

OPINION

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Donors of Color Are Not 'New' or 'Emerging.' We've Been Giving All Along.

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KEVIN MAZUR, GETTY IMAGES FOR ROBIN HOOD

Oprah Winfrey is among the self-made millionaires who have given big sums to charity.

centuries of generosity. It's a key moment to explain why it's time to refocus our thinking and remember that people of color have been giving for centuries; it's just that many nonprofits have ignored this group for too long.

America's anticipated transition to a majority-minority country over the next three decades means that such neglect cannot continue.

In recent years, it has become commonplace to refer to donors of color as "new and emerging." The phrase appears regularly in the headlines of newspapers and magazines that cover philanthropy, as well as in academic publications, conference programs, and webinar promotions. It suggests that a shift has occurred, or is occurring, in the philanthropy landscape, as if people not previously seen are suddenly appearing.

August is Black Philanthropy Month, a seven-year-old movement to recognize and celebrate

Something else is also at play that makes use of the label "new and emerging" harmful, because the term threatens all genuine efforts to engage and connect with a rapidly changing society. The label obscures the very thing it purports to recognize.

The label may rightly apply to any person of color whose recent giving gets media attention in a world dominated by familiar names like Gates, Buffett, and Zuckerberg. In this context, the term is not a problem. An individual may, indeed, have splashed onto the philanthropic scene, seemingly out of the shadows. That person's wealth and position may suggest the potential for more giving down the road; so, in fact, a new donor may have emerged.

The problem comes when entire racial and ethnic groups are categorized as "new and emerging," a designation that seems increasingly common.

Long Tradition of Giving

First, the label denies history. People of color have deeply rooted traditions of giving that are centuries old.

For instance, African-American philanthropy spans the period from slavery to the present, but originated in precolonial West Africa. This history includes many informal ways of giving and sharing as a matter of daily living, as well as formal volunteering, donating, advocating, and other activities, especially through the black church.

The contributions also consist of generous monetary gifts by people like Thomy LaFon (1810-1893), Colonel John McKee (1821-1902), Madam C. J. Walker (1867-1919), Annie Malone (1869-1957), Kenneth and Kathryn Chenault, and Oprah Winfrey, to name a few major donors over the past 200 years. So, to label African-Americans as a "new and emerging" donor group is simply wrong historically.

Second, the term perpetuates a limited definition of and harmful misconceptions about what philanthropy is and who counts as a philanthropist.

A definition of philanthropy focused only on wealth creates an excessive preoccupation with the social and economic elite and the number of zeros attached to their announced gifts. Such a view also reinforces prevailing myths that people of color are primarily recipients of philanthropy but not agents of it, especially within the context of the very real racial-wealth gap.

Together, these constraints blind us to the vibrancy of philanthropy among people of color, until donors of color publicly announce gifts that fit the familiar mold. Then, we label these donors "new and emerging" because they are defying the myths and finally coming into our limited field

of vision — we can now see them, though they have been present and active all the while.

Third, the term misses the robust landscape of philanthropy among people of color today.

In African-American philanthropy, the black church is still the community's primary institution teaching and practicing philanthropic values every day. A large portion of black giving is directed to the church, which then distributes it to causes locally and around the world. But that's the beginning of the story, not the end. Significant systems of giving have been built around and atop the church's foundation that extend the longstanding generosity of black people in many ways.

Informal and communal ways of giving still occur among families, friends, and neighbors, as well as through organizations such as fraternities, sororities, and women's clubs. African-Americans with high net worth are using family foundations, donor-advised funds, and community-foundation funds to advance philanthropic agendas locally and nationally.

Variety of Models

In recent decades, giving circles, the latest version of the generations-old habit of pooling and sharing resources to meet personal and social needs, have become a particular area of focus. Groups like Black Benefactors in Washington, D.C., Sisterhood of Philanthropists Impacting Needs in Denver, and the Community Investment Network in North Carolina engage black donors at all income levels and ages to support their communities.

What's more, organizations like UNCF and the Thurgood Marshall Fund have long existed to develop donors who support black advancement, and other organizations attract black donors to support an even wider range of causes

The Young, Black and Giving Back Institute in Washington, D.C., is engaging young, highly educated professionals of color, a group it says has been ignored as the nonprofit world focuses on how best to cater to millennials. Regional Blacks in Philanthropy groups, along with others such as the Association of Black Foundation Executives and the African American Development Officers Network, have long brought together grant-making and fundraising leaders of color to advocate for social justice, equity in funding, and diversity in the grant-making and fundraising professions.

Walker's Legacy, a 20,000-member national network of women business and civic leaders of color, is just one group among many that indicate the energy focused today on encouraging African-Americans to build social enterprises. These efforts are the latest incarnation of the vital historical role that black entrepreneurs have played since the days of slavery. Similar examples can be found among Hispanic, Asian, and Native-American communities.

How can all of this be "new and emerging?"

Shift of Perspective

It is time to right our vision and our language. When we label donors of color "new and emerging," we violate a cardinal principle in philanthropy and fundraising: donor-centrism. We demonstrate that we are not approaching donors of color from their perspective — a donor perspective — but from our own organizational perspectives and a sense of what the donors can do for us. We view them with preconceived and ill-fitting glasses that obscure the truth of their generosity, the historical depths of their practices, and their own uniqueness as individuals connected to cultural giving traditions.

Such spectacles frame a utilitarian view of donors of color in which they become a new frontier of "untapped markets" and "low-hanging fruit" — other unfortunate but common language in our field — that our fundraising apparatus must tap and pluck. We pride ourselves on making a Columbus-like discovery of what was known among the so-called discovered for generations.

Donors of color may, indeed, be "new and emerging" in any given organization. But that says more about the organization than the donors. It says the organization has little history of meaningfully and consistently engaging these donors on their own terms — a difficult admission to make, but a step in the right direction.

The nonprofit world's adoption of "one size fits all" approaches to philanthropy and fundraising has tended to overlook the specific motivations, interests, and needs of donors of color. The unfortunate result is misalignment in our identification, cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship strategies, which fail to effectively engage this important group.

But donors of color are not waiting for us to get our act together. They have continued to do what they have long done in their own communities and organizations: They give anyway. To change our habits, we must move beyond thinking mostly in terms of what our organizations stand to gain by engaging them. Donors of color, and the traditions and histories out of which they come, deserve our respect and understanding, period.

So, rather than donors of color, maybe it's the interest and attention we are suddenly showing them that is the real "new and emerging" phenomenon. Until nonprofits recognize and correct this major discrepancy, we will continue to inappropriately engage them on our philanthropic terms, not theirs.

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