CONSTRUCTING A RACIAL EQUITY THEORY OF CHANGE

A Practical Guide for Designing Strategies to Close Chronic Racial Outcome Gaps

SEPTEMBER 2009

Keith Lawrence
Andrea A. Anderson
Gretchen Susi
Stacey Sutton
Anne C. Kubisch
Raymond Cochrington
# Table of Contents

5  Background

7  Introduction: Race, Inequity and the Challenge of Making Change

11 The RETOC: Five Steps Towards Racial Equity

13  Step # 1: What You Want
    Defining Your Desired Racial Equity Outcome (REO)

15  Step # 2: Setting Your Priorities
    Identifying the “Building Blocks” of Your Racial Equity Outcome

17  Step # 3: What Supports or Impedes Your Building Blocks?
    Identifying Public Policies, Institutional Practices and Cultural Representations

19  Step # 4: What You Must Know
    Mapping the Local Change Landscape

21  Step # 5: What You Must Do
    Assessing Your Capacity, Planning, & Gearing up for Action

25  Concluding Thoughts

27  Appendix: Pulling the RETOC Juvenile Justice Scenario Together

31  Workbook

33  Exercise # 1: Composing Your Own Racial Equity Outcome

35  Exercise # 2: Developing Building Blocks

39  Exercise # 3: Identifying Policies, Practices and Cultural Representations (PPRs)

45  Exercise # 4: Identifying Local Factors, Agents Affecting Change

53  Exercise # 5: Assessing Your Capacity for Action
Introduction
Race, Inequity and the Challenge of Making Change

As we begin the 21st century, the embeddedness of racism in our institutions and culture continue to exert great influence on how social benefits and burdens are distributed. Much has changed in the recent past, but the opportunity playing field still tilts away from many blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. The United States in 2009 is a far more just and equitable society than ever before. Its election of an African American president just two generations after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s equal rights March on Washington, signals a tremendous leap forward for racial equity. Yet social outcome patterns across many regions, cities and communities are vivid reminders that the nation still stands far from its colorblind ideal. A legacy of structural racism continues to generate racialized mass incarceration and racial disparities in poverty, economic vulnerability and education outcomes. This continuing racial incidence of disadvantage in our nation strongly calls for a community change approach firmly grounded in a structural race analysis.

A Structural Race Analysis

Structural racism is a shorthand term for the many systemic factors that produce and sustain racial inequities in America. These are aspects of U.S. history and culture that allow the privileges associated with "whiteness" and the disadvantages associated with "color" to remain deeply embedded within the institutions, systems and norms that shape our political economy, culture and residential patterns. When we look closely at each of these areas we see that race, privilege and disadvantage remain very clearly linked.

Structural racism is a very complex, dynamic system with interlinked social, political and economic components. Although each component can only be fully described in relation to others, we believe that three stand out as strategic levers for social change planners:

Public Policies: Laws that directly allocate public resources and indirectly influence the distribution of private resources in ways that have greater negative impact on communities of color (e.g., in the criminal justice domain: increased public funding for prison construction, disparities in prison penalties for powder vs. crack cocaine possession and adult sentencing of juvenile offenders).

Social and Institutional Practices: Racialized and colorblind norms, regulations and standard operating procedures of public and private institutions that actually generate racially biased outcomes (e.g., aggressive street crime and "quality of life" law enforcement in poor communities; preference for confinement over probation of troubled youth of color).

Cultural Representations: Language, images, narratives, frames and cognitive cues that form the public's conventional wisdom about race. Within the common perspective that these representations generate, white privilege and racial disparities are perceived as normal, disconnected from history and institutions and largely explainable by individual and racial group characteristics (e.g., menacing media portrayals of inner city neighborhoods and young males within them; conventional wisdom, reinforced by adaptive behaviors of those who are isolated and disadvantaged, that these groups do not value parenting, educational excellence, work, etc). Cultural representations contribute to a common sense about race that most Americans share and so can powerfully influence public policies and social and institutional practices.
Racial Equity

Racial equity is the substantive alternative to structural racism. It is a social outcomes “picture” in which race is not consistently associated with privilege and disadvantage. The goal of racial equity is to produce fairness and social justice—race would no longer be a factor in the assessment of merit, or in the distribution of opportunity.

Given our free-market system and strong bias towards individualism, wealth and class inequalities may be inevitable. But these are not necessarily consistent with racial inequalities. Indeed, as our constitutional tradition evolved to accommodate broader conceptions of civil rights, racial hierarchy was explicitly rejected as a legitimate basis for social organization. One implication of this post-civil rights order is that race ceased to be an acceptable characteristic of winners and losers. Social justice since the Civil Rights era has been built upon the expectation that our institutions and opportunity systems would generate socioeconomic strata and outcomes that were not distinguished by particular racial profiles.

However, we have not come close to this equity ideal and will not do so unless leaders adopt a problem-solving perspective that is historical, political, comparative and systemic. Leaders, at all levels, need to acknowledge the totality of social and political factors behind the outcomes experienced in communities of color. And, those outcomes need to be evaluated in relation to the experiences of neighboring white communities and regions and not in isolation.

A racial equity problem-solving perspective also recognizes that institutional interconnections often reinforce inequities and that the exercise of power and privilege greatly influences allocation of resources that all communities need to sustain themselves. So, serious change-making efforts must be race- and power-conscious whenever disadvantage and color clearly overlap. It is true that development strategies that disregard or minimize race garner public, political and philanthropic support more easily. But it is also undeniable that when race is truly the elephant in the room, interventions that underplay or ignore race and promise to “lift all boats” have rarely closed chronic racial outcomes gaps or changed underlying conditions that drive disparities.1

As a practical matter, race-consciousness must translate into more than attentiveness to diversity and cultural sensitivity. It must also mean concern about policies and practices at multiple levels that heavily determine racial winners and losers. Even further, dealing with race requires coming to grips with the cognitive, cultural and political environments that give inequitable policies and practices their public legitimacy. To be truly race conscious in the field of community change, we must make the principle of racial equity operational.

A Racial Equity Theory of Change

This booklet takes on this task of making racial equity operational by outlining a Racial Equity Theory of Change (RETOC). The RETOC is a five-step primer for tackling community problems that are marked by chronic racial inequities.

Unlike other community change toolkits, the RETOC blends two theoretical insights: firstly, the structural race analysis outlined earlier and secondly, a visioning methodology that encourages change leaders to investigate their explicit and implicit assumptions about the attributes of the community-level outcomes they seek.

The RETOC’s visioning methodology draws from a significant literature on the evaluation of community-based change initiatives (CCIs). Responding a decade ago to the CCI evaluation challenge, the Roundtable on Community Change encouraged project leaders to be more deliberate in outlining assumptions about how desired changes might actually come about. Writing for a 1995 Roundtable publication, New Approaches to Comprehensive Community Initiatives, Carol Weiss recommended a theory of change approach2 to planning and evaluation that

---

1 For example, “the achievement gap between white and minority students has not narrowed in recent years, despite the focus of the No Child Left Behind law on improving black and Hispanic scores,” according to the New York Times, April 28, 2009. This universal federal program was never designed to grapple with the core of the achievement gap problem, which is racially and economically segregated communities and schools. This segregation translates into critical differences in school and teacher quality, school readiness, neighborhood quality and influence, parental involvement and local attitudes toward educational excellence.

emphasized the importance of defining all necessary and sufficient preconditions for any desired community outcome. This has since been widely embraced across the field as a way to strengthen claims that particular program outcomes result from particular strategies and actions.

The Roundtable has since refined Weiss's theory of change approach to emphasize “backward mapping.” This involves thinking backwards from one's ultimate goal, carefully considering what needs to be in place to make each iterative step toward that goal possible. Working backwards in this way produces a logically consistent explanation of where one needs to start and what one needs to accomplish in order to achieve a desired outcome.

Backward mapping generates a clear picture of what change makers assume to be the critical factors that will lead to the changes they want. Social outcomes have complex causes. So a backwards map for any particular goal will inevitably reflect its designer's beliefs about what factors are most relevant in that particular context.

The RETOC is a backwards mapping model that reflects particular concern about the influence of structural racism on community level outcomes in contexts such as education, juvenile justice, employment and affordable housing. The RETOC assumes that racial outcome gaps cannot be eliminated unless one carefully identifies relevant structural factors and their sources and then intentionally targets for change those mechanisms and systems responsible for maintaining specific inequities.

**Purpose of this Book**

This book outlining the RETOC is intended to help those who want to take deliberate steps toward ending persistent racial outcome disparities in their particular context.

However, the RETOC is presented with a few important caveats. First, its methodology gives priority to the ways institutional and systemic forces contribute to negative community outcomes and racial inequities. Accordingly, the targets for intervention that emerge from the RETOC application are more likely to be institutional, systemic and cultural, than individual and/or family oriented. Individuals obviously bear significant responsibility for their own fates and the RETOC does not discount the importance of personal choices and behaviors. But it deliberately draws more attention to the responsibilities of institutions and systems that allocate opportunity and to our collective responsibility for holding these institutions and systems accountable.

Secondly, the RETOC points to what must be changed and offers a sense of the capacities needed to do so. But it does not automatically convey how any particular policy change in a region or area might be effected, institutional practice reformed, cultural representation altered, or political backlash prevented. Circumstances differ from place to place, so such tactics must be tailored by stakeholders intimately familiar with their particular civic, institutional, leadership and racial contexts.

Finally, the RETOC will likely uncover many potential areas for intervention, making it unlikely that any single organization could make a huge difference acting on its own. Much of what would need to be done would likely be beyond the capacities of a lone actor. Thus before change leaders embark on a course of action, the RETOC encourages them to conduct realistic appraisals of their individual, organizational and other capacities and to be prepared to enlist other stakeholders with the resources and capacities that they lack.

This book is organized as a five-step backward map that points the way towards concrete steps for making change. It is formatted to serve as an informational workbook suitable for a broad audience. For each step in the process, there is a corresponding Exercise in the accompanying Workbook. These Exercises are designed to help users tailor the RETOC principles to their specific initiatives.
EXERCISE #1

Use the guiding questions below to compose your own Racial Equity Outcome (REO). (See pages 13-14)

Is there a specific area of racial disparity you'd like to eliminate?

At what scale will you seek change? Institutions or organizations? Community? County? State? Region?

What will "racial equity" look like in your outcome area? Are your racial goals measurable?

When do you expect to see results? What is the timeframe? Two years? Ten years?
EXERCISE #2

2a) As an exercise, develop an initial list of five or more building blocks for your REO (try to come up only with those you believe are necessary and sufficient). (See pages 15-16).

2b) Narrow your list down to a number that you think might be reasonably within your reach as an individual or organization.

Again, in the juvenile justice example the REO is:

"To eliminate racial disparities in juvenile sentencing in my city/county/region within two years."

Assuming, for example, that you decide on three "reachable" building blocks, they might be:

- Similar arrest rates for white, black and brown youth in the same community or region for any given offence
- A wider menu of positive recreational options for local youth
- Alternative sentencing options for local judges: options that are more proportionate to the crimes committed and that take the devastating community impacts of mass incarceration into account.
EXERCISE #2 (contd.)

2c) Use the template on the following page to write down your Racial Equity Outcome and your three reachable building blocks.

Racial Equity Outcome (from page 33)

Building Block

Building Block

Building Block

Identify the other building blocks that are important but not directly in your control:

•

•

•

•
EXERCISE #3

3a) Identify the policies, practices and cultural representations that will determine whether each building block in your map is reached. (See pages 17-18)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Equity Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Block #1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Policies</th>
<th>Social &amp; Institutional Practices</th>
<th>Cultural Representations/ Stereotypes/Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #3 (contd.)

Racial Equity Outcome

Building Block #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Policies</th>
<th>Social &amp; Institutional Practices</th>
<th>Cultural Representations/ Stereotypes/Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #3 (contd.)

Racial Equity Outcome

Building Block #3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Policies</th>
<th>Social &amp; Institutional Practices</th>
<th>Cultural Representations/ Stereotypes/Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #4

Considering the PPRs you want to target for either change or support, you should, at a minimum, answer the following question:

4a) Which individuals or institutions have the power relevant to the PPRs in your community, city, county, or state? Which ones are likely to be allies or obstacles with regard to your interests?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Those with the Most Power to Effect Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential Allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Obstacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #4 (Contd.)

If you need to explore this landscape more thoroughly, here are four additional sets of questions you might ask:

4b) **What are the key decision-making bodies relevant to your issue at the state, local, regional, or federal levels?**
   - Who sits on these bodies?
   - What are their mandates, timetables and activities?
   - What mechanisms exist for public access and holding them accountable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Decision-Making Body</th>
<th>Who Has Influence &amp; Control</th>
<th>Mandates, Timetables, Activities</th>
<th>Mechanisms Available for Public Access &amp; Accountability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #4 (Contd.)

4c) What is the legislative or institutional history relating to the policy or practice under consideration?

- Are there important changes or developments in the legislative, regulatory, or administrative “pipeline” with respect to this issue?
- Who are the main promoters or opponents of those changes or developments?
- Has this been a contested area historically? If so, why?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particular Legislative or Institutional History?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important Changes or Developments?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Promoters or Opponents?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historically Contested Area?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE #4 (Contd.)

4d) Are there complicated budgetary or technical aspects to the issue that require specialized knowledge?
   - If so, who provides that analysis?
   - Is this information publicly available? If so, where?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budgetary or Technical Aspects?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who Provides Analysis?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Provides Analysis?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicly Available? If Not,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Access?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4e) Which organizations in your community or region traditionally take leadership in this particular issue-area?
   - How do they exercise leadership?
   - What is their stake in the issue?
   - Are they likely to be an ally or obstacle with regard to your interests?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Currently Takes Leadership</th>
<th>How Leadership is Exercised</th>
<th>Stake in the Issue</th>
<th>Likely Ally or Obstacle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
EXERCISE #5 (See page 21)

5a) Does your organization have the will to take on this type of work for a sustained period?
   • Do the board, staff and other leaders within your organization share a race analysis that will prioritize this work?
   • Does the leadership have the courage and commitment to take this on?
If “No,” what concrete steps will you take to increase organizational awareness and understanding of structural racism?
   
   •
   
   •
   
   •
   
   •

5b) Does your organization have the capacity to do what’s necessary to change or promote PPRs? What specific capacities do you have that will allow you to take specific action?

Besides staff and financial resources, at least four additional types of capacities may be required:

**Analytical** – deep knowledge of specific policy, legislative and regulatory environments; familiarity with racial dynamics and outcomes of specific institutions; capacity to identify and assess power of narratives, images and other representations linked to race; strategic thinking capacity.

Our capacities in this area: 


EXERCISE #5 (Contd.)

Convening – capacity to bring together disparate stakeholder groups; provide “safe space” for honest discussion with agenda that moves process forward; support ongoing learning community.

Our capacities in this area:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Communicative – ability to frame information for and reach, critical audiences in local government, business and civic sectors.

Our capacities in this area:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Networking – ability to develop, participate in and actual membership of, formal and informal networks and coalitions; ability to acquire resources through those relationships.

Our capacities in this area:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

5c) What will your organization do as a first step?

With this clearer sense of what your organization can actually invest in an effort to achieve the desired racial equity outcome, you can develop a detailed action plan that is both realistic and in line with your social change vision.

• What will be your initial focus?
• What do you think you will have accomplished by the end of year one?
EXERCISE #5 (Contd.)

5d) How will you communicate your plan?

- Who will be your messenger?
- What media, communication format and messaging language will you use?
- Who will be your audience

Messengers:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Language:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Audience:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
When you have completed your RETOC, evaluate it according to these criteria:

- Clarity of racial equity outcome; clarity of the racial analysis that underlies your desired outcome
- Clarity in the description of and rationale for, your top three building blocks
- Recognition of building blocks that are not directly in your control and what, if anything, you are going to do about them
- Informed selection and analysis of the policies, practices and representations that you must affect in order to get to your building blocks in place
- Realistic mapping of the individual/institutional supports and obstacles
- Honest analysis of your institutional capacities for conducting the work
- Rationale for the first step you and your colleagues will take
- Likely reach and effectiveness communication and messaging strategy