

The Ethics of Spiritual Metrics: Some potential principles and guidelines

A longer version of this paper was first written by David Bronkema, and will be available soon. This brief contains the key points from that paper, and some reflections from the **KIF Spiritual Impact Learning Community** discussions. It is intended to encourage dialogue on the issue, and continued learning.

Introduction

This short paper explores some potential principles and guidelines for the ethics of measuring the spiritual impact of one's projects, programs, or activities. It is guided by two main ethical questions that keep popping up in any conversation on the topic:

1. Is it really ethical to measure other people's spiritual progress and maturity?
2. If so, how should we do so in a way that nurtures the kingdom of heaven rather than hinders it?

The Ethics of Measuring Other People's Spiritual Progress and Maturity

1. The concept and practice of evaluating the spiritual state, progress, and maturity of both individuals and groups is present in Scripture:
 - Jesus himself instructed his followers to apply the standard of fruits in discerning false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20);
 - Paul urges the Corinthians to examine and test themselves "to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5); and
 - Scripture in many other places talks about spiritual growth and maturity (Galatians 5:22; 2 Peter 3:18; Colossians 2: 6-7).
2. Four principles emerge from an examination of Scriptural examples:
 - Firstly, there seem to be different 'purposes' to spiritual metrics in the Bible - some is for testimony/encouragement (e.g. Acts 2), some is for assessing leadership, while others are for accountability and spiritual growth.
 - When applied to evaluate and encourage spiritual growth, the use of spiritual metrics is carried out inside the community of Christians, among people who know each other well, and to whom they are accountable.

- Context is often given. For example there are many contextual differences in the narrative of the feeding of the 4000 (Matthew 15; Mark 8) versus the feeding of the 5000 (Matt 14; Mark 6; Luke 9; John 6), such as geography, responsiveness, 'inputs', and 'outputs'.
- The underpinning driver and motivator to all of this is love: a love for each individual and the corporate community that wants the best for them and their relationship with Christ.

3. The conclusion, therefore, is that spiritual metrics guided by these three principles is not only ethical but quite possibly even mandated by our faith.

Corresponding Ethical Guidelines for How To Engage in Spiritual Metrics

1. Ensure that our motivations for engaging in spiritual metrics are properly prioritized. Many times, our spiritual impact evaluation might be driven by wanting to "prove" to donors that the program has a spiritual impact. We should rather seek to improve programs and/or use spiritual metrics to encourage people to grow closer to God through reflections on the questions asked.
2. Design spiritual impact evaluation in such a way that the process itself encourages spiritual growth. This means going beyond the "do no harm" principle of ethical research that includes informed consent, into a paradigm of encouraging spiritual well-being through the research itself. For example, asking questions in such a way that respondents reflect on their own spiritual practices.
3. Consider capturing structural determinants and 'spiritual capital' (e.g. access to the gospel / discipleship) as important context.
4. Give special consideration to including "process metrics" that capture how people felt they were treated in the process of measuring spiritual impact.
5. Ensure that the process of spiritual impact evaluation is engaged in a culturally relevant way that takes into account power dynamics, theological perspectives, and contextualization.
6. Give special consideration to including representatives of the participants as co-leaders in the planning and implementation of the programs seeking to increase spiritual growth, their assessment, and authority over the use of the results. The planning for spiritual impact is as important as, if not more, than the spiritual metrics themselves, and providing authority over the use of the results respects the principle that the individuals and community should be the prime locus of it all.
7. Make prayerful and deliberate exceptions to the 6th guideline when working in situations that call for it. In working with people who are "far from God," in a 1 Corinthians 9:22 situation for example, the 6th guideline may not be appropriate. A prayerful approach is called for to discern the extent to which that is the case.