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# RACE matters

HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACE



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## SHAPING THE MESSAGE: HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACE<sup>1</sup>

### Why Should I Use This Tool?

Productive conversations about race are difficult to have. This is particularly true for a focus on embedded racial inequities.<sup>2</sup> Based in communications research, this tool makes such conversations more likely to achieve results everyone can embrace.

### What Will It Accomplish?

It will help you:

- Frame conversations about embedded racial inequities in ways that keep others engaged and on point.
- Get through predictably sensitive moments that typically arise when people talk about race.
- Think about communications strategies for advocacy work.

### How Is It Used?

1. **Before you have conversations:** If you'd like an overview of the kinds of issues that typically arise in conversations about race – and advice about how to handle them – read the tool ahead of time to prepare yourself for promoting effective discussion.
2. **After you have had conversations:** If a particular issue leaves a conversation “stuck” or participants uneasy, review the questions and advice below to troubleshoot how to move forward.
3. **For advocacy messages:** See especially Q1, Q3, and Q4 below.

The other tools in this Toolkit are ANALYTIC tools. That is, they help you identify embedded racial inequities and suggest the kinds of changes that may be needed to reduce them. This is a COMMUNICATION tool. It helps you talk about embedded racial inequities in a way that has a good chance of keeping people engaged. One key point to keep in mind is that analytic tools **always** put race up front in order to produce a clear understanding of an issue and corresponding change strategies. Communication strategies on the same issue **may or may not** put race up front in a message. This is a decision based on the most effective ways to influence others in a particular political context. The ability to create change requires both good analysis and good communication.

Probably everyone has been in an unsatisfying conversation about race. This is certainly true if you have tried to focus on the systemic changes required to reduce embedded racial inequities. Research by Frameworks Institute shows that the way most people think about race is to focus on individuals rather than systems or structures. In particular, the **dominant model of thinking** about “race” in the U.S. has the following inter-related elements:

- The U.S. has made considerable progress around race, and, if government now favors anyone, it is African Americans (and people of color more generally).
- Individuals are “self-making.” That is, what they accomplish is entirely a matter of their own will and desire.
- To the extent that racial inequality exists, then, it is a by-product of the inability/unwillingness of individuals to properly adhere to basic American values like hard-work and personal responsibility.

Yet data and analysis give us quite a different understanding that calls this dominant model of thinking about race into question. Disparities are widespread, and they are produced to a great degree by policies, programs, and practices. This doesn't negate the need for individual effort. But the existence of racial inequities embedded in policies, programs, and practices means that significant barriers exist to achieving the same outcomes across racial groups, even with the same level of effort.

So how do we talk about embedded racial inequities in light of the dominant model of thinking about race? Here are the usual questions that come up as a result of conversations on race. We provide some new answers based on Frameworks' extensive analysis of conversations in focus groups.

### Q1: How can I get people to talk about race when they always want to change the subject?

A: People are more willing to talk about issues when conversations:

- Stress values that unite rather than divide (e.g., “opportunity,” “community” instead of “to each his/her own”)
- Bundle solutions with any problem description, in order to avoid “compassion fatigue” and helplessness
- Focus on situations that anyone might find themselves in (e.g., loss of a job)
- Use images that offer a shorthand for complex issues (e.g., competing in a race but having to begin it from **behind** the starting line as an image suggesting unequal opportunity and ongoing disadvantage)

They are also more likely to turn off conversations that:

- Criticize people instead of policies, practices, and proposals (e.g., It's better to focus on Policy X rather than Senator Y)
- Use too many numbers without a storyline for understanding them (e.g., It's better to focus on the harm to children from under-resourced schools rather than a stand-alone litany of numbers reflecting inequitable resources.)
- Use a rhetorical rather than practical tone (e.g., up-front accusations of racist intent make people defensive and unwilling to reason with you)

### Q2: Race is always so sensitive to talk about. How can I keep a conversation focused and productive?

A: Our recommendation is to keep the conversation focused on the **results** people want to achieve (e.g., all children graduate from high school) rather than **who's to blame** for present inequities. Of course, figuring out how to get the desired results will require a focus on **what's to blame**; that discussion can be directed to policies, programs, and practices that need to be changed. We recognize and respect that some in their work against racism give priority to racial reconciliation, whose processes require personalizing the issues.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, our approach stresses opening the conversation around shared goals and values as a way to begin the process of reconciliation. Our approach prioritizes the reduction of racial inequities. In turn, we believe such results have the potential to build the sort of trust that can contribute to the deeper personal process of racial reconciliation.

### Q3: When people do talk about race, and they use the dominant model of thinking, how can I get them to focus on policies, programs, and practices as sources of racial disparities?

A: Don't try to persuade people that their beliefs are wrong. Instead, find a value focus that is equally dear and compelling to them. The one value that research shows as promising is “opportunity.” Framing issues in terms of opportunity for all:

- Generally avoids debate about the value itself. Who can be against giving people an opportunity?
- Resonates with the deeply held ideal of America as the land of opportunity.
- Is better than framing issues in terms of “fairness.” With the fairness frame, focus groups have gotten into detailed debates about what “fair” means and who is deserving (and who isn't).
- Almost by definition focuses on policies, programs, and practices because these are the places opportunities are lodged.
- Avoids an either-or debate about whether personal responsibility or systems are to blame, since opportunity goes hand in hand with personal responsibility. Since this debate is off the table, the focus can be on barriers to opportunity, and the evidence can highlight how similarly situated individuals encounter very different circumstances in terms of opportunities. (E.g., white children with college-eligible academic performance enter college at higher rates than African American and Latino children with college-eligible academic performance.)

### Q4: Data make a strong case about embedded racial inequities, but some people still don't get it. Why?

A: Research shows that “narrative trumps numbers.” That is, if people see numbers that don't fit the model they use in thinking about race, they'll reject the numbers. For example, suppose you present statistics about disparities in juvenile detention that show that **even when youth of different racial groups behave the same way**, African American, Latino, and Native American youth are disproportionately detained compared to their white counterparts. People wed to the dominant model of the self-making person will still attribute the explanation for those numbers to some unspecified fault of the youth of color themselves. Their dominant narrative trumped your well-researched numbers. Your goal is to provide an alternative model they will embrace as a **prelude** to providing numbers. Your model must contain a value that trumps the dominant model (i.e., people embrace it) and must present that value first before presenting the data so that they can “hear” the data with a storyline that prepares them for it. For example, “All youth should have the same opportunity to pay for their mistakes. Yet that isn't what we see when we look at ....”

### Q5: Could you give me an example of how to apply all of these points?

A: See if you can catch all of the advice above in this example, and decide if you think it represents effective communication.

“Parents should have the main responsibility for raising young children and whatever training they need to do their job well. But we see some troubling statistics from our state child welfare agency. Not all parents are given the same opportunity to learn. White families are twice as likely **as other families referred for the same reason** to be given home support services to improve their parenting skills. In contrast, the African American and Latino families **referred for the same reason** are more likely to have their children removed from the home and put in foster care. We know how to remove the barriers to these troubling differences in how families are treated. When caseworkers are allowed to devote more available resources to prevention and have objective criteria for determining how to allocate those resources – criteria that understand family and community assets – these disparities decline dramatically. This approach also saves taxpayers over a million dollars a year by giving priority to helping families do a better job of raising their own children rather than expecting strangers – no matter how well-meaning — to do that job for them.”

### Q6: No matter what I do, people don't understand. Help!

A: Frameworks Institute offers a Checklist for effective communication (see pp. 33–34 of “Framing Public Issues,” [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)). If you are able to say Yes to every item on their checklist, then:

- The higher order value you used as a frame must not have succeeded against another strongly held higher order value of your audience. Try a different higher order value.
- Try another audience! No important proposal for change has ever engendered 100% support.

<sup>1</sup> In 2006 Frameworks Institute ([www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)) will produce a Toolkit with extensive guidance for communicating about the structural barriers to equal opportunity for children and families of color. The material in this tool is based on their work on race to date, the general guidance they offer about strategic communication, and our own conclusions.

<sup>2</sup> The [Race Matters PowerPoint](#) in this Toolkit gives an overview of embedded racial inequities, and the Fact Sheets go more deeply into specific areas in which they exist.

<sup>3</sup> See “Training for Racial Equity & Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs,” Aspen Institute, 2002.