



FrameWorks MessageBrief: Framing Race

Research Findings, Obstacles and Challenges

Beginning in 2003, and continuing through the present, the FrameWorks Institute has been funded by a group of foundations (the JEHT Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The California Endowment, the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation) to pursue an ongoing inquiry into how Americans think and talk about race. As with all its research endeavors, FrameWorks applied multi-method, multi-disciplinary empirical research to discern the dominant race frames in public discourse and to test potential reframes capable of moving the conversation forward and improving support for solutions that would reduce inequality. Specifically, the research set out to answer the following:

- How does the public think about race in the United States?
- Are there default frames that are routinely relied upon to make sense of unfamiliar situations or policies?
- How are these frames reinforced; what frames are available to people from media and the public debate?
- How do these frames affect policy preferences?
- How can racial equity be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that makes appropriate policy choices salient and sensible?

This MessageBrief describes the research findings to date, drawing from an array of cognitive interviews, focus groups, media content analyses, talk-back testing, survey research and online experiments. The individual reports are posted at www.frameworksinstitute.org, as is a more comprehensive MessageMemo, authored by Frank Gilliam, which this briefer document largely paraphrases. It is important to note that this MessageBrief also includes new findings that have not yet been reported out and incorporated into this earlier body of work.

I. The Dominant Racial Discourse

FrameWorks' research revealed three core narrative elements that represent the dominant race frame in public discourse, or how Americans currently think and talk about race:

1. *Historical Progress and Personal Racism;*
2. *The Self Making Person; and*
3. *Separate Fates.*

1. *Historical Progress and Personal Racism*

A key starting point for public reasoning about race is the widespread belief that racial matters have improved dramatically in America in the last 50 years.

“Personally I think that America as a whole as far as race is concerned has really, really come a long way. That is my own personal belief.” (White liberal woman in Oregon)

“There might be small groups that will be alienated, but overall, I think it’s much better than what it was.” (White conservative woman in Illinois)

The improvement, many people believe, is the direct result of changes in antidiscrimination laws and policies.

“Racism of years ago was more open. You know, there was no consequence back then. If they made racial slurs or anything, there was no one to answer to. And now, there’s still a lot of racism, but it’s just hidden because of the consequences.” (Liberal Latina in California)

The upshot is that, because racist attitudes are not socially accepted and discriminatory practices have been banned, the general public is not sure what can be done to further eliminate racist attitudes or behaviors. What we are left with, then, is the notion that racism exists primarily at the level of the individual person.

Moreover, because racism exists within individuals, it has the capacity to go “both ways”, with reverse discrimination, or discrimination of whites, presumed to be just as prevalent and just as problematic as discrimination by whites. When reasoning in this way, further solutions to racial problems are considered misguided if they seek to legislate or litigate change. In other words, the powerful narrative that racism exists only in individuals crowds out any consideration of systemic solutions or policy reforms. Put simply, it is assumed that this residual racism cannot be addressed systemically and may not be addressable at all. That notion also leads directly to the second element of the dominant race frame, the Self-Making Person.

2. Self-Making Person

The Self-Making Person narrative is the notion that one's success or failure in life is individually constructed. In other words, a person's ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on those persons themselves – their character, their effort, etc. This is not surprising, given that individualism and personal responsibility are core tenets of the American belief system. And it is not at all surprising that it is a narrative frequently invoked when thinking about race:

“My dad made us work for what we wanted and then you appreciate it. I don't want to give them anything. I don't care what color they are. I could care less. If they work and earn their way, what's the difference...I'm a firm believer in unearned is unappreciated.”
(Non-college educated white man, Minneapolis).

“It's up to the individual to make your own expectations in life. You set your own goals -- yellow, orange, purple or blue, you know. I came from dirt poor. I made sure I was the valedictorian in my high school; I graduated college at 21. I got out of the ghetto. It's up to the individual. I don't think it's color, everybody's fate is in their hand.” (College-educated white woman, Newark)

For some time now, social science research has shown that whites have developed “racial resentment” toward minorities in the post-civil rights era. This resentment stems from the fact that minorities (and blacks in particular) are perceived to violate the value of individualism as represented in the Self Making Person model. Racial inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to exhibit appropriate values.

A white woman in a mixed-race focus group asserted:

“Two words. Bill Cosby. If you ever read the hot water he got himself into, but he didn't care a bit, was personal responsibility. Everybody at some point has to realize that they are responsible for themselves.”

This sentiment was echoed by a wide range of informants. For instance, a Chinese American man in Newark said,

“Maybe the hands have been out so long they just need somebody to put it there all the time.”

Or, as a Latino from Los Angeles commented,

“I think many programs have been put forth to help minorities, to help themselves basically. The thing is - you can lead the horse to water, but you can't force it to eat.”

The main story line here is that whites (and to some degree Asians and some Latinos) are perceived to reflect the Self Making Person, while minorities in general (blacks and recent Latino immigrants, more pointedly) are seen as the opposite. Importantly, when equally

compelling alternative explanations are not available for people to use in their thinking about race, unconscious beliefs about personal responsibility become extremely difficult to dislodge.

3. Separate Fates

The final piece of the dominant race narrative is the degree to which minority concerns are understood as being disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Whites and non-whites are perceived as having separate fates. Put differently, when the explanations for life chances between whites and non-whites are seen as determined by different forces (self-makingness by whites; failure of self-makingness by non-whites), the result is different paths, different lives.

The notion of separate fates has three important consequences for the public conversation about race:

- It makes it easier to characterize minorities as the “Other” and, by definition, out of the system.
- It allows people to place the concerns of minorities “over there” and not connected to themselves; and
- It makes it much harder to make the connection between minority life chances and structural factors.

White success is perceived to be the result of the Self Making Person and racial disparities are simply the by-products of the failure of minorities to hold to the core American values of effort and achievement. Seeing the world through this lens makes it extremely hard to see conditions and influences that affect whites and non-whites alike. It makes it hard to see, for example, that we are all bound by the same concerns about education, health, employment, housing and the like. It also explains why whites cannot see white privilege as a web of structural advantages that account for many racial differences in success or failure.

Negative Consequences of the Dominant Race Frame

1. People believe we have made tremendous progress on matters of race.
2. To the extent that racism persists, it is in the hearts and minds of “bad” people who unfortunately pass it on to their children.
3. Therefore, a certain level of racism is likely to remain constant over time.
4. Dramatic changes in laws and policies have, for the most part, leveled the playing field.
5. Individual responsibility, not discrimination, is the driving value in the modern era.
6. Racial inequality is a function of minorities’ (especially blacks’) failure to take on core values associated with the Self Making Person.
7. Whites and non-whites are perceived to have separate fates in life.

Reframing Recommendations

FrameWorks employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods to discover potential reframes for social problems. It is our belief that reframing propositions are just that: testable propositions that are either supported or defeated by the evidence. Those that are defeated are relegated to what we often refer to as “the graveyard of framing hypotheses.” In this research inquiry, each of the frames proposed was tested to see the extent to which they could move two kinds of indicators – attitudes about race and racial policy preferences. We begin this section by detailing several reframes that were unable to move public perceptions of racial matters, and so were relegated to...

The Graveyard of Framing Hypotheses:

1. Diversity as Strength – This narrative asserts that our society is stronger as the result of diverse perspectives and experiences; the country is becoming much more diverse and we benefit from a variety of ideas and cultures.

Why This Didn't Work: In theory, people agree with the idea that a company or organization is better off as a result of its diversity. In reality, they quickly become stuck in a discussion about hiring the individual with the best skills or talking about political correctness. From this perspective, diversity is an obstacle to overcome, not an asset. Once people reason from this position, it is difficult to get them to think at the level of systems.

2. Prevention - The Miner's Canary – This frame is built around the idea of the “canary in a coal mine,” made famous by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in their book The Miner's Canary. The basic idea is that miners use canaries as early warning detectors for high levels of toxins in the mineshaft. When the canaries get sick, it is time for the miners to come up. When applied to minorities, the analogy is that stress fractures in minority communities (e.g., drugs, disease, loss of jobs, etc.) are an early indicator of trouble for the broader society.

Why This Didn't Work: This frame evokes two very powerful and negative perceptions of minorities. The first is that they are weak and vulnerable, thus implicitly less deserving. Second, they are a threat to the broader society that must be contained and quarantined. In both instances, the explanation for disparities is located in the sub-group, so the responsibility for the solution falls to the sub-group. If the sub-group is unable to change, then it is the responsibility of the system to control the spread of negative influences.

3. White Privilege - We frequently heard concern from advocates in the field that there was little recognition of the concept of “white privilege” by the broader American public. Many advocates hypothesized that an understanding of white privilege might improve support for structural resolutions to racial inequities. We tested a standard description of this concept in our research; namely, that whites enjoy the advantages of intergenerational transmission of assets

abetted by a set of institutional arrangements and practices, exclusionary social structures, and unequal allocations of goods, services, and power.

Why This Didn't Work: The critical learning from this tested narrative is that the dominant and default belief that life chances are determined by the individual trumps the idea that certain groups may have stored “credit” that gives them an advantage. Put differently, because the model is rooted in individual “little picture” thinking, people cannot acquire a “big picture” perspective on how bias in the system accounts for racial disparities.

In sum, our research found little support for three oft deployed framing strategies – *Diversity as Strength; Prevention – The Miner’s Canary; and White Privilege*. In each instance, the dominant understanding of race overwhelmed any attempts to move thinking in the direction of supporting solutions that would address racial inequality. This, of course, was due to the fact that individual responsibility trumped diversity, prevention, and inherited privilege as explanations for racial disparities.

The communications implications are clear. Effective conversations about race:

- Cannot begin by priming the historical legacy of racism;
- Cannot lead the audience to think about the issue as being about people, as opposed to being about situations;
- Cannot focus on the triumphant individual or invigorate the notion of Self-Making Person;
- Cannot engage in a rhetorical debate about the intentionality of bias; and
- Cannot focus on problems and disparities to the exclusion of solutions.

It is important to clear the practice of these compromised strategies in order to focus on more promising framing propositions, which we put forward in the following section.

Successful Framing Propositions

Early Findings – Values Matter

1. Opportunity for All:

Across FrameWorks’ research we have found consistent support for the value of opportunity, as long as this is understood to apply to all Americans. This is especially the case when minority opportunity is connected to outcomes for non-minorities. Thus people are able to reason about racial inequality in terms of the things that prevent all people from realizing a better life.

Opportunity is, by definition, about the level of access people have to societal resources and the way the system is set up to distribute them. People are able to acknowledge that there are many places where the system falls down. Insofar as we could show systemic breakdowns that left certain populations behind, we were able to move people to think about racial inequality in a fundamentally different and more productive way. An example of Opportunity for All, as tested in our research, is as follows:

America should be the land of opportunity for every child, but the reality is that some children, particularly minority children, do not have the same opportunities for success. Frequently, minority schools have less funding and minority communities have less economic development and few good-paying jobs, resulting in little hope for a better life. To make the American Dream truly achievable for everyone, we must address these problems together.

Forwarding opportunity as the key value has two distinct advantages:

1. It takes the conversation out of the realm of racism per se and taps into the widely held American ideal of “opportunity for all”. From a framing perspective, this means that people can more clearly see the kinds of systemic barriers that constrain minority life chances, thus moving people away from ideas about the Self Making Person.
2. Discussing opportunity in the context of what is happening in non-minority communities creates a sense of linked fate or interdependence. This allows us to overcome another core element of the dominant frame; that is, the idea that what happens to minorities is in no way connected to what happens to whites.

These optimistic signs led us to construct an opportunity frame supplemented by a metaphorical model we termed "prosperity grid", expressed as follows in our research:

Economists now agree that one of the most practical investments in American life would be to plug minority communities into the network of institutions that make prosperity possible - banks, home and business ownership programs, educational institutions and so forth. Experts call this the Prosperity Grid. The white population has been better connected over the years to these institutions. Minority communities have never had the opportunity to get connected to the Prosperity Grid in the same way. Plugging minorities in would build their prosperity, create a stronger economy overall, and improve American communities.

Cautions with the opportunity frame:

The opportunity frame breaks down if people think it is only about personal networks. When they do, it runs the risk of pushing the discussion back into the dominant frame of an individual-level understanding of racial disparities (“who you know”).

The opportunity frame is impaired if it is not construed as opportunity for all. When racial cues are made explicit and occur at the top of the communication, this frame’s performance is negatively affected (see below).

2. Ingenuity/Solutions First

One of the common mistakes made by advocates in all fields is the tendency to bury solutions messages deep in their communications material, while routinely according inordinate attention to defining the problem, discussing disparities and inequities. What we know from years of communications experience is that this type of communications produces either 1) compassion fatigue, or the sense that there are just too many problems that deserve attention, or 2) an intractability interpretation, or the conclusion that the problem is so entrenched that nothing advocates promote can possibly work.

A common sub-theme is that people are unable to see practical solutions to the race question. Americans perceive there to be a lot of talk about problems related to race and little discussion of solutions. In addition, there is the sense that government is over-involved in the few solutions that are discussed and that minority residents aren't sufficiently involved in these solutions. By contrast, when people are presented with effective solutions, they are able to more clearly understand where the system breaks down and how we might fix it. Importantly, the order of this frame requires that it signal solutions before it defines the problem. An example of the Ingenuity/Solutions First frame:

In the future, Americans will continue to make significant progress in solving problems because when we work together we can accomplish anything. As Americans, we want to solve problems when we see them and we want community leaders and public officials to take responsibility for bringing our attention to problems and helping us find effective solutions. The fact is that effective solutions do exist, but too often we as a society are not putting a high enough priority on expanding the use of effective policies and programs. People did not fix problems like polio through sheer will; it took coordination, planning and programs. Progress is being made. We have solutions; it is time to make this a priority.

The Opportunity for All + Prosperity Grid, and Ingenuity/Solutions First frames showed great promise in their ability to move both racial attitudes and policy preferences. Both frames are effective because of their ability to overcome “little picture thinking” about individual responsibility, which, in turn, makes it easier for people to have a conversation about systems reform. At the same time, both frames elevate the notion of shared fate among people, thus negating the belief that minority concerns are unrelated to the concerns of the broader society.

Recent Findings – Order Matters

With the above preliminary findings in mind, we submitted these and other reframing propositions to a national experimental survey. The benefit of this method is that it allows for experimental control of variables, thus providing both the causal value of experimental methods *and* the analytic power of a large-scale national survey. We submitted these survey data to an

analysis based on two central hypotheses, gleaned from both the scholarly literature on race and informed by the earlier stages of FrameWorks research:

1. We expected to find that the more explicit the racial cue in communications, the greater the opposition to policies that address racial inequality; and
2. We expected the impact of racial cues on support for public policies would be mediated by pre-existing levels of racial resentment, to wit: those higher in racial resentment would be more susceptible to racial cues in communications, effectively increasing opposition to policies that address racial inequality.

We analyzed five narrative reframes, each identified on a scale from implicit to explicit in racial cue, against a range of policy batteries from several distinct policy domains (including welfare, immigration, affirmative action, health disparities, and social determinants of health). The tested frames are summarized in the following chart as such:

Implicit Racial Cue:

- **The Responsible Management Frame** - which asserts that it is irresponsible to allow social problems to fester, thus they must be immediately addressed
- **The Prevention Frame** - which maintains that preventing problems today will have positive outcomes for the society in the future.
- **The Ingenuity Frame** - which focuses on American pragmatism, a Can Do spirit and effective solutions to address social problems.

Mixed

- **The Opportunity Frame** - which emphasizes disparities in opportunities, future prosperity, and the interconnectedness of communities that leads to shared fate. It is important to note that this execution of the Opportunity Frame differs from that tested in the earlier survey research in that this execution evokes race at the top of the communication.

Explicit Racial Cue:

- **The Fairness Frame** - which emphasizes race discrimination and the historic and institutional advantages/disadvantages that lead to racial disparities.

Our hypotheses about the impact of the explicitness of racial cues on policy support and attitudes were supported – and further extended. In general, we found that:

- The more explicit the racial cue in communications, the greater the opposition to race based public policies. This is consistent across policy domains (i.e., welfare, immigration, affirmative action, health disparities, social determinants of health);
- The impact of racial cues on public beliefs is moderated by pre-existing levels of racial resentment;
- The more explicit the racial cue, the greater the opposition to race v. class based public policies.

We also found some interesting distinctions among subgroup attitudes:

- For whites and Asians, exposure to explicit cues hardens attitudes about immigration (such as the belief that immigration is too easy, immigration levels are too high and immigrants take away jobs from Americans).
- For Latinos, the Opportunity Frame appears to work well, while more explicit cues do not; we are left to surmise that this follows often-documented attitudes among Latinos that eschew victimization and handouts.
- For African Americans, anti-immigration attitudes are hardened by exposure to the mixed racial cues in the Opportunity Frame but leavened by exposure to the explicit racial cues in the Fairness Frame; we interpret this to mean that blacks find a certain appeal in the social justice frame of fairness but are offended by the sense that immigrants are being granted opportunity, while they may continue to be denied it.

Summary Do's and Don'ts

At this writing, we interpret these findings to suggest the following framing strategies:

DON'T lodge race, racism or racial disparities at the top of a communications.

DO invoke common values that apply to all at the top of a communications, and then explain how these values are derailed in minority communities.

DON'T focus on the triumphant individual or other mechanisms that exceptionalize

DO show people where systems that we all rely upon break down and specify how they might be fixed.

DON'T focus on problems and disparities to the exclusion of solutions.

DO invoke the deeply embedded American value of Ingenuity/Can Do spirit with respect to solving tough problems

DON'T talk about Fairness or the historical legacy of racism

DO remind people of our common belief in Opportunity for All and how failures in the system hurt everyone

DON'T engage in a rhetorical debate about the intentionality of discrimination

DO communicate in a practical tone that emphasizes shared fate and future prosperity

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