Values, Voice, and an Equitable Vision of Validity

Authored by:

Jara Dean-Coffey
Director, Equitable Evaluation Initiative

Read a Q & A with author Jara Dean-Coffey.

So here we are, beginning the third decade of the 21st century. The United States is increasingly diverse demographically, reflecting a great variety of experiences, perspectives, and insights. Data continue to have a powerful role in our understanding of ourselves, each other, and our collective, albeit divided, American society. 2020's racial justice awakening, stemming from a deeper understanding of the ways in which structural racism contributes to inequity, and from the disproportionate toll that COVID-19 has taken in different racial communities, has made it more challenging, going forward, to ignore some truths about this country that have always been so.

This dynamic and complex reality cannot be reduced to the simplified expressions of data often depicted in dashboards and charts. There is growing acknowledgment that "voice" brings life to data that, often, are quantitative. This voice tends to be that of the people most impacted by specific conditions or outcomes. Their experiences and perceptions are increasingly considered when designing, implementing, or evaluating the strategies and programs that contribute to healthy, thriving, and sustainable communities. Still, although story and narrative are increasingly seen as meaningful and important, they are rarely considered to be "data" or "evidence." Why?

It's about validity—whether the data are considered sound, cogent, and factually acceptable. Sociopolitical decisions, policies, systems, and structures have long been shaped by methods that inherently give greater value and validity to certain types of data and analysis than to others.[1] The dominant (e.g., White and Western) concept of validity remains grounded in a preference for that which is empirical and objective and lends itself to quantitative representation.[2] Diversity and lived experience often are merely used to "color" the analysis. A construct of validity that reflects equity would more fully express the many dimensions of individual identity and the many elements—organizations, systems, and networks—that define the uniqueness of communities.

This essay considers what validity represents, who defines it, and how those definitions implicitly or explicitly reinforce hidden values and intentions. I then suggest a frame for validity (informed by and building on the work of others) that can deepen our understanding of complex environments, create more accurate narratives about what is working for whom (and how), and move us closer to a world that affirms human dignity and puts equity and liberation within grasp.

Concepts of Validity

It is important to understand how we got here so we can determine how to get to somewhere new. Several dominant research and evaluation paradigms have informed how we tend to conceptualize validity. They include:

- Positivism, which views data as "something that exists, are [already] there, and are observable… there is no relationship between the self and knowledge,"[3] and post-positivism, which acknowledges that "divisions between objectivity and

subjectivity, or public and private knowledge, or scientific and emotional knowledge, are socially constructed";[4]

- Social constructionism,[5] which states that reality is socially constructed and is interested in how these constructs come to be;
- Pluralism and pragmatism[6]—the former being the view that multiple truths and versions of rightness exist, and the latter a belief that there is "a" right—a singularity; and
- Critical realism,[7] which asserts that there is a world independent of human beings that has deep structures and that the structures can be represented by scientific theories, which are central to this paradigm.

Each of these paradigms tackle one or more of three core questions posed by Guba and Lincoln:[8] 1) what the form and nature of reality is and, therefore, what can be known about it; 2) what the nature of the relationship is between the knower (or would-be knower) and what can be known; and 3) how the inquirer (would-be knower) can go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known. What is missing from all of these paradigms, however, is the axiological question that asks:

What kind of information and knowledge, if any, is fundamentally and inherently valuable and important; what (whose) assumptions does the information reflect; and what (whose) intention does the information advance?

That unasked question matters because who we are matters, as does where we stand in relation to place and power. Those attributes affect what we see, what we believe, and how we make sense of (i.e., validate) things. They also shape the questions we ask (and don't ask).