



To: FrameWorks Team

Re: Race Project

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The primary purpose of this memo is to lay out the conceptual model that encapsulates our latest thinking on the race project. Our goal is to develop a model from a FW communications perspective; that is, a model that is consistent with our “levels of thinking” approach. The basic notion, of course, is that higher order values track lower order policy prescriptions. The trick is to identify and invigorate those values that set up a progressive policy agenda on race. In particular, we propose to focus on four related Level Three policy domains: crime, education, health, and community development. While this list is not exhaustive, it covers both a wide range of policy options as well as the policy interests of our core funders.

As noted in our submitted proposal, there are two prevailing views of racial disparities – one structural; the other cultural. On either account, we maintain, the analytic tools commonly employed are far too rigid to capture the fluid and dynamic state of contemporary American race relations. Moreover, the general debate on race quickly devolves into a set of dichotomous analytic categories that reveal more than they tell us (i.e. liberal v. conservative; Dem v. Rep; black v. white; etc.). What is called for, then, is a basic rethinking of how Americans understand race and the implications of this understanding for race-related public policy.

A cursory reading of recent trends substantiates the claim that the racial landscape is increasingly complex. For example, the massive influx of immigrants – primarily, but not exclusively – from Asia and Mexico has fundamentally altered not only the distribution of goods and services in American life, but has also had profound political effects. Likewise, the rapid rise of an affluent African American class begs for a more developed account of racial progress. To wit, what does it mean when the CEOs of Time Warner, Avis, and American Express as well as the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor are black?

The point is that profound changes in American society call for a reconfiguration of where Americans are on the race question. Our challenge, therefore, is to produce a more nuanced analytic framework that allows us to capture how Americans think about race in the face of current realities. Our basic charge is to identify and surface alternative frames that make it easier to promote a progressive race policy agenda. To be sure, there are any number of deeply held values that have the potential to lift up such an agenda. For instance, Americans commonly believe in such things as community, justice, tolerance, and human rights. The communications challenge is to examine whether or not these values (as well as any other contenders) invigorate reforms being pushed by progressive advocates. On the other hand, it is equally important to articulate the key frame features that work against progressive policies. One thing we have to look at is the extent to which racism is tied up with other core values. In other words, is racism a Level One value?

In what follows we delineate the central assumptions and features of our model and tease out the hypotheses that flow from these considerations.

The Model

Our primary assumption is that most people believe there is a direct, linear relationship between one's adherence to a particular set of American values and one's positive life chances. People are successful because they adopt the values of self-reliance, hard work, and merit. The failure to properly assimilate these core values, therefore, accounts for different levels of success in life (Figure 1). In short, whites are at the top of the heap because they have earned it, blacks are at the bottom because they have not. The varied success of groups in between, - Latinos, Asians, and Jews – is assigned as a function of their successful adoption of core American values.

As we indicated above, however, another school of thought says that racial disparities in life chances are heavily influenced by the extent to which the institutions of the society benefit or block the life chances of the citizenry. On this account, whites succeed because they have structural advantages (and therefore accrue “white privilege” – e.g., helping social networks; inherited wealth; social construction of merit); blacks fail because their path to upward mobility is blocked by discriminatory practices embedded in the institutions of the society (e.g., redlining; racial profiling; biased hiring practices); and other minority groups fall somewhere in the middle with Asians and Jews closer to whites, Latinos closer to blacks. This is depicted graphically in Figure 2.

We have constructed an alternative model which is a more dynamic and complex telling than the common renderings of race thinkers. In our view, mass perceptions drive a public discourse that makes some of the connections outlined in the first two models invisible, while making others clear. In particular, issues of culture and structure are revealed in myriad ways depending upon the group under consideration. In other words, there are particular conditions under which structure and culture are perceived to be determinants of life chances.

The model is constructed on eight key assertions and is graphically displayed in Figure 3. We have used dashed lines to suggest that the phenomena or relationship is publicly concealed and have used solid lines to indicate where things are revealed in public understandings.

1. White structural advantage – or white privilege – is invisible to most whites. There is by now a pretty strong body of evidence that suggests that whites do not see the structural advantages that accrue to them in the society simply as a function of group membership. The role of the “Yale men” in this year’s presidential election is just but one obvious example.
2. White culture is invisible to most whites. In other words, most whites do not see themselves as part of a white culture that is the product of structural advantage. American culture is white culture from this view.
3. Disparities among African Americans are perceived to be a direct result of the inability of the group to successfully assimilate core American values. The public understanding of African American culture as deficient has a long and sordid history in America’s public discourse. From the eugenics movement to the Bell Curve the notion of black dysfunctional is a persistent undercurrent in American life.
4. Structural disadvantage is generally invisible as an explanation of disparities for blacks; on the other hand, structural advantages (e.g., affirmative action; set-asides) are visible as an explanation of black success.
5. Transmission of American values to Latinos is perceived to be less successful than whites but more successful than blacks. There is a bit of schizophrenia when it comes to Latinos. Some Latino sub-groups are seen as appropriately absorbing American values (e.g., Cubans, 3rd and 4th generation Mexicans); others are seen as consciously rejecting American values (see the Huntington piece about Mexican immigration).
6. Structure advantage or disadvantage is relatively invisible for Latinos. True, there is advocacy around immigration issues and small business issues; and, on the other hand, there is a sense that Latinos strain public systems. The jury may still be out on this one.
7. Jewish and Asian culture is visible and perceived to be the reason that these groups have successfully absorbed American values. In other words, their cultures are perceived as positive AND distinct.
8. Structure is generally invisible as an explanation of Jewish and Asian life chances.

The Hypotheses

This line of reasoning now puts us in a position to sketch our key hypotheses:

H1: *White achievement is credited to the individual, not the group.* This explained as the internalization of core values by individual whites. As such, success must be the product of merit and hard work

H2: *White failure is credited to the individual, not the group.* Because white values and American values are perceived to be the same thing, failure can only be accounted for by the unwillingness and/or inability of deficient individual whites to properly assimilate the values.

H3: *Black failure is attributed to the group, not the individual.* The perception is that the group as a whole has failed to incorporate American values in their culture, and as a result, they are not able/unwilling to successfully compete in American life.

H4: *Black achievement is attributed to both the individual and to the system.* It is only exceptional black -- indeed those few who are perceived to have properly been inculcated with core values -- that succeed. Even still, they get a little boost from friendly government programs like affirmative action, set-asides, and other special (unfair?) programs designed to provide blacks a leg up

H5: *Latino achievement is attributed to the individual and the group.* On the one hand, people believe Latino is not only the product of individual worth -- that is, acceptance of core values -- they also believe there has been a successful transmission of values to some sub-groups.

H6: *Latino failure is attributed to the group.* On other hand, there is also a narrative out there that says Latinos not only fail to adhere to American values, but that there is an active attempt to reject American values. Huntington has made this argument about Mexican immigrants.

H7: *Jewish and Asian achievement is credited to the group.* There is widespread belief that Asians and Jews have succeeded because they have consciously and actively accepted core American tenets. A milder form of this argument is that both groups just happen to have the kind of cultural capital that is symmetrical to the values it takes to succeed in America.

H8: *Jewish and Asian failure is attributed to the individual.* Like whites, the failure to achieve by members of these groups is perceived to be a function of aberrant behavior.

We welcome comments, revisions, extensions, criticisms. As we noted above, our goal is to find the communications strategies that can move public will toward a greater understanding of the type of systemic reforms that are necessary to address disparities across several important indicators. In other words, we have to first document the dominant frame and the policy agenda that it supports. Much of this is implicit in the formulation above. We also have to, according to standard FW protocol, begin to identify some of the potential Level One reframes that will better serve a progressive policy agenda on race.

Key Considerations

The model and hypotheses provide a way for the research team to think about where the public is on issues of race and why they may hold certain perceptions. The central objective for this research effort, however, goes beyond these hypotheses to develop a conversation about race that advances a specific policy agenda.

On many social issues, communicators avoid a discussion of race so that racial stereotypes will not be triggered. In this project, however, we are investigating whether it is possible to have a compelling conversation about disparities that includes a conversation about race (rather than avoid race and only discuss class, geography, etc.). As outlined earlier in this memo, the public's assumptions about individual responsibility are likely to be a barrier to any conversation about disparities. Therefore, our research will determine whether or not is possible to make structural advantages and disadvantages more visible, and whether or not a better understanding of the structural issues will lead to public support for the policy agenda.

Finally, but most importantly, building support for the policy agenda will require more than knowledge of disparities. It will require a frame that compels the public to actively support the changes that will eliminate racial disparities. In short, it will answer the question: Why should this issue be my issue?