Between Funding Requirements and Community Priorities: Centro Hispano of Dane County's Transformative Approach to Program Evaluation

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Background: Evaluation approaches that aim to support large-scale social change need to address the way free-market logics have been established in the field since the early 1900s, normalizing dynamics such as (1) a focus on efficiency and accountability, (2) a perpetuation of deficit-based narratives about communities of color, and (3) a top-down approach to program development, in which funders define program goals and assessment criteria and outside academics are hired to provide research services. In consequence, evaluation often becomes a burdensome requirement that contributes to the extraction and devaluation of community expertise, rather than fostering learning, collaboration, critical reflection, and healing.

Purpose: This paper (1) traces the history and current impacts of free-market logics in the evaluation field, and (2) discusses how the resulting dynamics can be addressed by highlighting one community-based organization's innovative evaluation approach focused on community strengths and values, well-being, and critical consciousness building.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: By bringing together transformative evaluation and the HEART framework for healing ethno-racial trauma, Centro Hispano of Dane County prioritizes community interests, while challenging funders to rethink their evaluation requirements. This effort has created a double burden for agency staff to evaluate for both community priorities and funding requirements. The authors call for funders to rethink their evaluation expectations and emphasize the need to support community organizations' in-house evaluation infrastructure, time for critical reflection, and the development of community- and asset-based, culturally responsive evaluation approaches and tools.

Setting: The article centers Centro Hispano of Dane County (a Latinx-serving community-based organization in Madison, Wisconsin) and their current approach to evaluation within the Esperanza grant (a five-year Community Impact Grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program).

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: This paper combines a review of the history of the evaluation field with a case study of a community-based evaluation process.

Introduction

As Robinson points out, "The field of evaluation is undergoing a transformation, one that is inextricably linked to healing and resistance" (2021, p. 1). Evaluators have recognized their complicity in maintaining systems of oppression, propelling a new "activist, and critical-action orientation to evaluation" (Neubauer and Hall, 2020, p. 130). For over a decade, program evaluators engaging in critical, decolonizing, feminist, and culturally responsive evaluation have acknowledged evaluation's complicity in reproducing social inequities (Mertens, 2015; Hall, 2020; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002; Smith, 2012; Symonette et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2015). Drawing on previous efforts to respond to context and complexity in the evaluation process (e.g., by developmental evaluation; Patton, 2010), this growing and diverse branch of "transformative" evaluation (Mertens & Wilson, 2012) has made essential contributions toward advancing multiple aspects of social justice in the field.[1] Stakeholder engagement approaches, such as empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1994; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007), have developed methods that can enhance participation, ownership, and voice of program participants and staff. Approaches focused on cultural context and identity, such as culturally responsive evaluation (Symonette, 2005; 2013; Hood et al., 2015) and Indigenous evaluation (e.g., Cram et al., 2018; Chilisa et al., 2016; Waapalaneexkweew (Bowman) & Dodge-Francis, 2018; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2010) have expanded evaluation frameworks and methods toward acknowledging the importance of positionality and incorporating multiple ways of being and knowing. Yet only recently have evaluators begun to unpack the way neoliberal assumptions—free-market logics applied to the social sector—have been normalized and universalized in and through evaluation (Robinson, 2021a; 2021b). This lens offers a new path to approaching the role of evaluation in maintaining systemic injustices that reach beyond questions of process, participation, culture, or identity. Critically analyzing the values and logics embedded in evaluation's institutional contexts and infrastructures offers a new opportunity for identifying and addressing "systemic drivers of inequity" (Dean-Coffey, 2018).

We argue that addressing evaluation's institutional history is an essential step in this critical analysis. While evaluators often consider histories of collaboration (Bozeman et al., 2016) and individual biases (Mertens, 2015, 2017), many neglect the importance of institutional history, which we define as the shifting values, norms, and beliefs surrounding the organizations, systems, and processes of a field of study or service. We argue that neglecting to understand the links between the establishment of evaluation and institutional histories creates a susceptibility to institutionalized bias, developing and reinforcing harmful dynamics. Understanding the implicit effects of how evaluation has been institutionalized is thus essential to overcoming current inequitable dynamics.

The purpose of this article is dual: (1) to identify the historic root causes and current impacts of ongoing harmful dynamics in evaluation that are rooted in neoliberalism, and (2) to provide an example of one community-based organization that is confronting these harmful dynamics by transforming their evaluation methods, processes, and goals.

First, we provide a brief overview of historic factors that have impacted the institutionalization of evaluation in the United States since the early 1900s, transferring market principles to the social welfare sector and normalizing neoliberal logic as part of universal evaluation principles. We show how, in the course of the privatization of the public sector, ideas of scientific management and scarcity, along with competition logic, resulted in (a) a focus on efficiency and accountability, (b) a perpetuation of deficit narratives about communities of color, and (c) a top-down approach to program development and evaluation, in which funders define program goals and assessment criteria and outside academics are hired to provide research services.

Second, we center Centro Hispano of Dane County (a Latinx-serving community-based organization in Madison, Wisconsin) and their current approach to evaluation within the Esperanza grant (a five-year Community Impact Grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program) as a case study in challenging these dynamics. By combining the principle of "wellness from the inside out" (Cruz, 2020), the HEART framework for healing ethno-racial trauma (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019), and transformative evaluation (Mertens,

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[1] See Devia et al. (2017) for a differentiation of four types of social justice: distributive, procedural, recognition/cultural/identity, and structural.

2015, 2017), Centro Hispano is developing a values-based, strengths-based, collaborative approach to evaluation that centers community well-being, learning, and critical consciousness building. We describe Centro Hispano's process in four phases, which respond to the previously identified harmful dynamics. Conducted this way, evaluation becomes—rather than an accountability tool for measuring productivity—part of a holistic organizational strategy that supports positive community narratives, self-determination, and healing. While this transformative approach has been successful in engaging staff in rethinking evaluation goals and processes, it has also created a "double burden" of evaluating for funders' requirements as well as community priorities, without sufficient resources. Even so, Centro Hispano's experiences illustrate an important shift toward critical conversations with funders about their evaluation requirements and ways to move from capturing productivity, efficiency, and outputs toward evaluation that supports long-term, self-determined community narratives and priorities.

We write this text as a coalition of community-based practitioners, evaluators, and researchers involved with Centro Hispano of Dane County. By presenting this example, we hope to contribute to possible responses to evaluation's institutional history, institutionalized biases, and resulting challenges for systemically transformative evaluation. We hope this article can inspire other community organizations, evaluators, funders, and evaluation partners to rethink and reinvent their evaluation processes toward an evaluation practice that serves the participants and staff of community programs and services.

Background: Institutional Histories of Inequity in Evaluation

The Importance of the Institutional History of Evaluation

For decades, scholars and practitioners of decolonizing research and evaluation have documented the importance of history, explaining that history is the relationship to the past through which we establish our identity, orient ourselves, and understand our relationship to other communities and societies (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). We add to this perspective by highlighting the importance of institutional history. Institutional history refers to the history of the program evaluation field, including the roles of government and political movements in developing

what program evaluation should focus on and why. From this perspective, our focus on the history of institutional systems within an evaluation context is central to the argument that, without understanding various aspects of historical context, an evaluator may risk reinforcing inequities normalized by neoliberal logic.

Only recently have evaluation scholars such as Robinson (2021a, 2021b) started to unpack how neoliberalism has impacted the field, advocating for the development of an anti-capitalist praxis in evaluation, and offering new opportunities for critical systematic reflection. Neoliberalism is "a shorthand for a range of phenomena in the modern era" (Hardin, 2014, as cited in Robinson, 2021a, p. 2), and the term's definition is surrounded by much debate, contestation, and variation (Peck, 2013; Harvey, 2007; Robinson, 2021a). For this article, we will not elaborate on these discussions, and instead will draw on Harvey (2007) to summarize neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade." In practice, neoliberalism is a philosophy that transforms people and nature into commodities, so that meeting the needs of daily life occurs best through market terms (Robinson, 2021a). As both Harvey and Peck point out, neoliberalism has become so "omnipresent" (Peck, 2013, p. 140) that "it is now part of the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey, 2007, p. 22), making its logic and assumptions even more pervasive and evasive. An awareness of neoliberalism can offer new opportunities for identifying, critically reflecting on, and acting toward harmful dynamics within the evaluation industry—dynamics that contribute to maintaining and reinforcing systemic inequities. To truly understand how neoliberal assumptions and logics are ingrained in the evaluation industry, it is essential to critically review evaluation's history and trace the assumptions upon and contexts within which this industry was established.

Tracing Evaluation's Historic Roots and the Restructuring of Social Welfare

This section traces evaluation's rise in the United States from the early 1900s to today, highlighting how contemporary neoliberal assumptions were increasingly normalized as universal evaluation principles. These assumptions have created three

predominant dynamics harmful to conducting equitable evaluations. First, the assumptions have created a focus on efficiency and accountability. The notion that ideas of productivity and scientific management could be translated from factories to human services contributed to the use of evaluation methods as a way for funders to hold organizations (often community-based organizations) accountable and track the effectiveness of their activities, facilitating funders' control of community organizations, rather than organizations' coalition and transformation. Second, the assumptions have perpetuated deficit-based narratives about communities of color. Wording such as "delinquency prevention" and "war on poverty" or "at-risk youth" underscores the assumption that low-income communities, specifically communities of color, need to be policed, managed, and controlled to overcome poverty. Third, the assumptions have reinforced a top-down approach to program development. Managerialism and deficit-based narratives about low-income communities of color have reinforced the idea that program goals and outcomes should be defined by outside experts, providing generalized guidelines based on scientific evidence.

The concept of efficiency is central to early evaluation approaches and has been woven into the field's institutional history. It draws on positivist quantitative measurement techniques emerging in the early 1900s, as in Frederick Taylor's "The Principles of Scientific Management" (1911; Hogan, 2007; Madaus et al., 1983). Taylor introduced standardized quantitative measures as a way of determining the quality of performance in education and industry (Madaus et al., 1983), laying the foundation for widespread assessment and evaluation approaches. As Madaus et al. summarize, "The emphasis of this movement was on systematization; standardization; and most importantly, efficiency" (1983, p. 6.). These values were reinforced during the Great Depression when the need to combat hunger and unemployment with scarce resources was intensified. In response, notions of efficiency and scientific management were applied to the human services—a field that was quickly transforming from largely volunteer-run activities into a large, government-regulated sector. Procedures for planning, budgeting, quality control, and cost-benefit analysis were introduced and transferred from the Department of Defense to human services agencies that administered government funds (Rossi et al., 2004)—techniques that remain influential today.

Most New Deal reforms of the 1930s focused on reviving the economy as a whole to alleviate immediate suffering rather than addressing existing racial and social inequalities (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). This lens, which favored meritocratic explanations of economic success and neglected systemic barriers, reinforced deficit-based narratives of communities of color. Consequently, resulting public policy often viewed urban youth and other marginalized groups as "delinquents, criminals and the cause of general civic problems," rather than solutions, assets, or agents of change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). Public policy from the early 1900s to today, has reflected this fear of urban communities of color, turning away from "the impact of racism, the influence of poverty and unemployment" and instead favoring "explanations [....] that focus on individual and/or group pathologies" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). Black and brown communities repeatedly have been characterized as the cause of poverty and crime (Robinson, 2021; Baldridge, 2014). In line with these narratives, to this day, nonprofit organizations (known internationally as NGOs, or non-governmental organizations) are often treated similarly to the populations they serve: as deficient, incompetent, limited, or untrustworthy. These deficit narratives manifest in the widespread top-down approach to funding the third sector.

Managerialism—the use of business principles to manage services (Abramovitz & Zelnik, 2015; Robinson, 2021a) within the social sector—was reinforced with the economic upswing after World War II, which further expanded federal and private funding for housing, education, training, and health programs, intensifying demands for "knowledge of results" (Rossi et al., 2004, p. 9). By the end of the 1950s, program evaluation was a common practice for assessing a wide array of large-scale programs, such as those aimed at "delinquency prevention" or "public housing." These evaluations necessitated advanced statistical procedures for large-scale multi-site studies (Rossi et al., 2004). But it was not until the 1950s and '60s that evaluation in the United States began to expand to become an industry due to large-scale development projects funded by federal monies. The National Defense Act of 1958—a response to the Russian launch of Sputnik—expanded new educational programs in math, science, and languages, as well as counseling services and testing programs (Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000). Further key turning points for the explosion of program evaluation were the War on Poverty and Great Society programs starting in 1965. They provided a boost of financial resources to address complex social issues such as unemployment, crime, urban deterioration, medical care, and mental health treatment. The federal government addressed these issues through

grants and social policies, as well as contracting with nonprofits to deliver social and public services. As Kwon (2013) points out, the number of federal grant programs nearly tripled during this period, from $7 billion in 1960 to $24 billion in 1968. The distribution of these government funds increased the demand for evaluators who would legitimize the argument that "scarce resources" were being used "wisely, fairly and objectively" based on scientific criteria (Robinson, 2021. p. 7).

The establishment of evaluators as a new kind of academic experts who legitimized the individual allocation of scarce resources rather than addressing root causes was further intertwined with the growing influence of large foundations. As Smith (2007) argues, due to their industry connections and industry funding (as, for example, in the case of Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie, etc.), foundations were not incentivized to challenge the status quo or examine root causes of social inequality. Instead, they focused on alleviating individual suffering (Smith, 2007). By funding grassroots organizations aligned with their goals and by training activists, they contributed to the professionalization of social movements, effectively steering them away from mass organizing and toward policy reform, service delivery, and program development (Smith, 2007). As a field, evaluation supported and legitimized this trend by providing the tools for tracking and controlling service deliverables and their desired program outcomes, rather than supporting community organizing.

Deficit-based narratives of communities of color, together with scandals around financial mismanagement, facilitated a growing resistance against government welfare in the 1970s, resulting in increasing assessment of programs in terms of their fiscal "accountability" and managerial "effectiveness." With the Reaganite politics of the 1980s, federal expenditures for the public welfare system were massively curtailed, dismantling the social safety net and shifting the responsibility for social services to the nonprofit sector (Munshi & Willse, 2007). The discontinuation of social services and welfare worsened inequalities and the effects of poverty, especially for communities of color (Munshi & Willse, 2007). It also increased competition for scarce resources among nonprofit organizations, pushing them toward professionalization and specialization in certain population segments and issues, and away from large-scale organizing. As Rathgeb Smith illustrates, funding has been increasingly tied to meeting specified indicators and results, leading to shifts in organizations' focus and programming. At the same time, evaluation and performance measurement requirements created expectations of unattainable levels of progress reporting and organizational transparency (Smith, 2010). To meet the new demands of performance contracting and measurement, many nonprofits sought academic partners to provide capacity for and oversight of programming, forcing community partners to rely on outside expertise and evaluation capacity, adding value to academic and scientific approaches while discrediting experiential, community-based knowledge.

This short excursion into the history of the evaluation industry in the United States shines light on how the field is intertwined with neoliberal ideas that continue to play out today. Community organizations, evaluators, funders, and their partners must have a clear understanding of the institutional histories of the evaluation field to enable evaluation that can redress institutionalized neoliberal logic and is transformative at a structural level. This analysis needs to be included in existing social-justice-oriented evaluation approaches to effectively address normalized managerialism, implicit-deficit narratives about communities of color, and the devaluation of community expertise through the evaluation industry.

Transforming Evaluation from the Inside Out: The Case of Centro Hispano of Dane County

In the following, we briefly introduce Centro Hispano of Dane County ("Centro") and describe the key concepts that Centro draws on for their evaluation work: wellness from the inside out (Cruz, 2020), the HEART framework for healing ethno-racial trauma (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019), and transformative evaluation (Mertens, 2017, 2015). We then describe Centro's process in implementing this innovative approach in four phases: (1) centering shared values to take back the narrative and prioritize process, (2) co-creating questions to center staff expertise, (3) taking time to critically evaluate the evaluation, and (4) leveraging community data toward asset-based evaluation tools.

Combining Frameworks for a New Evaluation Approach

Established in 1983, Centro Hispano of Dane County is the largest nonprofit working with and serving Latinx families in Madison and the larger Dane County, Wisconsin. Centro is a family-centered bilingual/bicultural agency employing 30

staff. With a working budget of $3.2 million, it provides access to holistic case management that supports basic needs and resources around a variety of issues impacting the Latinx community, such as health insurance enrollment, workforce development, employment readiness, youth programming, immigration services, and referrals to housing, legal clinics, and other services. Throughout its work Centro applies a public health lens that addresses socio-economic determinants of health; advocates for systemic changes; and collaborates with other Latinx community agencies, schools, and partners at the city, county, state, and national levels.

In 2019, Centro received a five-year Community Impact Grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP) with the goal of improving culturally and linguistically competent mental health services through workforce training and upstream community programs that support social determinants of health (WPP, 2019). It included funds for staff time and resources for the development of evaluation tools and processes, and provided Centro with the rare opportunity to take a step back from daily operations and direct services and reflect—"What stories do we want to tell?" and "How do we want to assess impact (instead of just productivity)?"—rather than catering to deficit-based narratives of communities of color (Cruz, 2022). This funding provided capacity for the development and synthesis of three approaches: wellness from the inside out, the HEART framework, and transformative evaluation.

The first part of Centro's evaluation approach is the principle of wellness from the inside out (Cruz, 2020), meaning that community wellness starts with staff wellness. As Evelyn Cruz, Centro's director of program planning and evaluation, summarizes, "You can't give what you don't have" (2022). Centro's staff are 90% Latinx. They thus reflect the values, histories, and experiences of the community they serve and are impacted by the same systems of oppression, including systemic racism and ethno-racial trauma. Healthy, thriving staff can act as multipliers for mutual support, resilience, and well-being, transforming the community bit by bit. Therefore, staff wellness and learning lie at the center of Centro's theory of action.

The second part of Centro's approach, the HEART framework, was implemented in collaboration with the Immigration, Critical Race, and Cultural Equity Lab (IC-RACE). Grounded in the principles of liberation psychology, which draws on the work of Martín-Baró (1996) and Freire (1968), the HEART framework aims to support Latinxs in finding relief, gaining awareness, and coping with "systemic oppression while encouraging resistance and protection from the external forces that cause ethno-racial trauma" (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019, p. 49). Studies show that a positive self-image and healthy racial and ethnic identity are key to well-being; this holds especially true for youth of color, who can easily internalize racist messaging and intergenerational trauma if these are normalized by their surroundings (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019). To counteract the impact of deficit-based narratives about communities of color, the HEART framework is grounded in psychological practice that emphasizes positive "traditional cultural values" and "shared history and survival strategies" (p. 57), namely "Determination, Esperanza, Adaptability, Strong Work Ethic, Connectedness to Others, Collective Emotional Expression, and Resistance" (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017, p. 29). This framing "encourages oppressed groups to view their struggles through a collective lens," allowing a shift from self-blame toward collective action (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019, p. 59; Ginwright, 2010), and thus deriving meaning and hope from shared experiences. Chavez-Dueñas et al. point out, "Given the unique ways in which Latinx immigrants are impacted by interlocking systems of oppression, healing from ethno-racial trauma requires them to have a sense of control over their own liberation" (2019, p. 55).

The third component of Centro's approach is transformative evaluation (Mertens, 2016, 2017). A transformative evaluation approach aims to address injustices and power dynamics and promote change on an individual and societal level. In particular, this framework emphasizes the importance of making visible stakeholders' and evaluators' assumptions about the nature of problems and solutions and aligning the evaluation goals and methods with the values and practices of the community impacted by the evaluation results (Mertens, 2016). To validate and amplify community perspectives and expertise, transformative evaluation calls for including diverse ways of knowing and being. In practice, this often necessitates a cyclical, collaborative, and interdisciplinary process, as well as the use of mixed data collection and analysis methods that can flexibly respond to the specific evaluation context (Mertens, 2017). As we will detail below, for Centro Hispano, among other elements, this means using staff members' shared values as guiding principles of the evaluation and engaging in multiple rounds of feedback and reflection in Spanish and English to develop the evaluation questions and tools.

Combining these three approaches amplifies the strengths of each while compensating for each approach's shortcomings. As alluded to above, a transformative evaluation approach emphasizes the need to uncover hidden biases in evaluation—an essential step toward reframing the goals and purposes of evaluation from a community-based perspective. Yet, this approach does not include a critical analysis of the history of evaluation and the neoliberal logic internalized in the evaluation industry. To redress and transform the ongoing harmful dynamics within evaluation processes, methods, and institutions, we argue that a *conscientização* (or critical consciousness) of oppressive structures, as emphasized by the HEART framework, is needed—starting with a critical analysis of the history of evaluation. The importance of community expertise and collaborative approaches within transformative evaluation furthermore aligns with the need for self-determination that the HEART framework emphasizes. Applying the HEART framework to transformative evaluation thus aligns with Centro Hispano's action principle of wellness from the inside out. By emphasizing community strengths in their evaluation work, such as the seven Latinx psychological strengths identified by Adames and Chavez-Dueñas (2017), Centro takes an asset-based approach to evaluation that contradicts dominant deficit-based narratives about Latinxs, and

counteracts those narratives' impacts on an individual, community, and structural level. This new combined lens thus can support a shift within evaluation that is not only personal or methodological, but also organizational and structural.

Below we describe Centro's process in putting this approach into practice—summarized as four phases.

Centering Shared Values to Take Back the Narrative and Prioritize Process

In 2018, before beginning critical conversations about evaluation and receiving the WPP Community Impact Grant, Centro Hispano staff came together for a series of conversations about the organization's values. As a first step, the staff reflected on their individual values and brainstormed shared values. From this, a conversation developed about the strengths, priorities, and ways of being and doing that characterize Centro Hispano. Staff shared in which ways Centro felt unique and what qualities supported them in doing their work. From this brainstorming, over several sessions, common themes were distilled and discussed among the staff. A smaller task force synthesized common values and action principles, from which the following statement was formed:

Figure 1. Centro Hispano's Values Statement

WE

FOSTER connection.
We are a welcoming community, and we take great care to ensure support and belonging for all.

ACT with mutual respect and dignity.
We embrace our diverse cultural assets, which collectively make us stronger.

NOURISH community.
We work together to create and advance opportunity for all.

LIVE with courage.
We will question our own assumptions, protect and defend our rights and the rights of others, lead in collaborative ways, and seek help and guidance when we need it.

DEMONSTRATE integrity.
We make time to clarify our collective principles, do the work it takes to live ethically, and establish systems to hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Note. From "Our values," by Centro Hispano of Dane County, 2020, https://www.micentro.org/our-story.html. Copyright 2020 by Centro Hispano of Dane County.

This iterative process of group reflection was an important first step for the transformative evaluation activities that followed. Staff had co-created an understanding of their strengths, experiences, and values. They had shared stories, laughs, and tears about their experiences and work at Centro and beyond. Those stories, some of them previously untold, now formed part of their collective repertoire of positive, self-determined narratives. Many staff members shared that they felt strengthened in their sense of community and purpose through this activity.

The simple act of Centro staff coming together to share and validate positive self- and group-conceptions, therefore, was an essential first step to generating positive counternarratives. As emphasized by the HEART framework, on a personal level, such positive self-images and cultural values can support the rejection of bias and oppression that individuals have (often unconsciously) internalized. Values furthermore are important to focus on the "how" of an evaluation and prioritize process over outcomes, thus also counteracting evaluation's historic focus on efficiency. As Centro's director of program planning and evaluation, Evelyn Cruz, points out, "As a social justice agency, we have to be accountable for what we want to achieve. We need to be aware of how we reflect and are instruments of internalized structures of oppression" (2022).

Centering Centro's values in all the agency's activities, including evaluation, supports redressing harmful dynamics, such as deficit narratives about Latinxs and a focus on efficiency and productivity, from the inside out. These self-determined values act as a tool for critical reflection and action on an individual level and—multiplied by Centro staff—can contribute to community healing and shifting of public opinion about Latinxs—in, through, and beyond evaluation.

Centro's co-created values served as starting points and guidelines for developing Centro's transformative evaluation goals and questions, as we detail below.

Co-Creating Questions to Center Staff Expertise

Guided by the shared values and the evaluation approach previously outlined, Centro aimed to rethink and recreate the evaluation of their programs and services. In 2019, thanks to the previously mentioned five-year Community Impact Grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP), Centro was able to create the new position of director of evaluation and strategic planning. This was the first time that a staff member was given dedicated time to focus on evaluation, providing new opportunities to critically reflect on and redesign Centro's evaluation practice, while building on the organization's in-house expertise. The position was filled by Evelyn Cruz—a staff member with over 20 years of experience in public health and social services, bringing with them a wealth of biographical, applied, and theoretical knowledge relevant to culturally responsive evaluation with Madison's Latinx community.

Centro collaborated with graduate students from a transformative evaluation class at UW–Madison to support the development of the new transformative and community-based evaluation approach, and to build Centro staff's capacity for other ongoing organizational activities. The class was co-taught by Centro's director of program planning and evaluation and a professor with expertise in evaluation at UW–Madison's School of Human Ecology. The students represented four countries and multiple ethnic and professional backgrounds. Most of them had experience working in the nonprofit sector, and the group included one student who was a former employee of Centro Hispano. Together, they co-created the evaluation plan with Centro staff in the spring semester of 2020.

Centro staff, students, and instructors engaged in a series of conversations about staff's interests and questions regarding the evaluation. Based on these discussions, the class drafted a theory of change of Centro's work and mapped key stakeholders. The purpose of the evaluation was then defined as "learning how Centro's values-based approach to programming and services impacts the wellness and well-being of staff and the Latino community in Dane County" (Bakken, 2020). With this purpose in mind, key members of Centro's staff, along with the students, then conducted a survey of Centro's entire staff to determine evaluation questions and priorities. Through these exchanges, three evaluation questions were prioritized and adapted, based on staff feedback. The final questions, to be answered by achieving several objectives (see Figure 2), provided the basis for the development of a suggested evaluation plan for Centro.

Figure 2. What Questions Will this Evaluation Answer, and How Will the Evaluation Be Conducted?

Questions	Objectives
Question 1. How do Centro's shared values contribute to strengthening Centro's staff and the community's wellness? How do Centro's staff put their shared values into action in their work? To answer these questions, the following objectives will need to be achieved:	● Objective #1: Determine what wellness means to Centro's community. This can be done by obtaining open-ended responses using social media and analyzing those responses using qualitative methods. ● Objective #2: Conduct and analyze interviews or focus groups with staff to determine how they perceive Centro's values contribute to and strengthen their work. ● Objective #3: Using a word café or mapping process, determine how a) staff's and b) Centro's community's wellness are strengthened by Centro's shared values. ● Objective #4: Create a narrative about how Centro's shared values are contributing to strengthening Centro's staff's and community's wellness and share with interested stakeholders (e.g., funders).
Question 2. How do Centro's programs contribute to changing the narrative about Latinxs in Dane County? What are the long-term effects of Centro's programs on individual's well-being?	● Objective #1: Determine the desired public narrative. This can be accomplished through a visioning session with staff and/or community using face-to-face techniques, photovoice, or collaborative tools. ● Objective #2: Collect evidence of actual public narratives. This can be accomplished by qualitatively analyzing various social media outlets, documents (e.g., newspapers), and other sources (e.g., photo images) to gain an understanding of current narratives about social and structural inequities and community well-being. ● Objective #3: Compare actual narratives to the desired narrative over time using qualitative comparative analysis. This comparison will provide evidence of change over time. ● Objective #4: Conduct and analyze face-to-face or online interviews or focus groups with clients to determine how Centro's programs are a) contributing to their well-being and b) changing the narrative for Latinxs in Dane County.
Question 3. How do Centro's staff wellness strategies influence their ability to work with the community?	● Objective #1: With staff, define what is meant by "wellness strategies" so that these strategies can be identified. ● Objective #2: Conduct interviews or focus groups with staff to determine how each strategy positively and/or negatively influences their ability to work with members of the community. ● Objective #3: Analyze interviews or focus groups to create a narrative about how Centro's wellness strategies influence abilities to carry out their work.

Note. From *Evaluation Plan 2020: Centro Hispano's Programs and Services*, by L. Bakken, Centro Hispano of Dane County, and staff and faculty of the course CSCS 813, Transformative Evaluation in Practice, Spring 2020, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

This approach to developing an evaluation plan, while drawing on resources and expertise from outside of the organization, represented a shift in Centro's evaluation practice. It was the first time that an evaluation plan had been developed based on staff's interests, priorities, and shared values, rather than on funders' criteria. Collaboration between Centro staff, researchers, and students was intentionally iterative, supportive, and focused on building trust and sharing and honoring perspectives. This type of collaboration helped blur the lines between academia and community-based organizations and laid the foundation for ongoing critical conversations among the staff and organizational partners about evaluation purpose, methods, and processes. This way, the process gave value to experiential community expertise, which otherwise is often discredited through top-down approaches to program development and assessment.

Taking Time to Critically Evaluate the Evaluation

With funding and increased staff capacity, Centro was able to critically reflect on or recreate their organizational and evaluation practices. While COVID-19 exacerbated many of the existing inequalities and strains on the Latinx community (Gil et al., 2020), the disruption of "business as usual" also offered an opportunity for change. With Centro staff, clients, and program participants impacted by illness, deaths, unemployment, existential fears, and grief, the agency was forced to focus on essential activities, shifting not only their in-person services but also their evaluation work. Instead of engaging in data collection to respond to the evaluation questions outlined above, the Centro team decided to review existing data collection to see how the information required by funders might align with staff-directed evaluation questions.

To support this work, in 2021, Mariana Pasturczak, a recent master's graduate and fellow with the Wisconsin Population Health Institute [2] was brought on board—offering the rare opportunity to take a step back from ongoing data collection and reporting, and critically reflect on existing practices. To review Centro's existing data collection, Mariana worked closely with the program managers. They discussed the transformative evaluation questions, as well as questions like: In which ways is the information you

are collecting helpful to your work? What questions do you have about your program? What would you like to know or capture? What information is missing? Which stories would you like to tell?

Pasturczak found that the managers were particularly interested in the long-term impact of their programs on the larger community—something they felt was not addressed by their current data collection, which focused on demographic information and productivity measures (e.g., numbers of participants, number of programming hours, etc.). Pasturczak also noted that there was not much overlap in the data collection between the programs, highlighting the amount and variety of data collection completed for diverse funders. Many programs (such as, for example, the youth programs) are funded through several sources. Each of these requires separate reporting. This amounts to a patchwork of data collection requirements and methods that not only takes away staff time from client interactions but also does not allow for large-scale analysis of Centro's impact across programs or over time.

The conversations with program managers brought up other critical questions around data use, as well. Managers brought up the sensitive nature of some of the data points required by funders—for example, whether participants were in possession of a valid driver's license. While funders used this data as a measure of employability, this information may also function as a proxy for immigration status. Asking this question, therefore, can potentially trigger past trauma or reinforce the fear of immigration officials. Pasturczak summarized these observations in short narratives, which were shared with the staff, allowing them to engage in further discussion via email and chat.

For Centro staff, these collective interrogations of their data collection offered an important shift away from the common top-down approaches to evaluation that focus on efficiency and accountability, instead prioritizing community-led reflection before funder-driven action. Funding that supports evaluation infrastructure, independent data collection, and time for reflection is rare. As Evelyn Cruz summarizes, "They pay us to act, not to think." Commonly, community organizations have to "demonstrate their worthiness" (2022) or merit as grantees through evaluation. But by critically reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of their current data

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[2] The fellowship took place through the Wisconsin Population Health Service Fellowship Program (WPP, n.d.), which connects emerging public health leaders with

community organizations for service-learning opportunities.

collection and evaluation practices, and by including diverse staff and client perspectives in this conversation, Centro was able to move toward using evaluation as an organizational strategy, and toward interrogating long-term impacts rather than merely focusing on short-term productivity measures. As described in the next section, these collective interrogations also initiated discussions with funders about changing their project outcome requirements, shifting away from data collection to describe impact and toward practices geared for transformation that build upon community strengths.

Leveraging Community Data Toward Asset-Based Evaluation Tools

The conversations with staff described in the previous section showcased the need for a community-driven, asset-based tool that could respond to the transformative evaluation questions and capture the impact of Centro's programs on community well-being in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the community. In order to draw on existing culturally responsive work on this topic, Centro and their partners in the Esperanza grant at the UW Counseling Psychology Department ("the Esperanza Team") contacted IC-RACE (Immigration, Critical Race, and Cultural Equity Lab). Together, they started developing a psychometric tool to capture well-being based on the seven Latinx psychological strengths defined by IC-RACE as part of the HEART framework: "Determination, Esperanza, Adaptability, Strong Work Ethic, Connectedness to Others, Collective Emotional Expression, and Resistance" (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017, p. 29). To this end, the Esperanza team is now conducting focus groups and interviews with Latinxs in Madison to interrogate what these seven strengths mean to them. This way the team is collecting information that will help operationalize the concepts in a culturally relevant way.

This tool would allow for an asset-based measurement of Centro's programs' impacts while enabling more flexible, staff-directed data collection. It would furthermore offer an opportunity for Centro's community to highlight the impacts of their work that are important to them and showcase their experiences, regaining control over the narratives about Latinxs in Dane County and beyond. This tool may also act as an inspiration and template for other organizations' data collection.

Centro furthermore aims to leverage this tool in conversations with funders toward more self-directed data collection. Highlighting and demonstrating Centro's own data collection capacity—and providing alternative tools to capture program success—may provide openings toward revising reporting requirements. This tool thus could help shift dynamics in funder–grantee relationships toward more flexibility for collecting the information most relevant to community-based organizations (CBOs). Using an asset-based, community-driven evaluation tool would redress the perpetuation of deficit narratives about communities of color through evaluation and transform top-down approaches to program assessment. Toward this goal, in the meantime, Centro staff are willing to bear the double burden of collecting data to respond to both their own interests and funders' requirements.

Discussion: Opportunities Gained and Challenges Remaining for Transforming Evaluation from the Inside Out

As shown above, the establishment of program evaluation as an integral part of the third sector is intertwined with the normalization of neoliberal logic as universal management, planning, and assessment principles, resulting in (a) a focus on efficiency and accountability, (b) the perpetuation of deficit narratives about communities of color, and (c) a top-down approach to program development. Through these interlocking dynamics, the evaluation of social services in the United States has become part of an institutionalized cycle in which underfunded CBOs are asked to provide productivity measures to demonstrate their merit through scientific methods. This approach often does not reflect CBOs' values and priorities and fails to capture the complex long-term impacts of their work. It discredits community expertise and can reinforce implicit or explicit stereotypes and prejudices about communities of color.

Centro Hispano has taken several steps to address these harmful dynamics in their evaluation practice: (1) By centering positive community values as guiding principles to counter deficit narratives about Latinxs and prioritize process over outcomes. (2) By centering staff expertise and interests during the development of transformative evaluation questions to strengthen equitable, trust-based university–community partnerships and shift top-down evaluation approaches. (3) By taking time to critically reflect on their existing evaluation methods and purposes, fostering critical conversations about how these may be reinforcing

harmful dynamics (e.g., by asking for sensitive information or putting a strain on staff through non-transferable data collection for diverse funders). (4) By developing asset-based, community-driven, culturally responsive evaluation tools that can capture long-term impacts of Centro's work in a way that meaningfully reflects community experiences and may shift funders' evaluation requirements toward more community-driven data collection approaches.

While these developments offer exciting opportunities for positive changes, many challenges remain. As the description of Centro's efforts illustrates, changing existing evaluation practices requires staff time and resources that many organizations do not have. Even with the support that Centro has received from partners, the described critical conversations require an additional effort from already overburdened staff. Conducting evaluation for both themselves and funders is not sustainable in the long term—and while the steps described above have had many short-term benefits, the long-term outcomes and chances for structural transformation are still uncertain.

As Peck and Tickell (2002) point out, the creative adaptivity of neoliberalism is often underestimated, which contributes to its durability across diverse moments of crisis and resistance. Neoliberal discourse creatively reinvents and actualizes itself by "re-making its own image" (p. 282). It finds ways to incorporate, appropriate, and absorb critical discourse (Munshi and Willse, 2007). With the psychometric tool of well-being based on the seven Latinx psychological strengths described above, Centro hopes to "*speak-into-their-listening*" (Symonette, 2013, p.12) with regard to funders and reframe community experiences in a positive way that is relevant and validating to Centro staff and clients, while also being convincing and useful for funders. This undertaking entails risks, as it could contribute to commodifying marginalized stories. By translating community experiences into a more mainstream discourse that funders will understand, evaluators are also making them more marketable. This may contribute to incorporating community resistance into neoliberal discourse, corroding its revolutionary potential, instead of changing the current system.

Yet, taking this path also holds potential for long-term institutional and systemic transformations. As Robinson (2021a) argues, with no large-scale replacement for the current system on the horizon, change must happen from within. The terms and tools of evaluation hold cultural and social capital (Carter, 2003) that individuals and organizations can leverage in their favor (e.g., to gain credibility in certain spaces or to access certain resources). The challenge is thus to leverage evaluation's potential for critical reflection and action without devaluing or commodifying community expertise and knowledge. According to Freire's idea of critical consciousness, people can learn "the standard language of the oppressor" to survive, while also criticizing the ideological implications of this standard (Schor & Freire, 1987, p. 72). Centro believes that, similarly, by incorporating the HEART framework and other forms of ancestral knowledge, and by focusing on community strengths and healing, the community can use evaluation to "speak to power," survive, and transform the system, without devaluing their own forms of expression and reflection.

But, even more importantly, as Centro's principle of wellness from the inside out emphasizes, before anyone can transform a system, they need to heal themselves. With existing disparities brought into full view with the COVID-19 pandemic, "regenerative and restorative resistance forces are needed" now more than ever (Robinson, 2021, p. 15). Beyond the social justice orientation of existing critical, action-oriented evaluation approaches, the combination of the three frameworks outlined above opens new possibilities for evaluation to contribute to individual and community well-being, including the healing of ethno-racial trauma. The emphasis on community expertise and collaborative approaches within transformative evaluation in combination with the need for self-determination that the HEART framework emphasizes showcases how only self-defined data collection can provide the sense of control necessary for healing. When overlaying these approaches, it becomes clear that community-led data collection and analysis are not only key to shifting power dynamics within evaluation, but essential for healing ethno-racial trauma. Consequently, data collection driven by external questions and priorities not only renders culturally irresponsive and irrelevant and thus less valid data but also heightens a sense of powerlessness and disengagement, reinforcing ethno-racial trauma. In contrast, by centering staff expertise and questions, and conducting independent data collection and analysis, Centro supports the community in reclaiming, investigating, reflecting on, and reframing their experiences positively through evaluation. This way evaluation becomes an organizational strategy for learning, reflection, self-determination, healing, and collective action.

Conclusion

The process described above represents the first steps toward the goal of making evaluation part of a wider effort to dismantle institutionalized neoliberal logic and deficit-based narratives about communities of color. Thanks to extensive critical conversations about evaluation purpose and methods, staff at Centro are asking new questions and shifting the conversation with funders around evaluation, reporting, and data collection, pushing for evaluation tools that can capture the impact of their work, rather than measure their productivity. The described psychometric tool to measure Latinx traits of well-being is one way Centro hopes to further engage with funders in conversations around reporting requirements, and shift deficit-based narratives of Latinxs toward asset-based framings.

For these shifts to occur beyond Centro Hispano, evaluators and funders need to build critical consciousness of the ways evaluation may reinforce harmful dynamics. Therefore, it is important to understand the ways neoliberal logic has been institutionalized, normalized, and invisibilized in the United States. This sensitivity and understanding provides an important addition to other social-justice-oriented evaluation approaches, and can help evaluators and funders resist a focus on efficiency and managerialism in their processes and organizations. Evaluation concepts and methods are not culturally or politically neutral; they are intertwined with deficit narratives about communities of color and community-based organizations. As donor-driven approaches, they reinforce economic dependencies and the oppression of marginalized worldviews.

Until funders and evaluators recognize the structural biases inherent in current evaluation processes, and provide adequate funding, community organizations like Centro will continue to bear the double burden of evaluating for funders' sake, without the sufficient resources to do so, while also aiming to capture the impact of their work in a way that is meaningful to them. To provide opportunities for evaluation to be transformational on a personal and structural level, funders need to pay organizations to think, not just act, and acknowledge the transformative value of nonprofits beyond program outputs. They need to provide time and resources for learning and reflection, evaluation tool development and improvement, and community-based data collection and interpretation. This way, the existing neoliberal biases inherent in evaluation processes and institutions may slowly be transformed—from the inside out.

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