

Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building

Where They Come from and
How They Are Translated into Actions

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Executive Summary

Ideas are often the currency of philanthropy. Ideas animate fields of philanthropic endeavor. Ideas can constitute “forces” in field building that determine a field’s direction. This paper examines the sources of ideas that program professionals in foundations draw from to create programs and influence fields of philanthropic interest. It also provides guidance about how foundation program staff can identify powerful and useful ideas and apply these to the work of philanthropy.

Moral Ideas

“Moral ideas” are central to the social change work of foundations as well as to the grant-giving culture of some. Just as foundations might support right and just ways of delivering health care or protecting children’s rights, foundations might enact right and just ways of interacting with and supporting the work of grantees. In either case, the moral idea functions as a compass, directing people toward some activities and purposes and away from others. Mothers Against Drunk Driving stands out as a successful moral idea that began as a grassroots movement and gained a following in the policy and philanthropic arenas. Palliative end-of-life care in hospitals stands out as an idea that was taken up early and promoted by foundations. Respect for the nonprofit service providers at the front lines of social change is a motivating moral idea in the grant-giving practices of some foundations.

The hospice care concept illustrates how moral ideas, in conjunction with the concepts of “moral practice” and the relationships among people engaged in this practice, can stimulate program ideas. The hospice movement took off, in part, because it linked the moral idea of death with dignity to pain management as a practice and to the hospice provider as a partner to the dying. This intersection of moral idea, moral practice, and partner/provider is a productive intellectual location for foundation program officers looking for program ideas. In the youth development field, for example, Big Brothers/Big Sisters is the program idea at the intersection of: the moral idea that every child should have a caring, personal relationship with an adult; the moral practice of mentoring; and the idea of the mentor as a member of the young person’s family (sister/brother).

Powerful moral ideas often stimulate controversy because they set rights of different groups in conflict. So, when a foundation decides to champion one moral idea in its grantmaking, the foundation is often entering a field with conflicting forces at work. In the child welfare arena, for example, there has been a long-standing tension between two guiding moral ideas: that children deserve to be raised by their biological parents—even when there are issues in biological families that present risks to the safety of the children—and that children’s safety overrides parents’ rights to raise their children. Child protection law, and child protective practice more generally, has seesawed between these two goals over the last two decades.

Moral ideas can sometimes substitute for financial resources because they attract people to work for a cause without recompense and to contribute other valuable goods and services. This phenomenon represents “moral currency,” a commodity that is not only useful to foundations that want to promote their programs and strategies, but which may be essential to garnering support and leverage to build fields or change the direction of a field. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s interest in workforce issues of the millions of people who provide services to children, youth, and families in the U.S. offers an illustration of the potential value of moral currency. The foundation has considered establishing a national commission to generate interest in and promote policy solutions to such problems as low pay, high turnover, and inadequate training for these workers. The foundation’s challenge is whether pay scales, benefits, staff development, and career ladders can generate sufficient moral traction to achieve the foundation’s goal of improving the quality of services for children, youth, and families—or whether an alternative to a commission, such as a campaign for “economic justice for child welfare workers,” might have more moral currency.

The Ecology of Ideas

Ideas that might be germs of philanthropic programs emerge from the social and political currents of the time and work together to create an ecology of ideas. The connections or correlations between ideas, and the ways they reinforce or contradict each other, often determine whether a single idea is likely to spread and become a compelling basis for social change. In the 1990s, for example, the ideas of entrepreneurship, personal initiative, responsibility for oneself, and women’s economic independence established a moral context for changing the focus and purposes of welfare programs, particularly as they affected women with children. In the past, racial politics dominated the debate over welfare as conservative politicians inveighed against welfare spending and welfare dependency to gain white votes. But the emergence of these other moral ideas changed the moral landscape of the issue, making it possible for President Clinton, a centrist, to advocate changing welfare.

There is an ecology of ideas within and surrounding any particular field that can be mined by philanthropists to develop strategies for moving a field. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation developed a program promoting palliative care for seriously ill patients in hospitals within an ecology that contained the following elements:

- Health care professionals were in revolt against patient care protocols mandated by managed care organizations and were seeking to create hospice-like hospital settings where practice could be governed by compassion and thoughtfulness.
- Assisted suicides by terminally ill people publicized by the media raised the awareness among the public about end-of-life care.
- Adult children of aging parents—based on their own experience and media exposés—were recognizing that nursing home care for the terminally ill was indifferent, inadequate, and sometimes even neglectful or inhumane.

The Life Cycle of Ideas

A leading scholar of ideas argues that there is a limited number of ideas in good currency in a field at any given time and that a single idea traverses a natural life cycle in four stages from latency to growth to peaking (or maturation) to decline (or institutionalization). Attending to the life cycle of an idea helps foundation program officers assess where, in the history of an idea, they are intervening—particularly to avoid investing in an idea in decline and to anticipate what might be needed to boost a latent idea to the growth stage. However, ideas that pass out of currency can resurface, as has often happened with ideas about national economic development. For example, in the aftermath of World War II, poor countries were urged to adopt policies substituting local production for imports (“import substitution”). But, beginning in the 1980s, the prevailing philosophy of economic deregulation led economists, policymakers, and politicians to argue that poor countries should open their economies, reduce tariffs, and allow for the free flow of capital. Recent economic crises in Asia, Latin America, and Africa have prompted new assessments of the “open economy” policies.

Ideas in Foundation Practice

Paying attention to the ideas of others is a key element of the practice of philanthropy and reflects the intention of many foundations to be learning organizations. In many foundations, program officers are expected to stay current with what is happening in their substantive fields, which

includes being able to spot emerging ideas and assess their potential for foundation programs. Thus, “scanning” or “listening in to” a field or area of interest to identify emerging ideas and ideas in good currency is an essential foundation practice. The authors recommend that this should be a systematic and collective practice—i.e., that foundations should create and sustain an awareness of the importance of scanning and intelligence across programs, that the staff responsibilities for tracking various intelligence sources should be assigned, and that intelligence should be processed in groups.

Recognizing emerging ideas in action—as opposed to ideas presented in books, journal articles, conferences, and informal conversations—requires knowing how to identify the connections between moral ideas and organizational practices. The authors suggest three places to look for such connections:

1. “Found pilots,” a name given to practices that emerge from grassroots passions and eventually establish a wide enough constituency to adopt mainstream organizational trappings—and which demonstrate to philanthropy that the central idea is in “good currency” because a substantial number of people are willing to invest their own time, effort, and money, moving the idea from a latent to growth stage. Home schooling is such an idea. Having begun as a fundamentalist Christian movement, home schooling has spread across the spectrum of religious and political values and has grown its own infrastructure of institutional supports.
2. “Comings and goings,” shorthand for the movement of people in and out of organizations and fields of interest. Because new arrivals often signal innovation and departures often signal dissatisfaction, tracking changes of people in a field is a method of scanning or listening in to a field that can help foundation staff stay in touch with emerging ideas.
3. Where the tensions are between ideas—a different angle of perspective on the observation that moral ideas engender moral conflicts. People often want for themselves things that, if available to everyone, they would no longer be able to enjoy, which creates conflicts between social and individual rights and aspirations. These conflicts or intersections are ripe territory for innovation and social invention that can be supported and extended by philanthropy. The authors use the history of suburbanization to illustrate this opportunity to “locate tensions.”

In conclusion, the authors suggest how the techniques of problem framing—a classic communications skill—and marketing relate to foundation practices to seek out and promote program ideas. They return to the notion that a field of forces or influences surrounds any problem and that foundation staff need to understand what these forces are in order to effectively frame a problem or market its solution.