



From the Self Making Person to Opportunity for All: Rethinking Our Thinking on Race

A FrameWorks Message Memo

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This memo presents findings and analysis from the FrameWorks Institute's research on how Americans think and talk about the issue of race. In particular, we explore the influence of frames and reframes as they impact levels of acceptance for reforms regularly promoted by advocates.¹ This research was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the JEHT Foundation, the Charles S. Mott Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. It is also informed by our earlier work on healthcare reform (www.frameworksinstitute.org) funded by The California Endowment and California Wellness Foundation, the Endowment for Health and HNH Foundation in New Hampshire and St. Luke's Health Initiatives in Arizona.

The goal of this work is to understand the challenges and opportunities of moving public will, from a strategic communications perspective, on the issue of race. The goal is not to forward a specific policy package or agenda. To be sure, there is any number of worthy proposals for social change on the policy table. Rather, it is a call for advocates of racial justice to rethink the conversation they intend to have with the broader American public. In this vein, the memo lays out the communications challenges advocates are up against and begins to chart a course for a very different public conversation about race. Put differently, we identify the dominant race frame; show how it affects public reasoning; explore the reframes commonly employed by advocates; and offer some initial support for a viable, alternative reframe.

This Message Memo reports on and interprets an integrated body of research commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute. We certainly encourage readers to consult the full research reports (www.frameworksinstitute.org) and do not intend this memo to replace or supplant those papers; nonetheless, the memo does synthesize these findings and makes preliminary recommendations about the development of a coherent communications platform.

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Project Background

This project grew out of two separate but related developments. The first occurred as FrameWork's longstanding interest in race became more focused through a series of projects on communicating health care reform. The top line result from that work is that talking about race in the context of health disparities was not compelling to people in California and Arizona. For instance, exposure to the health disparities message did not result in higher levels of support for such things as universal coverage, fair access, and community clinics. As such, we had some clues about how race works from a communications perspective; what we didn't have, however, was either a fully coherent explanation or much sense of alternative frames.

The second, and related, development was participation in the Structural Racism summer workshop administered by the Aspen Institute Roundtable and conducted by the Structural Racism and Community Revitalization Project. The workshop was designed to think through how structural bias accounts for racial inequality across a range of issue domains (e.g., health, housing, education, etc.). The workshop also devoted time to a lively discussion of how best to communicate the racial equity agenda from this perspective. Of note in this context was a sense among some in the group that the structural racism frame might not positively influence the broader society's racial thinking. In the end, all agreed that this was an empirical question that could be answered by systematic investigation.

Responding to these challenges the FrameWorks team designed a series of studies - employing multiple methods to address the questions of how Americans think and talk about race. And how, more importantly, we can have a more productive conversation on the subject.

FrameWorks was requested to identify a communications strategy for moving public support toward a more progressive racial policy agenda. We were asked to examine the relationship of race to reforms in a number of critical areas, which we refined to include the areas of crime; education; and community transformation (economic development, healthcare). FrameWorks commissioned Dr. Kenny J. Whitby to survey and organize some of the key policy proposals in each of these substantive issue domains. Input was invited from national policy experts and complemented by an informal sample of policy analysts in the FrameWorks network. The full list of reforms was recoded into a manageable set of proxy policies to more effectively gauge the ability of particular communications options to influence thinking about and policy preferences related to race.

It is against this backdrop that this memo is situated: How do we have a more productive, engaged, and enlightened conversation about race in early 21st century America?

The Approach: Strategic Frame Analysis

For some years now, the FrameWorks Institute has brought together a diverse group of communications scholars and practitioners to develop a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on long-standing research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people understand all issues in terms of a small set of internalized concepts and values - also known as *frames* - that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. Frames thus serve as mental shortcuts that allow people to make sense of the world. Frames can be triggered by language choices, tone, visuals, messengers, and or values, and these communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes. Perhaps the most pervasive purpose of frames is to aid in the assignment of responsibility for the causes of and solutions to social concerns.

In many cases people are unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are commonly expressed indirectly. Moreover, these default understandings of the world can guide people's comprehension of an issue in ways they don't even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection.

Frames have several sources. Perhaps the two most important are the general culture and the news media. The broader culture, of course, is the fountain for many core narratives about American life. The "Horatio Alger" story, for example, is a common element for understanding how the world works. It has been passed on for generations and is closely tied to a core set of American values. Likewise, the modern news media has been a main source of Americans' information about public affairs. The way the news is "framed" on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this dominant frame. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Put differently, dominant frames have the power to help or hinder support for advocates' policy agendas. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement's strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition's frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis is available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord it public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about the issues, what images will come to mind and what

solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized.

When communications is effective, research demonstrates that people can look beyond the dominant frame to consider different perspectives on an issue. When communications is ineffective, the dominant frame becomes the default people tend to rely to assign meaning to new information. Understanding this process makes it all the more important that policy experts and advocates understand the likely “default” frames that ordinary people will use in processing new information.

Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research was designed to explore the following questions:

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

Research Methods and Data Base

Although the approach we outlined above is meant to be analytic, it also suggests a particular type of methodological approach. The breadth of the approach, we believe, requires a multi-method design that relies on both qualitative and quantitative measurement instruments. We utilize these methods in an iterative, interactive and integrated fashion. We begin by using qualitative measures such as cognitive elicitations in a heuristic fashion to tease out impressionistic hypotheses about the dominant frames at play. In addition, we look for potential reframes as they emerge from the elicitation interviews. We next turn to media content analysis to confirm the existence of the frames. Here we utilize both the qualitative and quantitative forms of media content audits.

Integrating the findings from these two approaches, we design a series of focus group tests to substantiate the presence of a dominant frame and to explore potential reframes (as both advanced by advocates and discovered by the FrameWorks team) in greater detail. In this phase we look for defining frame elements such as values, messages, messengers, and tone. We expose this round of findings (i.e., the results from an analysis of the dominant frame and the existence of viable reframes) to more rigorous quantitative testing in the form of large-N, probability-sample priming surveys. This memo reports on results from

research conducted up through the focus groups. The priming survey will be conducted later this fall.

Cognitive Elicitations - Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured recorded interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

The analysis presented here is based on intensive one-on-one interviews conducted by Cultural Logic with a diverse group of 50 individuals in California, Oregon, Illinois, Mississippi, Alabama, Rhode Island, and the Washington DC metro area. Subjects were recruited through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with “seed contacts” in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing. The sample included 31 women and 19 men. Subjects’ ages ranged widely – 1 subject was eighteen, 15 subjects were in their 20s, 16 in their 30s, 7 in their 40s, and 11 were 50 or older. The sample included 19 European Americans, 10 African Americans, 9 Hispanic Americans, 11 Asian Americans, and one Native American. A range of political orientations was also included in the sample (15 conservatives, 5 independents, and 30 liberals), as were a range of educational backgrounds (high-school only to graduate degree) and occupations.

Media Content Analysis – To obtain a picture of how race is portrayed in the news media, FrameWorks commissioned the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) to conduct a news content analysis of how local and national media address the issue of race. The collection of materials was deliberately timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, on the assumption that there would be ample coverage of race-related issues. As expected, there was a great deal of coverage relating to this landmark event, which provided many opportunities to see how race is framed. As it happened, the news during this period also included a fair amount of coverage of another relevant event: Bill Cosby’s speech, commemorating *Brown*, in which was perceived to blame many of African-Americans’ subsequent problems on their own failures.

The sample period began on May 1st 2004, approximately two weeks before the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education*, and continued over six weeks, through June 19th. For the national portion of the sample, CMPA examined ABC “World News Tonight,” CBS “Evening News,” and NBC “Nightly News,” *Newsweek*, *Time* and *US News and World Report*; and the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The local sample included newspapers selected from around the country, including the *Miami Herald*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *San Antonio Express-News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times* and *Detroit Free Press*.

The goal of this study was to explore the intersection of race and several selected areas of interest including education, jobs and employment, health care, and juvenile justice (these are what FrameWorks refers to as Level Two issues, or categories of issues). CMPA examined separately all news items (stories and opinion pieces) related to the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Within each of the areas, the central question was how the news stories explained or addressed disparities among the races. Stories or columns had to deal with one of the relevant areas and specifically mention race or ethnicity in connection with it. This included general references to "minorities," "people of color" or "non-white minorities." Pictures that accompanied print or television stories were also utilized for indications that the story addressed race.

Cognitive Media Content Analysis – Utilizing the CMPA content data in another manner, FrameWorks commissioned Cultural Logic to perform a qualitative analysis of a select sample of stories collected by CMPA. The analysis examined how the topic of race is treated in the sample materials, and the likely implications for readers' thinking. To this end, Cultural Logic reviewed over one hundred articles collected by the Center for Media and Public Affairs during May and June of 2004 from newspapers in various parts of the country, from Miami to Seattle to San Antonio to Washington, DC.

The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics are treated as either related or unrelated; the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, the metaphors used to talk about race-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said about race than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials.

Focus Groups - FrameWorks commissioned Public Knowledge to assess how Americans think and talk about race in a setting of their peers. Focus group guides were designed in collaboration with the FrameWorks research team. Fourteen focus groups were conducted in the late fall and early winter of 2004 with engaged citizens across the country (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) Focus groups were divided by race and class. The groups were conducted in the following order:

- Baltimore, MD (July 7, 2004)
 - Mixed race
 - African American
- Minneapolis, MN (August 5, 2004)
 - European American, non-college educated
 - European American, college educated
- Albuquerque, NM (August 18, 2004)
 - European American, non-college educated
 - Latino
- Newark, NJ (October 4, 2004)
 - European American, college educated
 - Chinese American
- San Francisco, CA (October 19, 2004)
 - European American, college educated
 - Korean American
- Los Angeles, CA (October 20, 2004)
 - Mixed race
 - Latino
- Nashville, TN (December 16, 2004)
 - European American, non-college educated
 - African American

In short, this memo is based on a rich and varied body of information derived from cognitive elicitations, two types of media content analysis and focus groups. While the scope is national - data has been collected from every major region of the country - the results and implications matter right at the place where the “boot meets the street”; that is, at the level of practical application in communities across the country. The remainder of the report focuses on the research findings and outlines a communications strategy.

The Research

Our analysis reveals three core narrative elements that represent the dominant race frame: *Historical Progress and Personal Racism; the Self Making Person; and Separate Fates*. By dominant frame we mean a cultural model that is “top of mind” for most people. The social psychologists call this “chronic accessibility,” meaning a patterned mode of thinking that appears almost automatically and serves as a lens through which people evaluate incoming information. These frames often reside in the general culture but are also reflected in and invigorated by the news media. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the dominant frame is what advocates must regularly confront in their daily on-going activities. In this regard, understanding what you are up against is a crucial first step in developing a communications strategy. Using findings from across the data base, we chronicle the elements of the dominant race frame.

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 over the last half a century. This line of thinking was easily stimulated, for example, in the cognitive elicitations. A white liberal woman in Oregon observed: “*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.*” Likewise a white conservative woman in Illinois said: *“There might be small groups that will be alienated, but overall, I think it’s much better than what it was.”*

The improvement, many people believe, is the direct result of changes in anti-discrimination laws and policies. A liberal Latina from California responded to the following question: *Q: Do you think there’s a difference between racism of years ago and racism of today in the US? A: Yes. 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.”*

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 acts. During an elicitation interview, a white conservative man from Alabama summed it up best when he said: *“How long ago was [slavery]? A hundred years? At least a hundred years, right? Black people are mayors, congressmen, doctors, lawyers. What have they got to complain about? They’ve got the same opportunities I have. I think their only handicap is if they think, you know, “I’m being crapped on because I’m Black.”* History, in this mode of reasoning, is irrelevant. It is no wonder, then, that many of the focus groups found it difficult to even talk about race.

What we are left with, then, is the notion that racism exists primarily at the level of the individual person. As a white liberal woman from Newark said: *“I don’t know how you can stop racial profiling. I think it’s something that has to come from within the police officers, the people that are doing it, not necessarily something that we’re telling them you can’t do it. Because if that’s how you feel inside, then you’re not going to be able to stop it no matter what.”* Moreover, because racism exists at the level of the individual, it has the capacity to go “both ways”; for example, as whites are biased against blacks, blacks are biased against whites.

In the focus groups, a college-educated white man from Newark said, *“I’ve actually seen it from both sides. When I went to college in Florida, I was out in a bar one night and a couple of Afro-Americans came in and they wanted beer. They wanted it to go and they wanted a glass at the bar. The lady said, ‘You can take it to go, but I’m not serving you at the bar’ ...Then maybe 10 years later...we walked into a bar and it was an Afro-American bar and they wouldn’t serve us...I’ve seen it from both sides.”* Likewise a white liberal woman from Oregon remarked: *“I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and have been able to see the other side of racism, as far as Afro-Americans being racist against Caucasian or someone of another race, and it can be just as vicious. So that’s my opinion.”* Thus the location of racial discourse at the individual level ironically opens the door to a discussion of “reverse discrimination.” This, to be sure, does not provide advocates with a good chance to get their message out. As Cultural Logic says, “Muggings, name-calling, rude clerks can all be perceived as racism on a par with not getting a seat at Denny’s.”

According to this line of reasoning, racism is likely here to stay because these evil-hearted people pass along their racial bias to their children. A college educated white man from Newark commented: *“I think it's the same thing that you see in Iraq...It's embedded in the children. The kids, they are burning American flags at three years old and dancing in the streets when our soldiers are getting killed. It's just passed from generation to generation.”* Solutions to the race problem, from this perspective, are misguided if they seek to legislate or litigate change. Essentially, there will always be a level of racism, according to this way of thinking, because it's in the blood. Or, as a college educated white woman from Newark stated, *“This prejudice is rooted deeply, and that is why it's not going away and it is probably -- I don't know if it ever will go away.”*

When the race problem is understood in this way, systemic reforms are crowded out by a very powerful narrative that focuses attention on individuals. System reforms are thus invisible, and this explains why advocates' claims often fall on deaf ears. People are reasoning about race at the individual level, not at the systemic or societal level. That this narrative centers on individual people, means it fits nicely with another powerful trope in American culture: the Self Making Person

The Self Making Person

There is widespread acceptance of the notion of the Self Making person (SMP) as an explanation for success or failure in life. Sayings like “anyone can make it in America” or “only in America can a person achieve...” are common lines in the American story. They express the view that effort, drive, and moxie are the defining characteristics for success. This is nothing new of course. Individual responsibility is a core tenet of the American belief system. And it is not surprising that it is routinely used to think about race.

Informants in our studies believed that a person's ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on the person themselves. In the elicitations, for example, a conservative white woman from Alabama had the following conversation with our interviewer:

Q: What is success, what does that mean?

A: Just kind of making / getting out of life whatever you want, you know. You can go as far as you want. If you'll just put your mind to it, that's stuff is part of success; just accomplishing things.

Q: Where does it come from?

A: The will to want to do it. You've got to have will to get somewhere.

The belief in the Self Making Person was easily surfaced in the focus groups as well:

“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)

Notably, African Americans also subscribed to individualism, as a man from Baltimore explained, *"We got two people who were in my class that are millionaires now. I also got some people who didn't make it, some people in my class now who are living on the streets who are bums, and I'm doing pretty good. So it's not just your environment, but it's what you do with it after you get it."*

For some time now, the social science research literature 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 disproportionately violate the value of individualism as represented in the Self Making Person model. Racial inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to properly inculcate themselves with the appropriate values. This view was commonly revealed in the focus groups.

A white woman in the mixed race group said: *"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."* In fact, the Cosby quote was frequently used by whites throughout the focus groups. 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 minorities, but especially African Americans, do not fit the model of the Self Making Person.

The focus on the individual, and particularly individual failings, as an explanation for racial disparities was reflected in the news content analysis. While the media did focus attention on some of the systemic barriers to minority achievement, the pertinent pattern had to do with racial differences in coverage of individuals. Across the domains of education, employment, and crime, the news media called attention to the individual failings of minorities, and especially blacks, as the central story line. For example, over a third of all stories about academic achievement disparities featuring African Americans were about such things as black students' poor attitudes, a lack of family support and low expectations of academic performance. Conversely, only three percent of the stories with whites as the central actors cited individual factors as the reason for poor academic performance. This trend was common across all of the issue domains and, not unexpectedly, most pervasive with the issue of crime. The news media, then, serves to reinforce this part of the dominant race frame.

The more people adopt this as an ideology, the harder it is for advocates to advance the view that external circumstances reduce the odds of success for particular groups. When equally compelling alternative explanations are not available for people to use in their thinking about race, unconscious beliefs about personal responsibility are very difficult to dislodge. Individualism is a very insular and self-contained mental model. This means that the structural determinants of life chances are effectively hidden from public view and more weight is given to the power of the individual to affect change.

Whites (and to some degree Asians and some Latinos) are perceived to be reflective of the Self Making Person, while minorities in general (blacks and recent Latino immigrants, more pointedly) are seen as essentially the opposite. Put differently, the explanations for life chances between whites and non-whites are determined by fundamentally different forces. For whites, it is effort and achievement, but for minorities it is sloth and failure. Different forces, different outcomes, different lives.

Separate Fates

The final piece of the dominant race narrative is the way that minority concerns are understood as being disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Whites and non-whites have separate fates. The cognitive content analysis revealed that stories about minority communities commonly portrayed minority trajectories as distinct from those of other American lives. Sometimes the separateness is described in fairly explicit terms: *“African-American teens, who often live farther from retail outlets, have unemployment rates double those of Whites.”* (*“Jobless Summer,” Detroit Free Press, 5/28/04, 10A*). Other times, the separateness is less direct: *“Kerry read . . . to kindergartners at the largely Hispanic, low-income school before discussing his education plan.”* (*“Kerry Assails Bush on Education,” Wash Post, 5/5/04 A7*).

The focus group data also supports the view that the races live in parallel universes. For instance, a white informant in Baltimore said, *“My kids went to school in a pretty diverse environment. The interesting thing that they told me was that when it came to lunch time all the black kids sat together by themselves at a table... so from my kids’ perspective they said there really isn’t diversity. They are here and we are here but there really is no mixing.”* Even in integrated environments, then, whites and non-whites have little in common.

The notion of separate fates has three notable consequences for the public conversation about race. First, it makes it easier to characterize minorities as the “Other,” and by definition out of the system. Two, it allows people to compartmentalize the concerns of minorities as being “over there”; no matter how well meaning, it is inevitably easy for people to be less motivated about issues that are less directly connected to themselves. Third, it makes it much harder to make the clear causal connection between minority life chances and structural arrangements. In short, 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 properly adhere to the core value system.

Through the lens of this model, being white is practically defined as the mainstream and, by definition, the exemplar of a state of self-determination.

Q: And what characterizes white culture?

A: I think of it as standard, you know, mainstream culture to the point where it doesn't feel like it's anything. (Asian liberal woman, CA)

The important point, as Cultural Logic points out, is that whites are the anti-race in this narrative setup.

By contrast, the fates of blacks and other minorities are easily seen as determined more by physical and cultural circumstances related to their ethnic qualities, and less by individual will. The sentiments of a non-college educated white man from Nashville were common across the focus groups, “*We do a lot of Section 8 housing...the government is paying for their houses but they are driving Cadillac Escalades.*” Put differently, whiteness is the implicit diminution of race and maximization of Self Making. On the contrary, being black is the maximization of race and minimization of Self Making. Seeing the world through this lens makes it extremely difficult to see the common connections between the things that affect whites and non-whites alike. It makes it tough to see, for example, the fact that we –regardless of race - are all bound by the same set of 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, in no small measure, racial differences in success or failure.

Negative Consequences of the Dominant Race Frame

1. *People are encouraged to believe we have made tremendous progress on matters of race.*
2. *To the extent that racism exists, it is in the hearts and minds of “bad” people who unfortunately pass it on to their children.*
3. *A certain level of racism, therefore, is likely to remain constant over time.*
4. *Nonetheless, the dramatic changes in laws and policies have essentially leveled the playing field.*
5. *Individual responsibility, not discrimination, is the driving value.*
6. *Racial inequality is thus 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. Whites are self-determinant, while minorities are bound by circumstances beyond their control.*
8. *Individualism is the key value in this frame.*

In all, the dominant race frame described above makes it hard for advocates to get across messages about racial equity reforms. Our research suggests that when people reason in this mode, it is very difficult to get them to think about the fairness of racially biased systems as an explanation for racial disparities. Instead, the value of individualism is highlighted as the critical factor explaining life success. If the dominant frame works against the preferred agenda, what frames are more promising?

Reframing Race

An important purpose of the focus groups was to test framing options regularly forwarded by advocates. In this section, we report on two such frames: *Structural Racism* and *Diversity as Strength*.

Structural Racism

There is little doubt that a progressive race policy agenda must produce fundamental systems reform. A convincing body of social research demonstrates that people's life chances are often directly affected by institutional bias and discrimination. From access to health care, to racial profiling, to discriminatory lending and mortgage practices, to employment bias, research shows that circumstances related to external conditions significantly impact minorities' life chances. Rooting out bias embedded in social, political, and economic structures is the mission of progressive race policy advocates.

The problem with structural racism as a communications vehicle - especially the idea that racism is embedded like a "virus" in American institutions - is that it runs directly against the powerful notion that racism is a personal matter. In the Newark focus groups, a white man expressed it best, *"I don't think it makes sense because we're saying and I think we've all acknowledged that these things have been occurring and the system hasn't shut down. The system is still functioning. It may not be functioning perfectly but it is still functioning. You get a decent virus in your system and it shuts down."*

As a result, this line of conversation quickly leads to a common and corrosive way of thinking about race. For instance, when informants were asked about a law enforcement program that trains officers to engage in racial profiling, a white woman from Nashville said, *"I have a friend that is a policeman and he told me that 90% of your crimes comes out of the black neighborhoods."* Not surprisingly, statistics are not persuasive. When presented with data that undermine the use of race as a proxy, people twisted the statistics to conform to their pre-existing worldview. This statement from a non-college educated white woman in New Mexico was, we are sad to report, repeated almost verbatim in other focus groups, *"Maybe 10 white people were stopped and two people had drugs on them, that's 20 percent. Say 100 black people were stopped and 20 of them had drugs, it's the same percentage and there were more hits, more stops on black people. That's what I'm saying. So 20 is still a far greater number than 2."*

The end game is that, by using concerns about fairness to highlight institutional racism, advocates may inadvertently stimulate two elements of the dominant frame – Personal

Racism and the Self Making Person. Thus the public conversation quickly moves from the flaws in the system to the flaws in people. Racism is a bad character trait, but so is laziness. In either instance, they do not allow structural concerns to come front and center.

Diversity as Strength

For some time, a common theme among race advocates has been that the society is stronger as the result of diverse perspectives and experiences. This notion received full attention as a result of the amicus briefs filed by the military and the business community in the Michigan affirmative action case. The basic argument is that the country is becoming much more diverse and we should therefore benefit from the existence of, and exposure to, a variety of ideas and cultures. In the Michigan case, for example, business representatives argued that it is good for business when a company is served by a mix of perspectives. Likewise, the briefs from the military pointed out the importance of having a leadership structure representative of the diverse composition of today's armed services.

The communications challenge with this approach is that the word "diversity" is quickly associated with race, and discussions about what makes for a good mix of employees, students, and soldiers quickly reverts to thinking about the individual. We presented our focus groups with several different vignettes that had "diversity as strength" in the foreground. The short story is this is not an effective frame for moving public will in support of a progressive race policy agenda.

In a series of tests, we presented focus group participants with vignettes that underscored the concept of "diversity of strength." In some cases, we asked people to talk about the role of diversity in hiring; in others, we prompted people to discuss an example where diverse members of a community came together to solve a community problem. The following focus group quotes bear out the communications obstacles this frame is unable to overcome.

"It seems to communicate how fractioned this community is and that they actually had to build a bridge with each other in order to even just understand how one another was communicating." (Latino, Albuquerque).

"If I say Latino, but you'd rather be called Spanish. If I say you're white, you'd rather be called Caucasian and you spend most of that time figuring out what everybody wants to be called, then the issues on the table aren't being addressed." (non-college-educated white man, Albuquerque).

"I almost think it's like reverse discrimination though...People talk about discrimination so much that, like for example people getting into colleges. It's always been the minorities, so now they're getting in and they're taking places of people that perhaps belong in that school." (college-educated white woman, Newark).

In theory, people may support the notion that a company or organization is better off with diversity, but in reality they quickly become mired in a discussion about hiring the individual with the best skills or talking about the shortcomings of political correctness. From this perspective, as noted by Public Knowledge, "...diversity is an obstacle to overcome, not an asset."

In sum, the two reframes often advanced by advocates have limited utility in getting the public to reconsider a progressive race policy agenda. The main problem is that both frames unintentionally evoke key components of the dominant frame. Any discussion about fairness quickly turns into a conversation about the individual. Once people reason from this position, it is difficult to get them to think at the level of systems. In other words, because racism and self-determination are individual matters, it is difficult for people to think through the causal sequence necessary to judiciously evaluate calls for system reforms. Similarly, when racism is invoked, people promptly move to a defensive mode in which they try to deny they are racist, charge that other groups (especially blacks) are themselves racist, or forward a conspiracy theory in which minority concerns are systematically denied by "the man". In either case, the end result is a conversation that quickly breaks down without any hope of reasonable dialogue.

A Platform for an Alternative Reframe

In the focus group testing we specifically designed vignettes to avoid inadvertently invigorating the dominant frame. The first step was to move the conversation away from the value of fairness. This is particularly important because fairness and racism are easily linked in the public mind. That is, calls for racial equity are essentially calls for the rooting out of embedded structural or institutional racism. Given that the laws have changed and that people perceive racism to exist only at the individual level, institutions are understood as race-neutral structures through which racially distinct fates are played out. As such, this does not become a compelling call to support system reform efforts.

This is not merely a semantic difference; changing "fairness" to "opportunity" will yield relatively little unless the change is accompanied by the notion of interconnectedness, or shared fate. Fairness is an "us vs. them" frame, "opportunity", as recommended here, is an interdependent frame, as in opportunity for all.

Across the FrameWorks research, on the other hand, there appears to be consistent support for the value of opportunity. 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. But there are lots of places where the system falls down. It surely hurts minorities more often, but system breakdown can also hurt whites. Whatever the cause, race is not necessarily the primary determinant of success or failure. To this extent, we have linked fate.

A common sub-theme running through much of our analysis is that people are unable to see viable solutions to the race question. There is a lot of talk about problems and not much systematic attention paid to talking about solutions. When people are presented with viable and effective solutions, they are able to more clearly understand where the system breaks down and how we fix it. In addition, there is the sense that government is over-involved and minority residents aren't involved enough in these solutions. As other FrameWorks research shows, people have serious problems with government taking on a lead role in addressing society's challenges. Reframing race necessitates moving solutions to the front of the conversation as solutions that would benefit the society as a whole.

An alternative race frame, therefore, must advance opportunity as a core value and find new ways to highlight solutions both by specifying an appropriate role for government and empowering community residents. On this account, the alternative race reframe has two central elements: *Opportunity for All* and *Solutions First*.

Opportunity for All

One clear finding from the FrameWorks research is that activating people's beliefs about fairness quickly transforms into a discussion about personal racism and the Self Making Person. This serves to block people's ability to see the structural influences on success or failure. By drawing attention to the value of opportunity, on the other hand, this reframe allows people to begin to understand why it takes more than individual resolve to overcome adversity. Importantly, opportunity is not to be misconstrued as individual opportunity, but rather opportunity for all, for the society to realize its potential.

We presented focus group participants with a range of vignettes focusing on education and community development that brought forward the idea of opportunity. An important aspect of this reframe entails explicitly portraying the plight of minorities in the context of other kinds of communities facing similar problems. The quotes below provide initial support for the notion that you can get people to think about racial inequality in a fundamentally different and more productive way.

"It should be the goal of the nation to make sure that everybody is educated, not just the whites or not just a certain elite class" (college educated white man, Minneapolis).

"I think it always comes down to the same situation. How do we create equal opportunity without also creating reverse discrimination?" (college educated white man, Minneapolis).

"I don't think they are given opportunities other people are and it is hard to break out of that. They say you can work really hard and get out of it, but I don't know if that is necessarily true" (college-educated white woman, San Francisco).

"What are you going to do if you get out of jail and you can't get a job? You don't have a degree. You don't have any skills. You are going to wind up right back on the corner" (black woman, Baltimore).

"It's something necessary to do [for] people in certain communities. I don't think they're given opportunities other people are and it is hard to break out of that. They say you can work really hard and get out of it, but I don't know if that is necessarily true" (college-educated white woman, San Francisco).

"This one gets an A; but this one means a lot more than that one does. That shouldn't keep them from getting to go to higher education. That's wrong, definitely wrong so they've got to do something" (non-college-educated white man, Albuquerque)

Forwarding opportunity as the key value has two distinct advantages. First, it takes the conversation out of the realm of racism per se and taps into the deeply held American idea 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. Second, and very importantly, couching opportunity in the context of what is happening in non-minority communities creates a sense of linked fate. 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. People quickly grasp ideas like the global economy can hurt all communities, or that few children – regardless of race - can succeed in life with poor schooling. The following quotes from the focus groups bear witness to this.

"Education is the beginning. All the studies show that children are the future. If you don't put the money into them, you're not putting money back into your own resource." (college-educated white woman from San Francisco)

"I work with bankruptcy every day and I think that it's not just the minorities that I see every day. I see all races of people having to file bankruptcy because of the decline of income and the downsizing of jobs" (African American woman, Nashville)

"When you outsource things and take it out of the country or even out of the state of California, the jobs remaining primarily are those low paying, low sector service jobs." (Latina, Los Angeles)

In all, this approach allows focus group participants to see the root causes of structural problems and the impact this has on minority communities. Instead of attributing responsibility to individual failure, people begin to understand the role of contextual forces in determining life chances. From this view, people are not morally deficient; external circumstances have changed.

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. On the other hand, advocates routinely accord inordinate attention to laying out the problems, disparities, and inequities associated with race. What we know from years of communications

experience is that this type of communications produces either “compassion fatigue” (the sense that there are just too many problems in the world that deserve attention) or a sense that the problem is so intractable that nothing advocates promote can possibly work. This is compounded by the fact that people have a hard time imagining an effective role for government in addressing social problems, and an abiding concern that minority communities do not have enough voice/responsibility in the change process.

When presented as being about viable solutions (in which the community played a key role), people can see an effective way to address the race problem. This line of thinking was frequently evident in the focus groups.

“We always hear about all these different programs and it's so hard to know if it really is going to help out. All you hear about is these programs and it just seems like putting more and more and more money into programs. So I like that they include that this is getting results for them.” (Korean American woman, San Francisco)

“I think whatever the program is it has to empower the people with training, tools, education,” “They can't be babysat by these officials who are starting this program. It has to be the people who can take this program and take it to where it needs to go.” (Korean American woman, San Francisco)

“It depends on the community itself and whether they have people that really want to invest in it,” “It's not just the money. It's going to take time and getting people together to figure out what the community wants. It depends on how active the people in the community would be.” (non-college-educated white woman, Nashville)

In short, talking about solutions overcomes a number of communications obstacles. It gets around the notion that we have solved the race problem in America by allowing people to talk about problems related to race in the context of viable means of addressing them. It does so by employing a practical tone. This frame element also gets around the question of separate fates by highlighting community empowerment in a way that sounds familiar to a mainstream accustomed to advocating on their own behalf. In addition, it shows how all benefit when communities work together. A final advantage of this approach is that it gets around the Self Making Person by demonstrating that minority communities are not dependent on handouts; to the contrary, they need government to do a better job of providing the tools that allow minority communities to help themselves.

This alternative race frame has many appealing elements to it. It trades on a core American value, thus allowing people to see how external circumstances can have a demonstrable impact on people's level of success in life. It makes history once again because it does matter how we set the rules in the past. Moreover, it attaches to the American “can-do” spirit and our pride in our own ingenuity. At the same time, it prevents people from becoming rhetorical as a result of defending against charges of racism. In short, this frame has the potential to transform the American conversation about race.

Before we get too carried away, however, it is important to note that the results reported in this memo are preliminary. Especially so in regards to the alternative race frame we just outlined. While we do feel confident about the existence of the dominant frame and have good reason to suspect it has a corrosive effect on public discourse, we will subject all of this to more rigorous testing in the form of survey research and through the development of Simplifying Models to help concretize certain aspects of the issue. These subsequent reports will be posted at www.frameworksinstitute as they become available. Nonetheless, we offer preliminary communications recommendations from our research to date to for improving the conversation about race in America.

Preliminary Recommendations

<u>Do's</u>	<u>Don'ts</u>
Talk about opportunity for all	Talk about individualism or fairness
Talk about solutions	Talk about problems, disparities
Talk about empowering people	Talk about heroic struggle
Talk about indirect role for govt	Talk about socialized programs
Talk in a practical tone	Talk in a rhetorical tone

ⁱ The advocates to which we refer are a collection of people and organizations who, although they go by different names (e.g., “racial justice”; “racial equity”; “structural racism”), spend their time representing the interests of racial and ethnic minorities through a “progressive” policy agenda.