**Open Society Fellowship Program**

**Portfolio Review Outcomes Summary**

**June 19, 2014**

**In person participants:** Chris Stone (moderator), Leonard Benardo (lead staff), Jonathan Cohen (respondent), Ken Hurwitz (discussant), Adam Culbreath (discussant), Laura Silber (discussant), Thomas Kellogg (discussant), Stephen Hubbell (program staff), Bipasha Ray (program staff), Christine Seisun (program staff), Adam Radwan (program staff/rapporteur), Dan Sershen (observer), Daphne Panayotatos (observer)

**Phone participant:** Isabel Hilton (program advisory board member)

**Video conference participant:** Akwasi Aidoo (program advisory board member)

Leonard Benardo introduced the discussion by noting that this review was the first opportunity in the program’s history to comprehensively examine how it has choreographed dissonance within OSF through its selection of fellows. He explained that the term “choreography”connotes the set of activities throughout the entire process of orchestrating dissonance, including: outreach efforts; input from colleagues during the review and selection cycle; and engagement with the fellow’s research project.

Dissonance, he added, is not simply meant to be equated with contrarianism, diversity, bipartisanship, or ideas corrosive to open society values. Rather, it represents a collection of clashing ideas that lack a resolution. The goal of this review was to explore the difficulties in ritualizing the practice of dissonance within OSF.

Jonathan Cohen of the Public Health Program (PHP), the lead respondent, praised the Fellowship Program for its constructive collaboration with his program, and highlighted two fellows in particular who introduced healthy counter-narratives to conventional wisdom within PHP. Mark Schoofs, whose research focused on the social, political and economic drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and Russia, brought a more nuanced understanding of the role of policing in the spread of the disease in Russia. Gregg Gonsalves, whose project sought to apply the lessons learned from the HIV/AIDs mass mobilization to other global health crises, brought a refined and insider’s view of social movements and how to support them. In reflecting on the Portfolio Review topic, Cohen noted that using fellowships as the tool to inculcate internal dissonance is an unusual choice since those grants are generally designed to benefit the recipient. This modality could in fact cause tension between OSF and the fellow and may also challenge the Fellowship Program’s primary goal to support exceptional scholarship and research. To further explore this tension, he posed several questions:

* Can the Fellowship Program benefit grantees and their work while also benefiting the culture of dissonance within OSF?
* What happens when grantees lack an understanding of strategic philanthropy, or if they hold back criticism of OSF in order to ingratiate themselves? Additionally, do Fellowship board members know OSF well enough to select applicants based on this internal balancing act focused on productive dissonance?

**Diversity vs. Dissonance**

Before the open discussion, Chris Stone requested clarification on questions of diversity among selected fellows. He asked when the Program developed the tripartite breakdown of fellows (referring to the three categories noted in the Portfolio Review Appendix 1 – contrarians, connectors and surveyors), and also noted that the majority of contrarian fellows were men from either the US or Western Europe.[[1]](#footnote-1) Program staff explained that the notion of three kinds of fellows had been conceived in the earliest Fellowship strategy documents but were explicitly named only during this portfolio review process. Fellowship staff acknowledged the imbalance in geographical spread and gender, and pointed to the Program’s concerted outreach in the global south as a means to encourage more geographical diversity. Additionally, OSF’s operational language of English can be a potential barrier for non-English speaking applicants since fellows are required to speak English in order to engage with OSF. Board member Akwasi Aidoo, who is also the Board Chair at the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) affirmed that the current global spread of fellows has dramatically improved, as the Program now has a critical mass of African fellows, a growing and largely positive reputation across the African continent and increased collaboration with the African foundations. Fellowship staff also noted that one of the major challenges the Program faces in recruiting applicants from very different worlds outside of the traditional OSF realm of civil society and NGOs, is the issue of common parlance – In order to effectively achieve constructive dissonance, all fellows have to be able to communicate their work in a way that resonates with OSF’s thinking and identifies potential areas for engagement.

**Impact and Challenges**

Stone led into this section of the discussion wondering whether Cohen’s point about focusing on the benefit to the fellow merited further inquiry or if, by virtue of being selected, the benefit is obvious. He noted that in the review document, the Program traces dissonance up until the point where fellows may “say something dissonant,” but doesn’t delve into what has changed within OSF as a result of the dissonance. To that end, he was eager to hear examples of fellows who had the biggest effect on OSF. Additionally, he wondered whether contrarian fellows may have, in fact, reinforced orthodoxy within OSF rather than challenge it.

A number of discussants responded with examples of how contrarian fellows drew out forms of dissonance and productive friction within their respective programs. Ken Hurwitz spoke of a conversation that OSJI’s anti-corruption initiative had with fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown about the arrests of drug kingpins in Mexico and her prediction that the level of violence and disruption would escalate in the resulting power vacuum. While Hurwitz’s initiative is primarily focused on trying to hold perpetrators of grand corruption to account and bringing them to trial, Felbab-Brown’s perspective took a different approach of accepting some levels of corruption as reality and forced them to think about what kinds of corruption are more unacceptable than others. Adam Culbreath, of the Soros Justice Fellowship program, brought up the different perspectives showcased by one of his former fellows Michelle Alexander, and Open Society Fellow James Forman Jr., on race and mass incarceration as prototypical of the kind of dissonance from which US Programs has benefitted. Laura Silber reflected on how fellow Evgeny Morozov’s critiques of the role of social media and the internet in sparking and sustaining political dissent and activism informed the Communication department’s internal thinking on the role of technology in social mobilization and activism. Thomas Kellogg, of the China program, used the example of Howard French whose reportage on Chinese migration to Africa disrupted accepted viewpoints within our staff and partners in Africa, and ultimately stimulated a series of rich conversations between his program and the African foundations. Lastly, Cohen noted that PHP’s programming on police reform within the harm reduction context increased in size and sophistication as result of its interactions with Mark Schoofs.

Program staff noted that one of the ways of conceptualizing a successful fellowship is in terms of a fellow’s engagement with OSF. While the level of engagement may be hard to predict before a fellow is selected, the Program emphasized two variables affecting success in choreographing dissonance: the personalized nature of the interactions between Fellowship program staff and individual fellows, and the willingness of programs to interact with new, sometimes challenging, ideas. Fellowship staff acknowledged that contributing contrarian viewpoints into the organization’s framework can become a delicate balancing act, especially since the Program sees the OSF network as its primary Field; without buy-in from colleagues, the Program would not be able to operate. Culbreath circled back to the example of James Forman Jr. to underscore how staff tensions were mitigated as his fellowship project evolved and broadened its focus.

One aspect of the discussion revolved around tracking finalists who were not selected as fellows to see whether they carried out their dissonant work through other means. While the Program does not track finalists in a systematic fashion, some finalists do end up working with OSF in other capacities as consultants, employees, or board members.

Aidoo returned to the tension that Cohen had alluded to earlier, between the general individual grantmaking goal of supporting exceptional work and the specific fellowship goal of strengthening OSF through challenging its orthodoxies. He suggested reframing the discussion by adding another beneficiary to the equation: the larger social context that the fellow is working to change.

**Moving Forward**

Ultimately, the Portfolio Review conversation provoked the Program to think about further innovative avenues for choreographing dissonance within the OSF network. For example, rather than viewing OSF simply as the forum for contrarian viewpoints, perhaps OSF itself and/or strategic philanthropy could be the subject matter of a project? Can individual grantmaking play a unique role in incorporating dissonant voices throughout OSF? Moving forward, the Program aims to expand OSF’s culture of dissonance by recruiting applicants from non-traditional backgrounds and by organizing events between staff and fellows for broader internal discussion and debate. The Program recognizes that in an organization like OSF, with its rich diversity of voices and perspectives, it may be impossible to really know if and when an ideal level of dissonance has been achieved, or whether such a dissonance ‘saturation point’ is even possible. Because the OSF network embodies a wealth of talent, background, and expertise, there will ostensibly always be apertures for productive friction and interaction.

1. The current gender breakdown of contrarian fellows is 2/3 men and 1/3 women. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)