

Strengthening engagement with philanthropic foundations

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The authors suggest using a distinct way to advance our theoretical understanding of philanthropic institutions known as ‘foundations’. They suggest using spectrality – a lens that enables an exploration of important social, ethical and political questions of influence and nuance, historical reasonings, people, practices and perspectives that may not be blatantly obvious, clearly stated or even rooted in the present but influence how foundations are set up, their impact, operations and how they are perceived.

They propose and critically explore spectrality as a strategic platform from which stronger theorizing on philanthropic foundations as a distinct institutional form can proceed.

The authors suggest four key themes in spectrality to approach and/or understand foundations for theory development and practical understanding. These are (i) relationality and decentring, (ii) narratives and representations, (iii) ethics and politics (iv) continuity and change. Researchers, academics, critics, philanthropy practitioners and whoever else is interested can use this framework to understand, critique, explore and engage with foundations in a better, more nuanced, more inclusive manner, attuned to issues of ethics, politics and justice.

[#Philanthropy](#) [#Foundations](#) [#Engagement](#) [#Ethics](#)

Background

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Context



- **Spectrality is the idea that cultural or social elements can return from the past to influence the present day.** Historically, researchers and social scientists tended not to rely on spectrality or consider it a solid basis for scientific inquiry. In the last few years, however, we have seen a turn towards the concept in scholarly work
- **Spectrality allows us to explore and theorize important social, ethical and political questions.** It helps us understand what is there and everything that is not there but still may influence what is present and obvious. **Philanthropy and foundations are both rooted in spectrality.** This is precisely why it is a great framework to apply when trying to understand philanthropic foundations
- Across geographies, religions and cultures, foundations have maintained core spectral characteristics in their social and historical origins, current legal set up and operations. Of note are the ideas of **manus mortis** (**‘dead hand’ of donors**), **the influence a donor can or should exert from beyond the grave**; the relationship between donors (those absent) and fund recipients (those present); the challenges of respecting the intentions of past donors and founders and they conflict with present-day needs/wants; the perception of the need to remain dedicated to the original vision for the foundation

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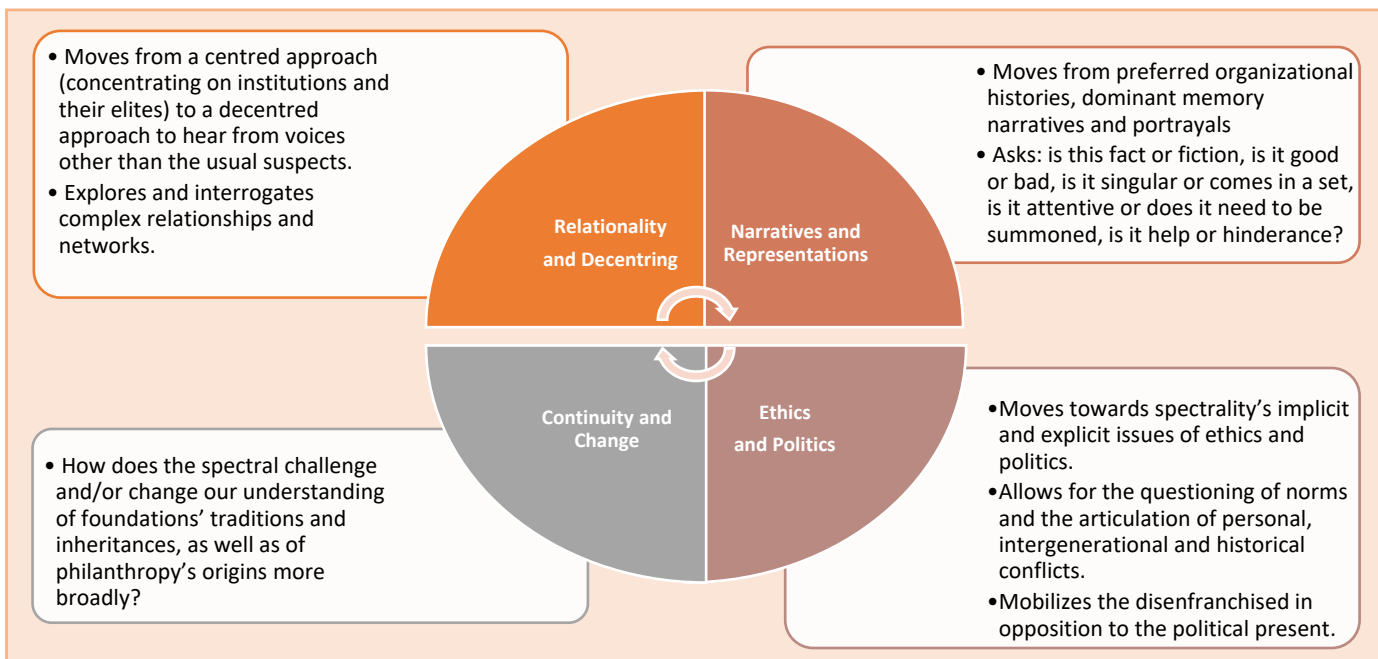
Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The last couple of years have seen growing criticism of foundations and their impact. The authors suggest that perhaps such criticism arises from a **misunderstanding of what foundations historically are or from assumptions the general public may have** thinking of foundations as mere vehicles for using private resources for the public good
- The authors synthesize a comprehensive review of literature across disciplines to arrive at **four themes in spectrality** that they suggest be used when examining foundations: (i) relationality and decentring, (ii) narratives and representations, (iii) ethics and politics, and (iv) continuity and change.
- Implications: Applying these themes shows that there is much more to foundations than meets the eye. It enables a **more inclusive approach** by listening to the voices of networks and beneficiaries rather than just founders, board members or staff. It also **aligns the study of foundations with the scientific inquiry** being made in other disciplines.
- It centers **power, ethics, politics and justice issues when studying foundations**. It enables a **more fulsome study** of foundations beyond simple characterizations (private foundations vs public etc.) and reported impact. One that goes beyond just relying on official accounts, websites, or reports to dig deeper into the legacy of a foundation's origins, and its present and future.

Image: Four interconnected themes on spectrality and how they facilitate theorizing on Foundations



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