Philanthropy Research – Research with, in, or about philanthropy that explores philanthropy’s values, roles and expressions at individual, organisational or societal level, and contributes to both theoretical understanding and applied knowledge on philanthropy.

Challenges with philanthropy research?

For foundations:
- Resistance to and disengagement with research – by donor/founder/trustee
- Scepticism – about the value of academic research
- Mismatched agendas and timeframes – of different parties and stakeholders
- Accessibility of research – ‘please don’t write anything too academic’
- Format of research – often seems too prescriptive or descriptive
- Perceptions of research – frequently seen as a tool for further social action rather than understanding and assisting philanthropy itself
- Philanthropic egos – individual, organisational and collective, and ‘disbelief’ that ‘someone (else) out there might know something’
- Fear – that research might challenge identities
- Power – need to feel/be in charge of the dynamics
- Organisational Culture – no strong history of internal learning and knowledge-exchange, with a resistance to learning from others
- Working environment and pace of change – not allowing for important reflection time

For academics:
- Private domain of philanthropy – difficulties of access, engagement and building trusted, long-term, relationships
- Perceptions of minimal opportunities – especially around experimentation
- Career trajectories – working with the sector(s) and engaged scholarship have traditionally not been rewarded
- Potential danger of ‘absolution research’ – aimed at confirming validity and/or appropriateness of philanthropic (funding) choices
- Bi-polarity – academic research has tended to take on an either overly friendly or hypercritical approach instead of acting as philanthropy’s ‘reflective/critical friend’

Opportunities for philanthropy research?

For foundations:
- Find out ‘what does work’ – identify ways to answer ‘the how to?’ questions
- Understand the ‘ecology of funding’ – explore better and more appropriate approaches for giving money away and understand donors’, founders’ and trustees’ motivations
- Join the dots and get a more global perspective – learn from other foundations and from different areas of activity/contexts/countries
- Enable learning from the past to encourage current practices – ‘if we treated our money in the way we treat the knowledge we hold, it would be a scandal’
- Reputation, competition and status within the sector and amongst peers – ‘we need to look good’
- Strengthen credibility – ‘research is like armour, it protects us’
- Become more self-reflective and examine practices and approaches – ‘what helps us do our job better and what helps us see our job better’
- Moving beyond rhetoric – providing a means of looking at the spectrum and limits of what foundations are actually doing and can do
- Provide pointers and space(s) to think – ‘indicate the directions of stuff we don’t know’

For academics:
- An important, highly relevant, underexplored and emerging area of research – promises new insights, understandings, and learning
- Offers opportunities to make a difference – to academia, policy and practice
- Scope for interdisciplinary and comparative learning – that identifies and examines lessons for/from different research fields and builds integrated knowledge – ‘what, if anything, is unique about the world of philanthropy?’
- Engaged scholarship and research co-production – develop scholarship that is supportive but reflects on philanthropy’s roles and actions, offering opportunity for critical friendships between academia and philanthropy
- Education possibilities – ‘where do you go to become a board member or trustee?’

Areas for development?

- Establishing and providing safe spaces for discussion, reflective exchanges and peer learning
- Building dialogues that both challenge and support philanthropy
- Developing ‘curated space’ for philanthropy research that offers accessible digests and ‘nuggets’, clearly points out ‘what is this research for?’, and addresses the danger of research getting ‘lost in translation’
- Undertaking meta-analyses (e.g. of foundations’ project/programme evaluations) to bring together disparate sources of knowledge

- Communicating, acknowledging and capitalising on the notion that ‘someone, somewhere else [in a variety of different contexts and settings], does in fact know something’
- Examining what, where and which insights can be gleaned from different disciplines and how such knowledge relates to philanthropy practice, policy and theory
- Reviewing appropriate funding for varieties of philanthropy research
- Opening and strengthening mutual understanding of philanthropy’s and academia’s respective expectations and needs, opportunities and challenges