their completion and academic success.

Child welfare is another governmental structure that has been intentionally utilized to weaken African American families and capitalize on children. For example, in Illinois' McLean County, the local child welfare system unjustifiably separated families and invoked trauma by unfoundedly removing children from their homes (Bell & McKay, 2004).

In our research on structural inequities and how these are experienced in the daily lives of African American men and boys in Chicago (Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities, 2019), 111 evaluation participants shared one experience after another in which multiple system-level disparities operated on them individually and in concert. These accounts demonstrated micro-experiences that solidified their hardship and inhibited progress toward their life goals, as well as the insidious and ongoing effects of structural racism. For example, the police have unnecessarily detained students after being called to school grounds. School closures have led students to cross conflict-ridden areas where they are at times propelled to defend themselves. These are only two small examples of how city, state, and national policy affect the daily-lived experience of many African American men and boys. Other systems that they identified as having direct, insidious effects on their lives included: criminal justice, education, housing, banking, labor, and health.

The Role and Responsibility of Evaluators in Inciting Change Toward Structural Equity

If structural racism is the problem, structural equity is inherent in the solution, including systemic protections and supports, designed to counter

racism's lasting effects and build and strengthen new systems for fairness, care, and justice. The pathway to structural equity lies in transformative actions that hold institutions and their policies accountable for operating in a way that abolishes previous and current barriers to wellbeing and rewards corrective actions. These circumstances will produce a different reality, where all people have unhindered access to flourishing lives inclusive of high-quality education, health systems that work for their wellbeing, and safety and security.

To reach a goal toward supporting the common good as evaluators, we must be more than well intentioned; we must adopt, engender, and support an oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge, 2001). We must be knowledgeable about and committed to examining and confronting these barriers to human and societal progress. Knowing the “truth” (Bledsoe, 2014) includes deep and valid knowledge of the context that influences the program/policy and participants; such contextual understandings consist of the origins and repercussions of historic or existing laws or systems. This truth also requires recognizing the profound brutality of the historic and current situation around race—that there were and are individuals with political decision-making power (and otherwise) who want to “plunder the black body” (Coates, 2015). However, there is a sanguine side of this issue; human beings constructed this reality and human beings can deconstruct and transform the situation (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Evaluators not only have a role but a responsibility, to deconstruct and then construct an ideal toward micro-level decision-making and macro-level policy transformation. Evaluators work on both levels and in between. Thus, the role and tactics that evaluators can employ toward structural equity can start exactly where we are. We can support a variety of actions that can help institutions internalize their role in remedying inequity. At a minimum, we can and should urge equitable decision-making, build data systems that provide evidence of disparities, guide the design and implementation of programs in a way that addresses social ills and help institutions ask questions regarding their own role in supporting inequitable structures.

Evaluators can also take lessons from other disciplines that focus on change toward justice, such as labor organizing, to make the change for the common good—structural equity. McAlevy (2016), an effective labor organizer, delineated how to move institutions, corporations, and decision makers toward justice through employing three ways to incite change: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing.

Advocacy often includes using individualized and targeted strategies to motivate extant decision-makers, those in formal positions of power (e.g., politicians, corporate leaders), to take action toward the common good. The strength of this approach is efficiency; however, the detriment is maintaining the current power structure—the person in the position of power stays.

Mobilizing consists of convening and motivating those who are interested and invested in solving an issue and moving in a more proactive and concerted way. The strength of this approach is greater participatory leadership, albeit those who are not already aligned with the stated goal are not included.

Organizing is constituted by moving the masses, including people who are not currently on the side of the goal and who may not be in decision-making or influential positions. For an organizer taking this approach, each person in the boundaries of the issue or institutional target is engaged. The strength of this is revolution—a pivotal change in the social reality in the mere process.

In charging evaluators with making a sociopolitical change, we recognize that our values and subjectivity are undoubtedly intrinsic to our practice. Therefore, evaluators must be critically self-reflective of our perspective and embrace a particular mindset in order to understand our influence. Furthermore, to effectively integrate self-reflexivity into our work, we must recognize that our decisions, judgments, and learning are deeply rooted in our values. When we value something, we often have keen attention to it or the absence of it, which consciously or subconsciously centers our values in our professional practice. More specifically, the adherence to a self-reflexive mindset, in turn, means the commitment to challenging evaluation processes that disempower, oppress, exclude, misrepresent, or dismiss particular stakeholders' contributions (Freeman, Preissle, & Havick, 2010). At the same time, we must identify, utilize, and encourage evaluation processes that are not only inclusive and empowering but are anchored by community voice.

Advocacy

Jennifer Greene (1997) asserts that “Advocacy is an inevitable part of evaluative inquiry, and indeed of all social inquiry today. The important question then becomes not, should we or should we not advocate in our role as evaluators, but rather what and whom should we advocate for?” From this position, whether using data as evidence for injustice or illuminating the unintended outcomes that may cause harm to families impacted by a program so that an organization can recalibrate, advocacy is uncompromisingly speaking truth to power. An evaluator is always charged with providing evidence of the reality of a program, organization, or institution to those in power. Leveraging this role as a social change tactic, evaluators serve as a conduit, providing decision-makers with meaningful data that can illustrate the disparities and opportunities for change.

Under resourcing is a prime example of how evaluators' stock in social programs and their desire to increase their effectiveness can be used to advocate for increased funding with local and state government officials or within their philanthropic network. For example, in BECOME: Center

for Community Engagement and Social Change's (BECOME) work with the Ark of St. Sabina in Auburn Gresham, a neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago, we witnessed severe cuts in federal funding that could have a detrimental impact on the youth and families they serve. BECOME evaluators committed to working with the Ark of St. Sabina for many years developed an advocacy agenda to use the lessons learned from the evaluation to build the capacity of other institutions in this community for greater community progress and social equity.

Mobilizing

Mobilizing is an opportunity to align with social service programs or other institutions that have a stake in building a more racially equitable society. By partnering with people, programs, and community organizations that believe in creating social change, we build the momentum toward our shared vision for justice. Evaluators can invest in activist groups that are mobilizing by building their capacity for evaluation at the grassroots level and beyond.

For example, BECOME evaluators partnered with Illinois Humanities' Envisioning Justice Project, which provided seven community organizations with grants to serve as hubs for projects using the arts as a lens to reimagine the criminal justice system. Each organization approached the project differently but all shared a focus on and commitment to reforming or abolishing the criminal justice system and creating a more socially just society. The evaluation team worked with the hubs individually and collectively to build their evaluation capacity. Through this capacity building engagement, community members developed evaluation skills and greater attention to how their planned organizational activities create change at different levels, such as organizational, community-level, and/or systems-level change. By investing in building the evaluation capacity around both knowledge and skills of grassroots practitioners, community members, organizational leaders, and other relevant stakeholders, we collectively created a greater sphere of influence for effective social change within these systems.

Community Organizing

Community organizing is crucial for increasing the collective, critical consciousness of communities of color, thereby supporting their empowerment and positioning to make change within and around the system. Organizing can reposition power with the people by giving community members voice and by building a bridge between individuals impacted by social service programs and the decision-makers intentionally depleting resources from the communities experiencing the brunt of injustice.

For example, we worked with twenty parents in a neighborhood located on the southwest side of Chicago around their concern about and

desire for services and resources for their children in their community. We provided training and support for them to facilitate and organize focus group and create and implement a survey to assess and illustrate the need for local after-school youth programming. They used these tools to engage 1,500 people over 6 months. From the process emerged a consensus and evidence that the community needs more youth and family programs. Since parents expanded their evaluation skills, complementing their activism experience, they were able to utilize the report findings to advocate for a community center where their children can safely access a variety of resources. The parents later applied their newfound skills to helping build better housing in their community.

Conclusion

While the idea of whether it is an evaluator's role to become a social change agent remains controversial, we believe our unique position in relation to different disciplines provides us with in-depth knowledge about structural barriers, opportunities to inform systems reform, and opportunities to create or contribute to movements that further social equity. The position of our profession, combined with social justice values, can inform our evaluation design, methodology, and analysis, and has the potential to inform our responsibility in taking collective action toward social change through advocacy, mobilizing, and community organizing.

We each bring our own talents, gifts, and experiences to our work of evaluation. Not every evaluator will give testimony at their state capital; some will be more comfortable in the field, others in the analysis. However, we believe that we all have an obligation to our society and have the potential to leverage evaluation work in the service of social progress and favor of a greater good. We can use our position at the intersection of sectors, social systems, and communities to inform decision-making and policymaking in favor of social equity. We offer that evaluation professionals can draw from other areas such as community organizing scholars and social advocates to add skills and orientation to our toolkits in order to better position our practices and profession as a whole to take action on this charge.

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