

Changing the World for All: A New Approach

By Niki Jagpal

Many people recently have discussed the relationship between “structural racism” and philanthropy. When a term is introduced into the public discourse, it is important to clarify the nuance it conveys. During a lengthy discussion in July 2008, Prof. John A. Powell,¹ a leading expert on this issue, noted his preference for the term “structural racialization” over “structural racism.” He said that when one uses the term “racism,” people are inclined to look for a person, i.e., a racist, but in “structural racialization,” you don’t need a racist to produce structural outcomes. Rather, he said, it’s our institutions that will produce racial hierarchy and racial inequality because these structures work, carry values, distribute resources and justice or injustice, and are in relationship with each other.

To illustrate, Prof. Powell shared the story of his son, who attended McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Even though he lived outside of Canada, it was cheaper to go to a good school there than in the U.S. That’s because of how the education system is *structured*: the way that our schools are funded produces different opportunities, based on race and class. If one has a lot of money, and is considered “smart,” then one can afford tens of thousands of dollars a year to go to school. If one does not have the financial resources, this isn’t possible.

“Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans are disproportionately poor,” said Prof. Powell during our discussion. “So we have a system that actually limits access, beyond financial restrictions. For example, things like the opportunity for children to go to a good K-12 school are related to where their parents live and how good the schools there are. So part of what you are looking at is the *relationship*.”

SYSTEMS THEORY: FOCUSING ON RELATIONSHIPS

According to systems theory, wealth, income, race, space, education and labor are in relationship with each other and they work together. Focusing on the relationship often is more important than focusing on a single entity or action. When thinking about systems theory, it’s helpful to think about the opposite approach.



Prof. John A. Powell with NCRP research director Niki Jagpal.

“Our dominant mode of thinking is Newtonian: we think that there is a single cause and a predictable effect that is mechanical and unidirectional,” said Prof. Powell. “So A causes B, and B causes C. The knower, the observer, is largely unaffected by this so, in a sense, seems inert or neutral to these systems. There was a period of time when people thought that we eventually would know everything about the universe because it was a mechanical system. It also was based on the notion that if you see something really complex, you could break it down into its constituent parts and understand it, that the whole and the sum of its parts are exactly the same. This paradigm implied certainty.”

Systems thinking challenges this Newtonian notion; it says causation is mutual, reciprocal and cumulative. The knower or observer is part of the system and never will have complete knowledge. It’s not so much that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The whole is different than the sum of its parts. When we introduce something, we don’t know exactly how things are going to interact because systems adapt. The adaptation is in multiple directions. If we look at efforts to integrate schools and open up previously all-white schools to Black and Latino children, we can ask: Did we anticipate white flight or how housing

affects schools? It may seem like a small step but it's a step that the Supreme Court stumbled over because it was analyzing school integration in isolation. Using a systems approach, we see the connectivity of different institutions and structures: funding, transportation, housing and schools, even our preferences and expectations all are interactive. So housing policy drives school policy and school policy drives housing policy and impacts our desires. In short, they are mutually constitutive and mutually-related.

FEEDBACK AND CHANGE

In a systems approach, we can see *feedback loops*—how the system is learning or reacting. *Negative feedback* means the system will try to absorb the impact of an intervention without really changing, it adapts. Returning to school integration, one could say that we've adapted to all of the interventions around school integration to keep schools relatively segregated and to keep white middle class children largely isolated from black, Latino and Asian children. Sometimes a small change can create big results or change the system itself, and that's *positive feedback*. For example, organizers tackling living wage issues are faced with mixed opportunities to make significant impact on employment policies. Often, we cannot predict the full impact of these efforts because labor policy is tied to other complex social issues. The outcome, therefore, can't be predetermined.

IT'S ABOUT EVERYTHING

Prof. powell stated that systems thinking is about everything, not just race or the environment or health. Increasingly, we live in a complex world. Consider globalization: what happens in China has a ripple effect in the United States. We didn't think that way fifty years ago (even if in reality, this always might have been the case.) We thought in terms of very discrete spaces and activities, and of control; the idea of *influence* largely was

ignored. Systems thinking, in part, is not just new information, but a new way of knowing and a new paradigm.

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Let's consider what happened in post-Katrina New Orleans. It had a huge impact on blacks living in Louisiana and Mississippi, and on the entire country. "And that's good news. In the extreme, racism denies this interconnectivity," said Prof. powell. "It says blacks are a different species than whites—as people said in the 19th century. So what happened to the 'other' was irrelevant to me. It's becoming increasingly obvious that this perspective is wrong."

Recent attempts by funders toward a more multi-issue perspective when taking on structural or systemic issues are a move in the right direction, but they also need a deep relational perspective. They need to look at the

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connections and very deliberately support grantees that are in conscious relationship with each other.

Moreover, it's important to clarify the time frame of what it is that social justice work is trying to do. Some things can be done in a short time frame, within the structures of an existing system. Those usually are *transactional*. Others will take a much longer time frame because we're actually trying to create positive feedback to alter the whole system. That's *transformative* change. Because things are relational, there is no clear line between these interventions. If we engage in transformational interventions, we're not just trying to negotiate existing arrangements; we're trying to change the whole system. We're not just changing it for the target population; we're changing it for everybody.

A NEW APPROACH FOR FOUNDATIONS

Systems thinking leads us to consider a new paradigm, one that is inclusive and moves all within our society toward better outcomes. “I use the term ‘inclusive’ in a robust way,” said Prof. Powell. “It’s not just including people in this already-existing paradigm. Maybe the most important form of inclusion is people being involved in the design and arrangement of systems that impact their lives. In a strong democracy, we all are ‘constitutionalists’; we’re constantly participating in making the future, creating and monitoring our institutions. So I have a voice, all communities have a voice. It’s not ‘this is my show or country and you can come as long as you behave yourself.’”

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Some really great work is being done on systems thinking and structural racialization, and on framing² and cognitive science. These seemingly separate fields share the same belief that not only is the world different than we thought outside, it’s different than what we thought inside. The idea of a rational, singular, separate individual controlling his or her fate needs to be reevaluated because there’s just no evidence of that. That doesn’t mean that the individual goes away, but it means that how we think of the individual is very different. The individual does not stand outside or above the world but is a part of it.

Foundations need to be clear about what this relationship model means, the different time frames for creating transformational change as opposed to transactional change, and provide a supportive approach to the kind of change they aspire to create. “I don’t think that single-

issue work is dead, but its utility certainly is limited precisely because there are so many things in relationship with each other,” noted Prof. Powell.

A relationship approach implies thinking about coalitions, multi-issue groups, being aware of both the paradigm that we’re in and the one we’re moving toward. And when we talk about shifting paradigms, we’re talking about transformational change. It is not just tinkering with the existing arrangements but changing institutional arrangements.

“The only constant is change; but the nature of that change is quite important,” said Prof. Powell. “We celebrate or bemoan the fact that we are an increasingly diverse society. We know that probably by the middle of this century, there won’t be a racial majority in this country. This may or may not be true because racial categories themselves may change; but we don’t pay much attention to what that means, or how we can make our institutions reflect those values. In this country, 86 percent of us think we have integrated schools, but 86 percent of our children don’t

go to integrated schools.”

This implies that our values and institutional practices are out of alignment, and partly, it is attributable to the fact that we fail to recognize the work that institutions are doing and thus don’t hold anyone responsible. Justice requires that we arrange our institutions in an equitable way. To ensure greater alignment between our goals and values on both a personal and institutional level, we also need a more fluid, open concept of citizenship.³

Funders might assume that no one is responsible for the structures of schools and housing, which seem like too large a problem to tackle. Many of the problems that foundations are trying to solve are much too small. “Small problems hurt us by enticing us to see things as separate, while big problems are more likely to be seen relationally,” Prof. Powell observed. “It

is important for foundations and communities not only to do multi-issue work, but to see issues in relationship. And this is everywhere, so its application in terms of racial justice work is very instructive and very important.”

If we look at the social determinants of health, a systems approach says that only about two percent of our health inequality is directly related to seeing a doctor or a health care worker. Most of it is related to how we work, how we structure our communities, our lives. This relationship model needs to be fleshed out, experimented with, and it needs to be recorded. For foundations, that means what some call “patient granting,” recognizing the relationships among different institutions and structures, and different metrics for impact.

LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

“I think that some organizers have been ahead of the game in terms of the importance of relationships; and so that’s something all of us can learn,” expressed Prof. powell. “A focus on relationships suggests we have to be careful not to think of issues or interests as given or static; both are shifting constantly, partly based on relationships. Organizers’ willingness to talk about power, especially for marginalized peoples, is quite important. It’s critical in systems thinking and structural racialization to realize that people are situated differently inside of existing structures, and much of what we call ‘interest’ is situational within structures.”

While organizers are more attuned to a systems approach, Prof. powell suggested that they too can learn much from adopting this explicitly as a framework. They sometimes assume, and often buy into, the individualistic model in which self-interest is too narrowly defined. We need a more sophisticated notion of interest. Sometimes, organizers don’t acknowledge that self-interest is one of the things that are affected by structured systems, so if you change structures, you change interests. “Changing structures isn’t enough; in fact, you never can just reflect interests; you’re actually influencing interests,” said Prof. powell.

Foundations, organizers and individuals need to understand that our self-identities and interests are complex. Institutions and cognitive frames help to call a par-

ticular self or interest forward. For example, the same person may have both racial hostility and racial resentment, and a strong tenet for racial equality. But which of those frames becomes dominant or operative depends on the institutional relationships at work in the moment and the specific circumstances that bring a particular frame to predominate. It doesn’t mean that people are completely malleable, but on many important things our interest isn’t singular.

“We need to look at the individual in terms of many different relationships to him/herself, many things in relationship to his/her community and to the larger community, not just in isolation,” said Prof. powell. “If we take this approach seriously, it affects how we see the world, how we experience ourselves, how we do our work, and helps move us to a truly inclusive paradigm.” This new paradigm is a powerful tool for foundations and grantees to work together strategically and deploy their resources to address injustice and strengthen democracy. ☺

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NOTES

1. Prof. john a. powell is an internationally recognized authority on a wide range of issues including civil rights and civil liberties, race, structural racism, ethnicity, housing, poverty and democracy. He is executive director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University. He holds the Gregory H. Williams Chair in Civil Rights & Civil Liberties at the University’s Michael E. Moritz College of Law. He is a member of NCRP’s research advisory committee.
2. A simple way to think of cognitive frames is as a mental “filing system” that we all use to make sense of the world.
3. Prof. powell is working with Lani Guinier, Claude Steele and Susan Sturm on something called “democratic merit.” He noted that one of the reasons for public education in Jefferson’s mind was for people to become citizens. In his mind, you weren’t automatically a citizen by being born in America; you had to learn to become a citizen. He also said that our current public education system doesn’t really support democracy.