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PCI: A Reflective Evaluation Framework for Systems Change

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Keywords: Systemic change, systems-oriented evaluation, evaluation design, community engagement, racial equity, culturally responsive evaluation

Introduction

This article arises out of our work over several decades in the evaluation field and in philanthropy with a focus on designing and facilitating the implementation of systems-change strategies and evaluation. It addresses our current thinking about how foundations and communities can work within complex systems to identify key levers for change and use evaluation to track progress and assess impact.

We are developing the PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework and offering it as a prototype integration of systems thinking into practical, community-based change efforts. The framework is intended to be especially useful where the goal involves a fundamental shift in the worldview or values that underlie the key systems that need to be changed. The framework can also be used by nonprofits and organizations other than foundations and communities.

The PCI framework can be adapted to a variety of social-change situations; we are focused here on its use in advancing racial equity. In particular, we want to help communities use evaluation to sustain their efforts to achieve racial equity and other systemic-change goals that involve fundamental shifts in the underlying assumptions and values on which a social system is built.

The PCI framework (1) recognizes the complexity of social systems while honing in on levers for fundamental change, (2) uses tangible indicators to show early wins and connects them to root causes of system barriers, (3) incorporates evaluation into a community change effort to ensure only the evaluation activities that truly matter to it are conducted, (4) makes use of

Key Points

- Systemic change involves deep shifts in social norms, beliefs, power, and privilege — and seldom, if ever, follows a straightforward, predictable path. Such change also requires incremental, long-term action and evaluation. To better support systemic change, how might a foundation reframe its approach to evaluation?
- This article explores the interconnected dimensions of the PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework, an approach now in prototype form which is grounded in practical thinking about working within complex social systems. This article focuses on its use in advancing racial equity, describing possible applications to integrate a racial equity lens in unpacking and addressing the complexity of systemic change.
- The framework is intended to help communities use evaluation to sustain their efforts to achieve racial equity and other systemic-change goals that involve fundamental shifts in the underlying assumptions and values on which a social system is built.

evaluation findings to determine next actions, and (5) concretizes the role of a funder’s evaluation enterprise.

We provide this framework to stimulate collegial dialogues that can advance the value-add of evaluation practice in complex social-change endeavors such as achieving racial equity. In the first section of this article, we describe the basic elements of the framework. In the next section, we provide a hypothetical example of how a community might use this framework. In the subsequent section,

we articulate four challenges that led us to propose the PCI framework and how the framework addresses these challenges. The final section considers some potential implications of the framework for a foundation's evaluation enterprise.

The Basics of the Framework

At the heart of the PCI framework is the specification of where to focus an evaluation when evaluating complex systems-change endeavors. The "P's" in the framework designate five critical components of a system:

1. *People*: individuals' behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and values;
2. *Power*: allocation, distribution, and ownership of resources (e.g., financial, positional);
3. *Programs*: interventions designed and implemented for systemic change or to achieve specified outcomes for designated groups;
4. *Practices*: patterns of individuals' behaviors formed and reinforced over time; and
5. *Policies*: regulations, legislation, and rules within and across multiple levels and domains (e.g., institutional, local, state, national).

The three "C's" of the PCI framework designate the dimensions of the larger systems that encompass the five "P's":

1. *Content*: the substance of the five "P's";
2. *Connectivity*: linkages, interfaces, and interactions among the five "P's"; and
3. *Context*: the environment, background, and situational dynamics where the "P's" or "C's" are exhibited.

The four "I's" set forth actions that communities can take — and evaluate — to achieve the purpose or goal of systemic change:

1. *Improve*: Better a system through changes in targeted "P's" or "C's." For example, the

purpose could be better program design or delivery; better implementation of effective or promising practices; more equitable power distribution; more conditions in the community that are conducive to stimulating changes in people's attitudes; and/or better connections between policy and practice.

2. *Inform*: Raise the visibility of the likely lever(s) of a systemic change so that they can be more effectively used by those who become informed. For example, an informative community action could stimulate valuable insights from community constituencies that inform and influence policymakers to take actions that help ensure equitable constituency-centered policy implementation.
3. *Influence*: Mobilize factors to enable a systemic effect. For example, the goal of system change could be indirect but powerful shifts of resource allocation to ensure equity. This "I," unlike others, might be intangible, but it is one of the most potent objectives. Lifting it up in the evaluation framework could help clarify the overall goal and possibly also identify or mobilize the most relevant lever(s) of change.
4. *Impact*: Produce the effect of a systemic change. This "I" tends to be longer term, resulting from the other "I's" or from the "P's" and "C's."

The relationships among the "P's," "C's," and "I's" can be linear and nonlinear. The nature of the relationships must be taken into account in the evaluation design and implementation. (See Figure 1.)

Before proceeding to an example of the use of the framework, we want to (1) clarify the meaning of "systems" used in this article and (2) clarify the role of the evaluator.

Systems

The many different meanings of the term "systems" range from concrete to abstract, and can be confusing. This can be explained by the

FIGURE 1 The PCI Framework

broad nature of the definition: a system is “an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something” (Meadows, 2008, p. 11). Systems may be conceptual models and/or physical entities, and can include highly controlled and mechanistic systems as well as more complex and adaptive ones.

In this article and in the PCI framework, we are focused on the fairly concrete formal social systems such as education, health care, and criminal justice. They exist along with informal recognized social systems such as families, social groups, faith-based organizations, and neighborhood groups. Both the formal and informal systems are of importance in systemic change to move toward an impact such as racial equity. This orientation to systems (rather than the more abstract ways of thinking about systems) is the one we have found to be most readily understood by a broad range of people with varying backgrounds. Formal systems are especially important when addressing issues such as structural racism.

The Evaluator

Communities often see the evaluator as an outside person who is checking to see if those implementing a change have followed their plan. The PCI framework steps away from that approach, and views evaluators and community stakeholders as partners engaged in understanding the results of iterative sets of activities and determining what those results — intended or unintended — suggest for future actions toward a systemic change grounded in shifts in social norms, beliefs, assumptions, and purposes.

There are other approaches to evaluating improvement and community-level change, including Results-Based Accountability¹ and the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model.² These approaches are valuable and can be used within the action-evaluation-adjustment plans that occur in the PCI framework. The big difference is that those approaches typically have an underlying assumption that the systems within which they are being applied operate from basic

¹ See www.raguide.org.

² See www.ihl.org.

Structural racism occurs when the hierarchical sense of white people being superior to other races is institutionalized in policies, practices, and programs. The assumption of white superiority permeates the personal belief systems of many Americans consciously or unconsciously. People of color have long recognized how the systemic structures have made them more vulnerable to incarceration, poor health, inadequate housing, and poverty.

assumptions, beliefs, and norms that are congruent with the desired results. The PCI model recognizes that such congruence may not exist. Goals such as racial equity are not necessarily congruent with the underlying assumptions, beliefs, norms, and purposes on which critical existing system features were built. Thus, system change involves changing core system components (expressed as the five “P’s” in the PCI model) and their interconnections in a given situation (the three “C’s”) to align with a different set of underlying assumptions, beliefs, norms, and purposes such as racial equity.

Getting to these root causes of systems barriers is necessary. Thus, the PCI framework came out of our reflections on what would help community groups find a way to keep focused on these deep and complex changes in social systems while engaging in practical and significant action-evaluation-adjustment cycles. The authors

— a director of a nonprofit evaluation organization focused on systemic-change initiatives and an evaluation leader within a large foundation committed to racial equity — have extensive experience working with communities and have seen firsthand the complexity of systems change and the difficulty multiple stakeholders have in understanding how they can bring about long-term change.

The authors have been involved in two important trends in the evaluation field. First, the field is increasingly recognizing the importance of issues of culture in the conduct of evaluations. Various groups within a community have their own cultures — shared behavior, values, customs, and beliefs. An evaluator who does not attend to the multiple cultures within a community runs the risk of misunderstanding behavior and producing inadequate or incorrect findings. Secondly, the evaluation field is expanding its attention to the significance and nature of complexity and complex systems (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Parsons, 2012; Parsons et al., 2016). Developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) is an example of an evaluation approach that attends to complexity and complex systems.

The authors saw the need to have a framework with practical language that communities could leverage into iterative, incremental action for deep systemic change. Let’s look at how a community might get started on using the framework to create a plan for sustained systemic change toward racial equity.

Racial Equity and Structural Racism

“Racial equality” and “racial equity” are not the same.

Equality refers to sameness, where everyone receives absolute equal treatment and resources. ... Sameness can often be used to maintain the dominant status quo. Instead, equity refers to fairness, where everyone gets what they need based on their individual needs and history. (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2016, p. 78)

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racism is institutionalized in policies, practices, and programs. The assumption of white superiority permeates the personal belief systems of many Americans consciously or unconsciously. People of color have long recognized how the systemic structures have made them more vulnerable to incarceration, poor health, inadequate housing, and poverty. In recent years, more white people have begun to acknowledge their own privileged status.

Use of the PCI Framework

To illustrate how a community might use the framework, we have set our hypothetical example in a community located in a culturally diverse, midsize city surrounded by suburbs and agricultural land. A number of years ago, a partnership formed to focus on early childhood care and education. The partnership was concerned about the significant disparities in educational achievements and the quality of the care and education among racial groups within the city, the rural areas, and the suburbs.

The partnership has been focused on improving several existing programs that had been created in recent years. Each program had its own evaluation and evaluator. As the partners learned more about structural racism and racial equity, they became increasingly aware that their work was connected to a bigger and more systemic issue — racial equity in their community.

The partnership had recently acquired a description of the PCI framework and decided to use it to rethink its actions and evaluations to more intentionally address the systemic barriers to racial equity. The partners hoped that the framework would help them avoid being overwhelmed by the multiplicity of players, programs, policies, and processes that made up the education and child care systems. They decided to use the framework to “storyboard” their thinking, intending to track the development of their plan by visually recording the major steps on frames of the framework. They wanted the outcome of working on each frame to be a better articulation of what they wanted to accomplish by helping them to focus on the most important issues for their situation. They decided to start with the

original framework and then mark their changes as they went through each step of their thinking. The storyboard would be posted in a conference room of a public building where they often met.

They began with a replica of the basic PCI framework: a circle with three major components. The outer ring was labeled with the names of the three “C’s.” Inside the outer ring were five equal pie-shaped slices, each with the name of one of the five “P’s.” In the center was a small, removable box that was labeled with the names of the four “I’s.” The components in the circle could be written over or moved, so that for each step in the development process the partnership could create an updated frame. Thus, each frame visually summarized a step in the development process. (See Figure 2.) And while the process is set out in the order in which a partnership is likely to proceed when working with the PCI framework, that order may vary depending on the pressing concerns of the community.

Frame 1

The partnership confirmed that racial equity was its desired impact — one of the four “I’s.” Since the partners didn’t yet know how they wanted to work with the other three “I’s,” they moved the box with the four “I’s” out of the diagram. Doing so allowed them to look first at the “C’s” and “P’s.” They started with the “C’s”: They decided that they wanted the content focus to be on education, so they inserted “(education)” after “content” on Frame 1. They also wanted to expand the context to include the whole community, so they inserted “(whole community)” after “context.”

Having decided to have an action and an evaluation plan that dealt with education for the whole community, the partnership next considered connectivity. The partners realized that their biggest problem was the lack of connectivity — in this case, patterns of disconnection and separation among the racially and economically diverse groups in their community. What was needed was community engagement, defined as “a process that includes multiple techniques to promote the participation of community members in community life, especially those who are excluded

FIGURE 2 Frame-by-Frame Storyboarding

and isolated” (Building the Field of Community Engagement Partners & Babler, 2014, p. 1). The partners made the “Connectivity” label larger than the other “C’s” on the frame to reflect their focus on that dimension and that connectivity among cultures was of particular importance.

Frame 2

Next, the partners looked at the five “P’s.” The PCI framework explicitly highlights the programs, practices, and policies of social systems because structural racism resides in those elements and their interconnections. In formal hierarchical systems, policies set the boundaries and structures within which programs are designed, and the people involved then engage in ongoing practices befitting their role within the structures of the programs.

The partners realized they had been focused on the programs and the practices of one group of people involved in the program — early childhood educators — but had not looked at the policies, programs, and practices as an interconnected unit. As they worked with the framework, they became more aware of how the interplay among programs, practices, and policies was heavily influenced by the people involved and the nature of their power in the situation. To move toward racial equity, the partnership decided to focus on these five “P’s” and their interrelationships to shift the system structures from ones that institutionalize racism to those that institutionalize equity.

Using their “connectivity” lens, the partners noticed that frequent disconnections occurred in the implementation of policies, practices, and programs. Having read a lot about equity and structural racism,³ the partners thought that addressing the interconnections among these three “P’s” would get at the heart of the system changes needed in early childhood care and education. The structure created by the interconnection of these three elements is especially significant in creating the systemic power that can either support or undermine equity in hierarchical systems. For example, the partners

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had been focusing on improving professional development for early childhood teachers. The evaluator of the intervention found substantial gains in teaching skills and knowledge as well as increased learning among students. On further investigation, however, it was found that the school district’s policies were not being adjusted to increase professional development for teachers or ensure that existing professional development was provided in ways that reached teachers and schools where it was most needed.

Frame 3

The partners also decided against creating any new programs because the education sector in their community had fallen into an ineffective habit of starting programs in response to a problem or to an offer of funding.

The funder for the current action-evaluation-adjustment plan had agreed to let the partnership develop its own strategy, a freedom that allowed the partners to focus on working among existing policies, practices, and programs over a longer

³ See, e.g., www.kirwaninstitute.osu.edu and www.wkcf.org.

term. This is where they saw the most possibility for sustained systemic change that would contribute to their desired impact — racial equity. The partners indicated this decision by writing “new” above “Programs,” and then circling and striking through the word.

Frame 4

Finally, the partners were ready to tackle an issue so difficult that change initiatives in the community had avoided it despite its importance: how to involve racially diverse people in conversations and decision making that built strong, sustained interconnections and addressed the issue of power. Just as they had realized the importance of working back and forth among policies, practices, and policies, the partners realized it was going to be an iterative process of engaging diverse groups, getting feedback on the conversations, adjusting their approach, and adaptively moving toward sustainable interconnections between racially diverse groups and addressing the nature of power, including allocation, distribution, and ownership of financial and positional resources.

Dissecting the five “P’s” within the perspective of the “C’s” had helped the partners reveal which levers in the system might need to be changed and why. It also helped them focus on the levers they could most affect and develop a plan for iterative action-evaluation-adjustment loops. The partnership was now ready to consider how changing the interconnections among the five “P’s” as shown might lead to other changes and help the partnership — and ultimately, the funder — use change strategies in ways that mattered and seemed appropriate. In essence, the partnership was ready to invoke the power of evaluation as a tool — it expected the evaluation to enrich the understanding of what was and wasn’t working, and why.

The partners turned to the four “I’s” to establish their next steps and an evaluation approach. They recognized that they needed to understand the “I’s” and determine which to target at a given time and location so that the evaluators could collect, analyze, and, most importantly, make sense of the data in light of iterative

action-evaluation-adjustment loops. The adjustments might lead to a different mix of the four “I’s” during the next loop.

Frame 5

The partners now came back to discussing the four “I’s.” Having worked through the storyboarding frames with a focus on “impact” (i.e., impacting racial equity), the partners decided that “inform” was their next focus. They had learned a lot about the disconnects and misconnects among policies, practices, and programs and between racial groups. Informing other stakeholders who possessed the influence to make changes was next. In particular, the partners had learned about the importance of dialogue in racial healing. So, they decided to start by asking people from different racial and cultural groups to inform one another about their stories and histories. The framework focused the partners’ attention on how power had been expressed historically and how it was being expressed now. They realized that there was very little opportunity for people from different racial groups to talk to one another in settings where they shared personal experiences of equity and differential power. They wanted people to hear what others were experiencing in terms of the five “P’s.” In the past, public “dialogues” were arguments for and against a given city policy — debates among the most articulate speakers instead of conversations during which diverse people suspended their assumptions and listened carefully to the experiences of others.

With the focus on “inform,” the partners engaged an evaluator to learn whether informing through stories would evolve into helping people improve the interconnections among policies, practices, and programs if they were in a position to make such improvements. The partners wanted to use the evaluation process to look at what type of influences resulted from emphasizing informing through personal stories. In this way, the partners could use their evaluation work to go beyond ensuring that informing had happened; the findings would indicate whether it had stimulated any systemic improvements or influence and with which people, even if the changes were small. To indicate

their intention of using informing to bring about improvements and positive influences, the partnership placed an arrow pointing from “inform” to “improve” and another from “inform” to “influence.” This visual cue provided them with a broad picture within which various groups could develop specific plans.

Frame 6

The partnership established the first iterative cycle of action-evaluation-adjustment plans to illustrate where it would focus in the near future. The action plans involved people telling stories and sharing information through other means. The partners and evaluators would look carefully at opportunities within the community to build the conversations into people’s existing patterns of living; they also would look for other ways to create different opportunities for interaction.

The partners decided to set checkpoints for gathering evaluative information framed around if and how “inform” connected to “improve” and “influence.” The partnership and its evaluators developed evaluation approaches that helped them see if such sharing led to those involved making improvements in their work or influenced them in other ways that nudged the system components toward racial equity. The evaluators would look for evidence of people starting to internalize the changes in underlying beliefs and assumptions about racial equity, going deeper into the root issues under the five “P’s.” They decided to stick to this approach for the next six months and then rethink their next steps based on what they learned from the evaluative work, and hoped to achieve some early progress toward racial equity. In the box with the four “I’s” below the circle, they drew a jagged line to indicate that the partners expected an unpredictable ride on their journey toward racial equity (“impact”).

After the partnership and evaluators started their action-evaluation-adjustment plan, a variety of actions brought together many combinations of people across racial groups for dialogue. The evaluators helped ensure that each dialogue was designed to fit the appropriate schedules and cultural styles of interactions of the groups. As the groups worked in ways that fit their context

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and content there was considerable variation in actions and evaluation approaches, but generally, the groups came back to the overall connections among the five “P’s” as they moved back and forth between specific actions and the more general concepts that related to structural racism in their situation.

Six months later, the partnership regrouped around its PCI framework to reflect on what had been learned from the first round of action (various informal, facilitated community conversations) and the evaluation of that action. (See Figure 2.) The partners learned that the conversations were promoting understanding, had influenced people to view one another differently and learn to listen with empathy, and led them to change some of their daily practices and assumptions. They also discovered that people were talking about policies, programs, and practices that were outside the existing early childhood care and education system. The transportation system, for example, was influencing whether parents in certain parts of the county were able

FIGURE 3 Six Months Later: An Adjusted PCI Framework

to access high-quality child care; people saw the interface with the transportation system and the city's minimum wage policy.

For the next round of action-evaluation-adjustment, the partners decided to dive more deeply into the interconnections among the five “P’s.” They modified the visual representation by lifting up the corners of the “P’s” to illustrate a deeper look at the nature of the connections among policy, practice, and programs as well as of people and power that were creating structural racism. (See Figure 3.) By keeping attention on action and evaluation and making adjustments, the partners were pleased to see that they had been able to test out approaches. They could now develop an iteration of action and evaluation focused on connections among the five “P’s” that mattered in the community to strategically move it through small steps toward greater racial equity. It included some new perspectives that had not emerged before the community

conversations. The partners began to see how their role might include facilitating such dialogues over several years to specifically address the connections among policy, programs, practice in different situations, what power looks like, and which people were involved. In their evaluation, they want to look at how “informing” in this way influences people to be more aware of their own power and that of others. They also want to track what types of improvements occur in existing policies, programs, and practices that shape early childhood care and education. Their attention is now shaped by a systems orientation and the interconnection of elements of systems.

Common Challenges

Systems change requires vigilance and intentionality. In this case, the PCI framework helps communities and evaluators connect immediate, concrete actions to deeper, systemic root causes of and long-term desired impacts on racial inequities. The framework helps them maintain the

systemic connections throughout their work and keeps them from getting lost in the details of adjusting their actions and evaluations to fit their situations.

No social system change can be viewed as a permanent state; systems involving people continuously shift in predictable and unpredictable ways. To make sure that change is going in the desired direction, communities and evaluators must continually adjust their action and evaluation approaches to go to deeper issues, such as basic beliefs about racial relations and systemic structures. Work toward racial equity must be carried out through sustained, intentional effort and never be considered “done,” because progress made can be quickly lost when attention wanders from the goal or becomes superficial.

In systems-change efforts, communities encounter multiple subsystems and systems. The multiplicity of issues, players, programs, and more tends to overwhelm community stakeholders and evaluators alike. The PCI framework can help them unpack the dimensions of the system and simplify the complexity enough to create iterative action-evaluation-adjustment plans for achieving racial equity. The players allow the plans to unfold by watching what actions are taken, observing the results, and attending to the small and short-term indicators while, through the framework, continuing to pursue the goal by adjusting to new conditions that result from their actions or other changes.

The PCI framework, in sum, seeks to overcome a variety of challenges faced by communities and evaluators who are engaged in systemic changes toward a goal such as racial equity. (See Table 1.) In particular, the framework was created to help them overcome four challenges:

1. attending to two conceptual levels concurrently;
2. paying attention to the significance of interconnections;
3. setting boundaries for action and evaluation; and

4. understanding how to effect systemic change.

Use of the Framework for Foundation Evaluations

As foundations shift toward a more complex systems-change orientation and greater attention to cultural differences and assumptions, they also look to communities, rather than themselves, to shape the evaluation design and determine the questions. As Coffman and Beer (2016) note, it is important for foundations to support grantees in “answer[ing] their own evaluation questions so that data can inform their own decision making” (p. 40). The foundation learns from community-designed evaluations as its evaluation staff manages data across sites and programs. The evaluation unit at the foundation uses an evaluative thinking lens to look for evidence of change, learning, and a community’s developing capacity to conduct evaluations that serve the community’s purpose. Evaluation shifts from being done for the foundation to being done by, for, and with the community.

Foundations that are taking a complex-systems orientation to their work are increasingly realizing that they cannot expect to see predictable, progressive, step-by-step change. Nor can they expect changes that are made to necessarily last. Indeed, it may not be valuable for some changes to last; they may simply be steps along the way. Additionally, the changes may come from actions within the community that go beyond the work that the foundation has specifically funded. As Gardner (1994) observes, “The surest cure for the sense of powerlessness that afflicts so many citizens today is to take action on the problems of their own communities, restoring belief in their capacity to make a difference” (p. 1).

Systems change requires more than a single winning project — it requires a commitment to keep working on different aspects of an issue, parsing out the effort over time, and seeing what can be done over an extended period of years in a given place. When a foundation makes this kind of commitment to a community, it is with the understanding that even when an individual

TABLE 1 Challenges Addressed by the PCI Framework

Action and Evaluation Challenges	How Communities and Evaluators Often Experience the Challenges	How the PCI Framework Addresses the Challenges
Attending to two conceptual levels concurrently	Difficulty in focusing on both specific activities and the influence of those activities on the larger system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engages people in ways that use their knowledge and ideas and produce meaningful findings, whether or not they intentionally think in terms of systems.PCI vocabulary gives users a common language to talk about what they're learning.Users can iteratively design action-evaluation-adjustment plans with attention to long-term systemic impacts (e.g., racial equity).Collective reflection among stakeholders guides next iteration of action-evaluation-adjustment.
Paying attention to the significance of interconnections (i.e., connectivity)	Frequently losing the significance of interconnections due to tendency in Western culture toward reductionism, or breaking things into parts.	Focuses attention on the significance of connections among major components of specific systems involved in shaping intended impact.
Setting boundaries for action and evaluation	Difficulty establishing the boundaries of activity or evaluation, which easily become too broad or too narrow.	Sets boundaries around iterative action-evaluation-adjustment plans that are realistic in time frame, scope, and consequences for long-term impact.
Understanding how to effect systemic change	Unrealistic connections between actions and impact due to a lack of understanding about how social systems change, often with focus on specific programs and short-term changes to meet funding requirements rather than on deep and ongoing systemic changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Recognizes that different theories of systems change may be appropriate depending on the nature of the action-evaluation-adjustment plan.Gives priority to shifts in fundamental system changes, instead of short-term shifts, when altering action-evaluation-adjustment plans.

activity misses the mark, the lessons learned can add an essential piece to the overall understanding of the process and the strategies required to achieve desired outcomes that are deeply rooted in systems and their structures.

The PCI framework can guide a community to effect sustained systemic change — but the value of the framework doesn't end with the community. It also provides a philanthropic foundation with information it needs to understand the long-term, diverse patterns of shifting system

structures. While providing a framework that keeps the power in the hands of the community to determine its overall strategy, the generated knowledge can help a foundation understand multiple, diverse, creative approaches to addressing systemic issues such as inequities. The framework provides a way for a foundation to glean practical knowledge about changing social systems across communities.

A core issue for a foundation is learning how system change has a different look from community

to community at any given point in time. When communities focus on the “P’s,” “C’s,” and “I’s,” however, the foundation can design its knowledge management around these aspects of systems and their interactions and patterns. They can adapt the stories and visuals to communicate to their board, leaders, staff, and other audiences.

The framework encourages communities to talk about how the interplay of PCI elements creates a pattern of system change in their community. By using the language in the framework, community members from different contexts can share their experiences using similar terminology. Thus, the evaluation unit at the foundation can discern patterns in how communities engage in systems change and identify long-term patterns of systems change that connect to root causes expressed in the five “P’s,” three “C’s,” and four “I’s.”

Conclusion

The PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework is a prototype. It is designed to work both for communities and foundations as they consider how they learn and what needs to be done to create sustained systemic change, such as achieving racial equity. While it is firmly grounded in complex-systems thinking and evaluative thinking, we recognize that it is in the early stages of development.

We think it is important to make the PCI framework public so we have a formal venue to invite evaluation and discussion to refine the framework for useful applications in evaluating complex systemic-change efforts. Our hope is that it will spark collegial conversations about how to make it better and more useable by many types of communities, foundations, and evaluators. We look forward to hearing your ideas and suggestions.

Acknowledgments

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Commentary on PCI: A Reflective Evaluation Framework for Systems Change

Hanh Cao Yu, Ph.D., *The California Endowment*

In 2016, The California Endowment undertook a comprehensive effort to assess its approach to evaluating a 10-year policy and systems-change “place-plus” initiative called Building Healthy Communities (BHC). A \$1 billion effort throughout California, BHC aims to involve local mobilization and organizing in statewide policy and systems change through an alignment of neighborhood, city, county, regional, and state efforts and resources. The endowment’s equity analysis led to an explicit focus on policy and systems change, rather than programmatic solutions, and movement building to advance health equity.

Our investments and action strategies follow a theory of change which posits that five “drivers of change” can produce significant policy and systems changes, which in turn can improve the conditions of healthy communities, which will, in the long run, improve health outcomes. The drivers of change are:

1. people power (civic engagement, resident organizing and mobilization),
2. youth leadership development,
3. collaboration and partnerships,
4. leveraging partnerships and resources, and
5. changing the narrative.

To measure progress in state-regional-community implementation of this theory, BHC had a number of outcomes and indicators frameworks during the initiative’s first five years. In 2016–2017, we consolidated and refreshed these into a results-based framework that sets clear goals for the initiative at several levels with 11 major indicators of success. These provide focus for the many interrelated parts of BHC and are known as the BHC North Star Goals and Indicators.¹

Within a systems-thinking frame, we have learned that our work is at its most powerful when it

engages with the less visible systems-change conditions — relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. The Building Healthy Communities initiative is made more complex by its simultaneous engagement of multiple actors operating in 14 communities and statewide under shifting contexts to transform systems that are set up to perpetuate structural and racial inequalities. Our ability to evaluate shifts in invisible, underlying systems conditions is not an easy endeavor, because few existing frameworks have provided meaningful alternatives to the traditional, linear, “cause and effect” model.

The PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework is promising in that it brings the intersection of multiple areas that have been the focal points of BHC: people, power, policies, transformed institutional practices, connectivity, and context with our goal to influence and impact through a strong racial equity lens. The potential for application of this framework is enormous. As we evaluate BHC in its final phase, we need to be explicit about how our power-building strategy is not only a means, but also an end, to transforming complex social systems that are the root causes of systemic barriers to the health and well-being of Californians.

From a design, prototyping, and experimentation perspective, we believe that the application of the PCI framework to the BHC evaluation will help us — our partners, communities, and the foundation — to think differently about systems dynamics and better understand how to sustain long-term systemic change through building, exercising, and holding power. We look forward to joining the dialogue to learn and better evaluate efforts to build healthier, sustainable, and equitable communities.

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¹ See <http://www.calendow.org/northstar/index.html>.

The PCI Framework: Foundations Investing in and Evaluating Their Contributions to Systems Change

Thomas Kelly, M.P.H., Hawai'i Community Foundation

Most foundations have ambitious goals for solving complex social problems using only the few tools we have available. Money, knowledge, and influence can be powerful tools only if they are deployed in ways that intentionally effect change in people, organizations, and systems. This is why it is important for philanthropic investors to be systems thinkers — to hold robust theories of change that engage whole systems and not just programs or individual organizations.

And our theories of change need to be translated and implemented according to our theories of how foundations can bring about change through these limited tools and investments. Oftentimes our grand theories do not achieve our ambitions because we fail to be both disciplined and adaptive when working in and with complexity. And we fail to communicate clearly and consistently to grantees and partners when we respond to complexity with either rigid plans or whiplash-inducing changes in strategy.

The PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework gives foundation investors specific help to plan intentionally for the levels of intervention and change necessary to influence complex systems change. It also underscores key assumptions about working and investing in complex systems and societal change: First, our traditional grantmaking and ways of thinking reinforce programmatic outcomes and not long-term, population-level impact that requires change in systems, not just in programs and a few organizations. Second, our most effective strategy to scalable change is through influencing the system. And, finally, by providing foundations and their grantees concrete tools to map their interim and long-term pathways of change, we can help them be more effective in mapping and assessing their progress while also help them act and adapt as effective change agents.

Engaging effectively in complex systems requires any foundation to be self-aware of its own role and relationships inside the system. Foundations often spend a lot of time planning and managing

grants and grantees in order to “buy” outcomes, without a clearer understanding of their own role and how their money is capable of effecting change. Foundations need to articulate explicitly the assumptions about their beliefs and understanding of how complex social systems can and do change, and what the foundation's role is in that change. More importantly, foundations need to attend to how aligned and relevant their time frame, grant investments, capacity building, and influence strategies are with the system they are in and their intended goals of change. Does the foundation comprehensively understand how its investment vehicles and resources operate and are effective at the same levels of change needed and expected? Its theory of philanthropy (Patton, Foote, & Radner, 2015) needs to make clear its assumptions about how its investments and actions provide a pathway to change at multiple levels of the community and system.

The PCI framework's concept of influence is extremely important to understand as the “most potent” lever of change. Much misplaced foundation expectation is placed on grants and investments to add up arithmetically to bring about outcomes at scale. Yet the most powerful lever of change is often the influence that foundations have using their experiences and experiments in smaller grants and programs to broaden and promote the knowledge, capacities, and will across a system so that many more people and organizations understand and act differently to achieve real change at the system and community levels. Influence may seem intangible, yet it is a powerful strategy if we are explicit about the assumptions and expectations of how change actually happens — when people and groups of people share goals and an understanding of the most effective way to achieve change as part of a collective. Influence is the lever and path of changing beliefs and behaviors and attending to the parts of the system that are capable of having powerful impacts at scale — public will, policies, and systems (Reisman, Gienapp, & Kelly, 2015). Mapping and understanding these

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pathways of system influence will help foundations be more effective system actors.

Mapping these pathways is a key step, but foundations and nonprofits need to define appropriate interim measures and milestones to help them evaluate and adapt over long periods of time to remain effective change agents in complex initiatives. The PCI model helps overcome the weak correlation we often see between shorter-term systems interventions and the longer-term goals we hope to achieve. It also helps make room for appropriately adapting measures as systems and contexts change. It requires foundations to hold this tension between maintaining appropriate discipline and accountability while remaining flexible and adaptive. It is even more important in multiyear, complex change initiatives for this evaluative discipline to be maintained because there are too many opportunities for foundations to become rigid in thinking or planning because we fail to continually reassess our assumptions and theories about how change happens (Beer & Coffman, 2014) and how we need to adapt to be effective system-change agents over multiple years and grant cycles.

Community change is complex, often making it difficult to understand, plan, and act effectively especially when we need collective understanding and communication to be powerful as aligned actors. We cannot “manage” complexity. But we can use tools like the PCI framework to help manage ourselves and our roles in complex change — our expectations, theories, goals, and actions — to communicate our intentions and hold ourselves accountable as effective investors for the community- and systems-level changes our communities need.

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Applying the PCI Framework to Academic-Community Collaborations to Achieve Health Equity

Philip M. Alberti, Ph.D., Association of American Medical Colleges

In 2016, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) launched² a three-year effort it called Building a Systems Approach to Community Health and Health Equity. As a result, teams from 10 academic medical centers across the United States are engaged in academic-community partnerships to develop an efficient, impactful systems approach to community health that minimizes health inequities and positively impacts stakeholders both internal and external to the academic institution.

Broadly, year one of the program focused on identifying relevant community health-promoting activities across the 10 institutions and their communities; year two, on crafting implementation and evaluation plans related to one or two changes or adaptations that will move the institutions closer to ideal, learning community health systems; and year three, on collecting data to assess the impacts of the previous year's changes. At the time of writing, the cohort is midway through its second year and there have already been important lessons learned (Alberti, 2017).

As the AAMC began planning year-two activities, we sought an evaluation framework that not only took a systems approach to assessment given the nonlinearity and feedback loops involved in community health improvement work, but also one that embedded stakeholder and community partnership in the design, deployment, and monitoring of the evaluation itself. As we explored the literature related to systems-oriented evaluation and culturally responsive evaluation, we were fortunate to discover the PCI framework and have adopted it as a way to organize the development of the teams' year-two evaluation strategies.

Two benefits of the framework were immediately apparent.

The first benefit is that PCI reflects, in an intuitive way, the complexities of developing and evaluating a multisector, community-engaged system to address local health inequities.

As our program's first step, teams delineated their institutions' community-relevant efforts across the traditional education, research, clinical, and diversity missions of academic medicine. We asked the teams to cast an intentionally broad net: service learning opportunities, hospital community-benefit efforts, employee-wellness initiatives, population-health research programs, and local workforce "pipeline" development were all fair game — and relevant to the "programs" and "content" domains of the PCI framework (though we didn't know it at the time).

We then required teams to select a local, community-identified health need — "context" — and literally draw, based on the previously identified programs, the current set of connections and linkages between these efforts ("connectivity"). Then, through a gap analysis, teams revised that "current state" to an "ideal state," wherein these programs and their goals were aligned and in service of the same long-term objective and were engaging all important stakeholders both internal and external to the academic institution ("people").

As these efforts unfolded, teams were also engaged in cross-site conversations germane to the "practices," "policies," "power" structures, and "context" that can either facilitate or hinder community health improvement efforts. These dialogues focused on issues of governance and sustainability, community engagement and partnership, and data availability and management.

Finally, we developed a template teams could use to initiate conversations with various stakeholders

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² This project was supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the CDC, or the Department of Health and Human Services.

from the community and other sectors interested in health (“people”) about the outputs and outcomes of community-academic health partnerships that matter most to them in their roles as learner, administrator, patient, public health professional, etc.

Although our year-one work was developed in the absence of a formal evaluation framework, the PCI model allows us — and the teams — to see how the year-one program activities coalesce. Our AAMC team’s (and teams’) natural, intuitive sense of how to push this work forward aligned perfectly with the structure the PCI framework offers.

The second benefit of the PCI framework is that its explicit incorporation of “power” reveals a central barrier to sustainable progress in academic-community partnerships focused on health equity, and requires collaborators to address imbalances.

Health inequities, by definition, are rooted in social disadvantage and persist as a result of historical and current imbalances in power, agency, and opportunity. The kinds of multisector partnerships required to meaningfully address these inequities and improve community health are often similarly hamstrung by such imbalances.

In conversations about power in relationship to community-academic partnerships, we often and correctly focus on longstanding, bidirectional mistrust between some academic institutions and local community residents. However, in collaborative efforts to improve community health and address health inequities, power dynamics are evident across multiple levels and can be seen among community-based organizations as they compete for scarce resources, or in whether and how community-engaged scholarship is considered in an academic institution’s merit and promotion policy. The PCI framework explicitly calls out “power” as a crucial piece of a justice-focused evaluation strategy and encourages frank dialogue between collaborators about how imbalances manifest and can be overcome.

Each of our 10 teams has selected a different health or health care outcome as a focus and has begun to develop a system unique to its institution

and to its community and its needs. And the PCI framework has provided a structure for each to support the dynamic, adaptive, and engaged partnerships emblematic of a “learning community health system.” We are excited to introduce the framework to the teams this spring, and, as evidence and data accrue, better understand how the model allows us to document how this project “improves” programs and practices focused on health equity, “informs” stakeholders about the value of this work, “influences” how resources are distributed and, of course, “impacts” the health and well-being of the communities served by academic medical centers.

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Challenges We Need to Overcome for the PCI Framework to Be Effective

Kien Lee, Ph.D., Community Science

The PCI framework brings together many of the concepts discussed in systems and community change, racial equity, action research, and various evaluation approaches grounded in values of inclusiveness and social justice (e.g., deliberative democratic evaluation, culturally responsive evaluation, utilization-focused evaluation, and, most recently, equitable evaluation). The framework specifically draws attention to complexity and explicitly names four crucial components that have been implicit in the genre of evaluation models intended to support social justice.

First, as one of the five “P’s,” “power” is clearly emphasized. Power is obviously the significant component to address and monitor in situations involving strategies to advance racial equity. Second, the PCI framework refers to “connectivity” — the connections, interactions, and interfaces among the five “P’s.” This is another strength of the framework — it explicitly addresses the interdependency of the five “P’s” and the implications of their interdependency, because a positive or negative change in any of them can lead to progress or setbacks in our nation’s struggle for racial equity and social justice. Third, “influence” is lifted up, suggesting clearly that evaluation, according to the framework, has a role in identifying and possibly mobilizing levers of change. Last, but not least, the framework makes it clear that the relationships among the “P’s,” “C’s,” and “I’s” can be nonlinear.

These explicitly named components — power, connectivity, influence, and nonlinearity — reflect the complexity of addressing racial equity. Some funders, public and private, have been working hard to address racial inequity in the communities they serve and in the nation. Evaluation professionals have also been working hard to assess the impact of foundations’ racial equity initiatives, as the number of these initiatives and their derivatives grow and foundation board members, donors, and elected officials inquire about the return on their investments.

The PCI framework is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. Advances in methodological

approaches are essential to ensure that the field of evaluation evolves alongside innovative solutions to deal with social issues that are becoming increasingly complex: changes in our climate and physical environments, global economic interdependence, migration trends, political leadership, technology capabilities, and people’s sense of what is right, wrong, and ambiguous. But even as we put forth new approaches, an evaluation framework remains just that — a framework — until there are enough game-changing efforts to tip the status quo. As of now, evaluators, philanthropists, intermediaries, and advocacy groups still face the following challenges.

First, an evaluation framework and the results of an evaluation are as good as the strength of the evaluand intended to advance racial equity. Public and private funders design strategies, initiatives, and programs to end racial and ethnic disparities in health, education, economic opportunity, and other life conditions. Sometimes, these actually attempt to deal with structural racism, but two circumstances typically get in the way of their effectiveness: inadequate alignment among the structures, norms, and practices of the funder institutions needed to impact policies and systems — which in turn affects the scale of the solutions; and deeply ingrained expectations among funders and their donors and investors to see, in a relatively short time, the impact of the work to advance racial equity, and to be able to quantify the impact. More often than not, the funders and their donors and investors are also reluctant to spend a lot of time discussing their expectations, their strategies, the realities confronted by those implementing and evaluating the strategies, and the process and implication for making midcourse corrections. Consequently, the evaluand is flawed from the start, without any clear sense of how to identify and correct the flaws along the way; and as such, the PCI framework is limited in its usefulness. For the framework to be effective, the concepts it contains must be embraced and practiced by everyone — not just the evaluation staff of funder institutions or a particular segment of the evaluation profession.

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Second, evaluation must be thought of as something more than assessment, data collection, analysis, and reporting; it's about building institutional and community capacity to use knowledge to inform continual strategy development, improvement, and implementation. Change is a continual process — remember the old adage, that the only thing constant is change — and change in service of racial equity and social justice is a lifetime endeavor. The change process is not defined by a particular discipline or profession, and it requires a full set of interconnected supports, from leveraging the power of big data to community organizing. Thus, the lines typically drawn among evaluation, technical assistance and training, and strategy development are blurred when the realities of communities and their context set in. New needs arise, new opportunities and challenges emerge, and external factors shift to create a dynamic environment where funders, evaluators, and other capacity builders have to work seamlessly to support the communities in which they are working. This means that funders have to determine — and pay for — the management and coordination of all the capacity-building functions to ensure that evaluation is continually integrated into decision-making about the strategy and any midcourse corrections. The “I’s” in the PCI framework are an explicit and important reminder of this necessary shift.

Third, evaluators must think of themselves as change agents, and other people also must perceive them as such and not as judges, auditors, or data technicians. Evaluators have to think of themselves as change agents with varying degrees of power in different types of situations, and constantly work to balance scientific rigor with the volatile, imperfect, and sometimes unwelcoming environments in which racial equity efforts take place. This means that evaluators must have the skills of a change agent, including being able to challenge the more powerful (e.g., the funder, elected and political leaders) when appropriate; recommend and implement strategies for engaging community residents in the initiative and evaluation (not just to provide input but also to make decisions); train community residents in how to interpret and use data; facilitate group processes and discussions and handle intergroup conflicts; advocate for policy changes; and, most important,

collaborate with professionals from other sectors and community leaders, because no single person or organization can advance racial equity. The “P’s,” “C’s,” and “I’s” in the PCI framework suggest this shift in the evaluator role, and, perhaps, the framework can be a useful tool for designing trainings for evaluators who are committed to racial equity and social justice as part of their practice.

In summary, the PCI framework is a step in the right direction. It has the potential to further dialogue about how evaluation can help support and advance racial equity, because it explicitly names power, connectivity, and influence as part of the evaluation approach and illustrates the nonlinearity and complexity of the change process. However, it will take more than a technical solution — and evaluation has been and continues to be seen as a technical solution — to truly move the needle on racial equity in the United States and globally. It will require courage and perseverance by philanthropists, elected leaders, advocates, intermediaries, and evaluators to implement game-changing practices and efforts to truly make a difference.

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