Ways of Knowing Symposia: Principles & Practices for Anti-racist & Anti-colonial Health Equity Research

Executive Summary

Knowledge, what we know and believe to be true, is derived from a variety of sources – education, experience, instinct or intuition, experimentation, etc. Historically, the scientific community has placed greater value on experimental knowledge, elevating not only the information it provides, but also the methods by which it is obtained. This thinking has created a scientific knowledge system that is insulated and limited. In recent years, deep politicization of science combined with a public reckoning with racism in the United States (and in science) has spurred a reevaluation of what constitutes knowledge. Despite growing attention to research focused on racial and Indigenous equity, structural racism and settler colonialism are embedded in how the current research system operates - from how research is done, to who gets tenure and how it is achieved, from who and what research is funded, to the type of research that is published and cited.

In recognition of the importance and value of a more holistic basis of knowledge, constructed from multiple sources and approaches, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is working to shift the paradigm around how knowledge is created, valued, and distributed within the health sciences knowledge system (e.g., the "gatekeepers" of scientific knowledge - academic and other research institutions, journals, scientific review boards, research funders, and other entities that make decisions about what constitutes scientific knowledge).

To catalyze this transformation, in 2024, Evidence for Action and Partners for Advancing Health Equity, two programs of RWJF co-hosted – in collaboration with local organizing partners – the *Ways of Knowing Symposia*, a series of five townhall-like gatherings across the country that brought together Indigenous and local community members, anti-racist and anti-colonial scholars, health equity advocates, and others with a long-standing commitment to advancing Indigenous and racial health justice.

- Kickoff Event | New Orleans, Louisiana
- Indigenous Ways of Knowing | Pray, Montana
- Transforming Community-Led Health Research | Greenville, North Carolina
- Challenging the Norm: Redefining Rigor in Health Research | Washington, DC
- Culminating Event | St. Louis, Missouri

The symposia were designed to uplift a shared understanding of scientific rigor—one that is more accurate, equitable, and inclusive—and to challenge the thinking of the

institutions and individuals who have historically served as “gatekeepers” of knowledge, determining who creates it, owns it, and assigns its value. Acknowledging the importance of this transformation being led by those who have long been doing the work, we convened individuals well-versed in diverse ways of knowing. Participants of the symposia voiced their challenges, priorities, and principles for transforming systems that support health equity research, including the role funding, academia, and publishing play in advancing Indigenous and racial health equity.

In 2025 and 2026, our focus shifted to engaging decision-makers (or the “gatekeepers” of scientific knowledge) across the domains we’re prioritizing within the health science knowledge system – funding, academic administration, publishing and community-based organizations – to workshop the emerging themes, principles, and practices identified throughout the Ways of Knowing Symposia. The aim is to refine these emerging themes into actionable opportunities and develop a comprehensive action plan to drive systemic change within the health sciences system. Ultimately, symposia organizers hope to seed (and cede!) leadership of this effort to others who are better suited to carry out the action plan itself and to build momentum that can be carried on by others for true systems-level change.

Emerging Themes from the *Ways of Knowing Symposia*

Racial health equity and Indigenous health equity research must be undertaken for the purpose of promoting racial and Indigenous justice and in service of uplifting the knowledge, expertise, and power of people who have been oppressed and marginalized.

Principles

These principles are intended to be *aspirational* of a state we hope the field will eventually embody.

Research serves the public good and advances justice

- Research prioritizes community needs and aligns with goals for reconciliation, reparation, abolition, and systemic change
- Research is a tool for change-making and liberation that expands on community-centered knowledge, wisdom, beliefs, other ways of knowing, and lived experience (as opposed to validating/verifying lived experiences)
- Research uses a strengths-based approach to uplift abundance, joy, self-determination, and community assets and wisdom, while acknowledging historical and structural injustices that drive health inequities
- Research processes, approaches, questions, measures, and outcomes value and incorporate lived experiences, cultural and historical wisdom, and other ways of knowing equally with findings from traditional scientific methods

Research is guided by equity and justice approaches

- Being ethically accountable to the community is key to conducting rigorous research
- Rigor means research methods are selected based on their appropriateness for addressing community-prioritized questions, rather than defaulting to a Western scientific methods hierarchy
- Racial and Indigenous equity approaches guide all aspects of research, from the questions being asked to sharing results
- Mentorship and training programs prepare researchers to apply anti-racist and anti-colonial principles thoughtfully
- Decision-makers in the health sciences (funders, publishers, academic administrators) are trained in anti-racist, anti-colonial frameworks and these principles are valued in the funding, publishing, and tenure/promotion processes
- Resources are dedicated to developing new methods, theories, practices, data, and interdisciplinary approaches to advance anti-racist & anti-colonial research

Research is led by community with academic support

- Research centers community members as leaders in research efforts, with academics serving as collaborators or subcontractors
- Research funding and timelines support long-term, trust-based partnerships that prioritize sustained benefits for the community
- Institutions commit to decolonizing their systems and hierarchies to foster racial and Indigenous justice
- Collaboration is incentivized over competition in research processes
- Other avenues for doing anti-racist and anti-colonial health research exist outside of academia (e.g., think tanks, research networks)

Institutions are accountable to equitable research processes

- Promotion and tenure criteria are redefined to reward mentorship, research quality, community impact, and relationship-building over publication quantity
- Equitable compensation, community input in funding decisions, and transparent evaluation processes that include input from marginalized voices are required and valued for research grants, publications, and academic tenure/promotions
- Research funding is equitable and community-driven, prioritizing long-term relationship-building and sufficient indirect costs
- Community capacity-building grants are treated as equally important to traditional research grants
- Competencies for addressing racial and Indigenous equity are tied to funding and accreditation requirements, and incorporated into research curricula at all levels, including continuing education for professionals

- Training in racial and Indigenous equity research methods is accessible to all and equips scholars with a broad range of research designs and approaches to choose from
- Academia is a welcoming and supportive environment for marginalized researchers

Action is the center of research

- Research findings are shared in ways that directly influence policy, practice, education, and public opinion
- Research dissemination prioritizes formats that are relevant and useful to impacted communities (e.g., storytelling, films, reports)
- Publications are co-authored by those who directly experience the issues being studied and are freely accessible to all (not hidden behind fees or paywalls)
- Data ownership and sovereignty are respected during the research process (from data collection to storage to dissemination) and remain with communities