

words matter

language and social justice
funding in the us south

GRANTMAKERS FOR SOUTHERN PROGRESS

introduction

Grantmakers for Southern Progress recently conducted a research study that examined the thinking and motivation behind social justice funding in the South. (See *As the South Goes: Philanthropy and Social Justice in the US South*, at www.nfg.org.) The first question asked of the study sample involved language:

How do Southern and national foundations talk and think about social justice work in the South?

A core assumption going into the research was that language could be a barrier to Southern and national funders developing partnerships. In particular, GSP assumed the term social justice might present a particular challenge. This proved to be the case. The researchers also tested other terms that related to social justice, in search of language that might substitute for “social justice.” This short paper aims to provide grantmakers with a better understanding of how the language they use may be received by different funders. GSP hopes that this increased understanding can help facilitate deeper conversations about the broader shared ambitions of all funders of social justice work in the South.

“Southern and national funders are not monolithic in their views on social justice and community change.” - Excerpt from full *As the South Goes* report

on social justice

Based on the one-on-one interviews conducted, the As the South Goes study found that funders describe their work using a range of language, some of which belies assumptions. Most of the national funders in the study are very direct and precise with using the term social justice, while most Southern funders intentionally use more muted language, avoiding the term altogether because of the relatively conservative social and political climate in their communities. They say leading with the term can end a conversation before it begins, so they use a more nuanced language to garner trust.

Nevertheless, Southern and national funders were not monolithic in their views on social justice and community change. While Southern and national funders were split on their use of the term social justice, several Southern funders were supportive of the term, while several national funders – even those that are seen as social justice funders – did not use the term or were ambivalent. Regarding their stance toward social justice and social change, it would be more accurate to disaggregate Southern and national funders in this study into four categories:

Traditional Southern funders: who do not support the use and concept of the term social justice;

Southern social change funders: who support work that seeks to promote social and economic change for impoverished communities, but always or often avoid using the term social justice in discussion with their local and regional colleagues;

National social change funders: who support social change and social justice work, but avoid using the term social justice internally with their boards of directors;

National social justice funders: who explicitly use the term social justice and support social justice work.

Traditional Southern funders have discomfort with both the language and the underlying concept of social justice. These funders see social justice as an outdated term with negative connotations of the civil rights movement and as being too confrontational and divisive. Some also speak about it as a suppression of individual rights and responsibility, which can be especially counter-cultural in the South.

Southern and national social change funders support social justice-related work, but they often feel the language is too vague, too political or too imprecise, as exemplified in the comments of one national funder:

My interest is in how the world feels to those most impacted by the world around them. Instead of talking about social justice in education, I talk about specifics – I want black and Latino boys reading on the 3rd grade level by 3rd grade. What’s underneath that? We want teachers to view black and Latino boys in their classrooms as students and not threats. I try to go a level deeper. The bottom line question is: Is my life better? We may want things that we think are good for communities, but if [local community leaders] can’t understand it from their own perspective, we’ll be no better than people who do “for” rather than “with” people.

For national social justice funders, social justice is not just a term but also the embodiment of a theory for how to achieve progressive social change in this country. In speaking about social justice, these funders emphasize the concepts of improving the lives of those most in need; restoring fairness; confronting structural barriers and systemic inequities; and changing power relations. Social justice funders explicitly distinguish their efforts from “charity,” and they tend to be explicit about racial equity,

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though varied in their level of analysis or skill for addressing structural racism. They acknowledge that they can be viewed as “edgy” or “controversial” and say that they will be identified as “progressive” or “liberal” or “social justice funders” regardless of whether they use that language – and therefore they might as well proactively use the terminology.

There are of course a handful of Southern funders who explicitly use social justice language to describe their work and strategies, but they are in the strong minority.

Because of the South’s unique history of race relations stemming from slavery and the civil rights movement, understanding the language funders use and why they choose to use it is critical to relationship building. Funders have relationships with others – peer funders, community leaders, grantees – all of whom have their own political lenses, levels of understanding and world views. A singular way of talking about the work will not resonate with the diversity of audiences with whom funders are engaged.



Photo credited to the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

other terms

In search of a term other than social justice that might appeal to broader audiences, the study tested the following words that related to social justice: **opportunity**, **structural change**, **equity**, **power** (or power building), **organizing**, **human rights**, and **vulnerable communities**. Interestingly, the study found that some of the reasons funders cite for preferring and using a term often mirror the reasons other funders choose not to use the same term. And some who prefer the same term may do so for opposite reasons. The study revealed neither monolithic patterns nor predictable responses, but in general, Southern-based funders tend to use more opaque or generic language while national funders tend to be more explicit in their language, which focuses on power and structural inequities. Below is a snapshot of findings on these terms.

National and Southern funders viewed the term **opportunity** positively. Several funders use the term interchangeably with access, though some say it means more than just access. Those that like the term view it as a safe, aspirational and positive term that can resonate at some level with everyone as a core American value. Some traditional and social change Southern funders like it because it does not imply equity, but allows space for self-sufficiency and choice. At the same time, some national funders believe it is too safe and generic and doesn't acknowledge the structures that thwart opportunity.

The term **structural change**, viewed positively by most national and Southern funders, received the most similar responses of all the terms presented, but definitions varied. Some use this term as a noun to describe an outcome, others see it as an action word: the process by which to achieve equity. Southern social change funders describe the term as a more comfortable and less provocative word than equity to acknowledge the existence of structural barriers and describe the

comprehensive, long-lasting change necessary to improve lives. They note that if evoking structures is still too controversial, the term policy change or reform could be substituted without changing meaning.

Most funders that dislike the term structural change believe that it is too academic, technical, and vague. Some traditional Southern funders, as well as national and Southern social change funders, believe the goal should be to make the best use of structures rather than change them. Some national social justice funders think that change does not adequately convey the transformation that structures require to be equitable. Some traditional Southern funders think that this term evokes negative images of the civil rights movement and the need for the redistribution of resources.

Equity generated positive responses from most funders except traditional Southern funders, who tended to view it negatively. Those who like the term equate it with fairness and distinguish it from equal opportunity. They also like it because it acknowledges that structural disadvantages exist. While most proponents talk about equity as a core value, a few say they like it because it is outcome focused.

For traditional Southern funders, this term is the most equivalent to social justice, and thus evokes very similar (negative) reactions, and they would prefer something softer like inclusion. These funders dislike this term, because they think it implies a special interest focus and is code for racial equity (which is, for them, a negative concept or no longer needed). It emphasizes that inequity exists and it evokes the need for a redistribution of wealth (also a negative):

Equity is a danger word on a board level. When people hear "equity" they understand that they have something to lose; it's a zero sum game.

“the choice to use social justice language or not is both ideological and political. The question for Southern and national funders interested in fostering new partnerships with each other is how rigidly they hold to their ideologies and politics.”

- Excerpt from full As the South Goes report

Those that favor the terms **power** or **power building** – mostly national funders – do so because they believe the change they seek cannot be achieved unless those with less power increase their power, most often through organized action. Having the agency to direct one’s own destiny is both an ingredient and an outcome of change.

We believe that people can’t act on their own behalf and create change without power. It’s power when used wrongly that increases oppression. Democratic control over power is essential in our vision.

Those that dislike or avoid the term power, mostly Southern funders, feel it evokes negative images of the civil rights movement and the need for redistribution of power. Some small funders believe they do not have enough resources to build power. They express concern about challenging and alienating traditional power structures and players.

Power is really negative because it implies taking power from someone else. We try to prevent a lot of negative. We want to look at thoughtful ways to talk about issues that don’t alienate anyone.

Many Southern social change funders offered alternative language to power – building capacity, developing leadership or building social capital. In some cases, these alternative terms aim to avoid controversial, overtly political language and keep diverse players in conversation. In other cases, funders prefer to steer clear of not only the language but also any explicit engagement with power dynamics.

Supporters of the term **organizing** – typically national funders – view it as a lasting way for people to determine their own vision and priorities, build power and achieve concrete changes in and for their communities. Though some interchange the term organizing with civic participation and policy advocacy, others view organizing as the most direct and powerful term and one with a strong tradition that should be uplifted rather than obscured.

Organizing tends to yield positive change for investment. It also lifts up indigenous leaders for future projects. Organizing is a democratic process for building power, leadership, and coming together in a collective vision.

Traditional Southern funders describe it as negatively connected to the civil rights movement, President Obama, the Occupy Wall Street movement and unions; they are opposed to the implicit goal to redistribute power and resources. This reaction shows up even among some national social change funders:

We’re not allowed to use that word internally. It makes our board feel uncomfortable. Sometimes people equate organizing to rabble rousing and unions. That’s just the history.

Human rights is the term least universally supported across the study sample. Only a small number of funders like this term; they describe it as being the most comprehensive, all-encompassing term. The most overwhelming reason given for not liking the term is that it has an international connotation that does not reflect U.S.-based work. It is also seen as politically charged and extreme, and not outcome focused.

Finally, the term **vulnerable communities** generated a mix of support, opposition and ambivalence. Generally, Southern funders viewed it positively, while national funders viewed it negatively. Those who like the term describe it as a sympathetic term that evokes a desire to help those in need and viewed it favorably as a charity-oriented term that doesn’t highlight systemic injustice or privilege. Those who do not like the term describe it unfavorably as a charity versus justice-oriented term that overlooks structures that make people vulnerable. Many funders from across the political spectrum describe it as insulting and disempowering, overlooking the resilience, assets and power of marginalized groups and painting them as passive and weak victims. However, many of these funders admit it is an honest characterization of the circumstances facing those communities.

race talk

It should be noted that while this study didn't specifically ask about race, interviewees spoke about how language can be a hindrance when talking about the dynamics of race. In fact, the most reoccurring theme of avoiding a particular term was that it evoked negative images of the civil rights movement.

Race is the third rail. If you want to divide an initiative, talk about race. If you talk about 'the community that needs safer sidewalks,' then you're for everybody. I don't think it's hiding race, it's talking about it obliquely. Because of that we've made great progress. Very confrontational racial discussions will paralyze you.

Given the language barriers identified in this study and the potential for shutting down conversations, why do self-identified social justice funders insist on talking about social justice and race at all? They are, of course, speaking their values and ideology. And perhaps they can contribute to changing the larger narrative and creating greater comfort in the dialogue. They also know that a lack of explicit dialogue coincides with very low levels of philanthropic investment in social and racial justice. The people and communities most affected by inequity bear the consequences for philanthropy's discomforts and conflict avoidance. For example, even by using expansive definitions only about 12 percent¹ of the total philanthropic pie feeds social justice efforts. Not talking about social justice and race has not produced the results urgently needed in the South and throughout the country. And yet talking about it effectively continues to be a challenge.

To be sure, ideological purity will not draw traditional or mainstream funders into conversations and partnerships to advance social justice or racial equity. At the same time, being too quiet about race only perpetuates our collective inability to address it. As one community foundation asks,

How can we change the very systems we are trying to change while not acknowledging these words? Language is so evocative of all the stuff that sits right under the surface. Without acknowledging [race], we hide behind the words. They evoke the same things that keep us stuck in mindsets and assumptions.

For various reasons, some funders, both Southern and national, make the choice to not lead with race as they approach work in the region. As with all of the findings related to language, assumptions cannot be made about a funder's concern or analysis based only on the language they use. They may, in fact, hold a very sophisticated analysis about racial dynamics, as well as the larger political context in which they are operating. At the same time, funders in all regions could benefit from increasing their skill and confidence in bringing race into the conversation in appropriate and courageous ways.

¹ The Foundation Center, (2009). Social Justice Grantmaking II.

conclusion

While Southern and national funders may use different language, research revealed that they often have similar or at least complementary goals. Vocabulary should not be a barrier to dialogue that can reveal shared interests. In light of the struggle to find a common language to talk about social justice work, Grantmakers for Southern Progress recommends that funders set aside shorthand language and take the time to have conversations about what they are trying to achieve and, just as importantly, why they are trying to achieve it.

GSP suggests that Southern and national funders borrow a story-based technique from community organizers called “one-on-ones” to facilitate better dialogue. The point of one-on-ones is not just telling a story, but listening for the other person’s intentions, values and analysis to uncover what motivates and drives them to do their work and make their choices. This more substantive information can be the basis for building deeper relationships among funders. Getting to the story behind the story can help establish common ground.

An important part of GSP’s work is to facilitate these one-on-one dialogues among and between Southern and national funders. We hope that these conversations will lay the foundation for stronger partnerships and collaboration to effect greater social and economic progress for the South and the nation overall. Opportunity awaits those funders that resist assumptions and probe beyond language in order to find ways to leverage the power of funder partnership and collaboration. Additional recommendations based on the *As the South Goes* research appear in the full report, cited above.

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