Improving Race Relations and Undoing Racism

Roles and Strategies for Community Foundations

by David M. Scheie
with T. Williams and Janis Foster

Rainbow Research, Inc.
621 West Lake Street
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408
612.824.0724

Excerpt reprinted with permission of authors.
Credits
Principal author: David M. Scheie
Contributors: Theartrice Williams, Janis Foster, Hedy Chang
Editor: Leola Johnson
Photographs: Boston Foundation, Community Foundation for Muskegon County, Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, Philadelphia Foundation, Richard Howard

Community Foundations Race Relations Learning Project team:

Rainbow Research, Inc.
David Scheie, Associate Director
Theartrice Williams, Senior Project Associate
Mary Healy Jonas, Research Associate
Barry Cohen, Executive Director

Consulting Associates
Hedy Chang
Janis Foster
Leola Johnson
Laura Waterman Wittstock

Book design and production: The Poll Group

Improving Race Relations and Undoing Racism: Roles and Strategies for Community Foundations
Copyright © 2001 Rainbow Research, Inc.
ISBN 1-892336-03-0

This document was produced by Rainbow Research, Inc. under a grant from the C. S. Mott Foundation. We encourage its reproduction to strengthen race relations and community foundation improvement efforts. Once acknowledgement has been made to Rainbow Research, Inc., parts or all of this publication may be reproduced provided that such material is not sold.

To order
This book is available at a special discount when ordered in quantities. For information, contact:

Rainbow Research, Inc.
621 W. Lake Street
Minneapolis, MN 55408
Tel: 612/824-0724 Fax: 612/824-0429
www.rainbowresearch.org
a setting specifically for this purpose, we are able to reach the core of what so often must be negotiated in the community daily by our constituencies.”

**Lessons from the Community Foundations Race Relations Learning Project**

Discovering what community foundations are doing to reduce racism in their communities, and helping community foundations become more effective at that goal, were the two core purposes of the Community Foundations Race Relations Learning Project. Sponsored by the C. S. Mott Foundation and coordinated by Rainbow Research, the Project sought to raise the visibility and strengthen the capacity of community foundations to lead bold and effective anti-racism initiatives in their communities. Specifically, the Project aimed to

- synthesize findings from numerous recent “good practices” projects in this arena,
- engage community foundations and other leadership institutions committed to undoing racism in a reflective dialogue process to examine promising strategies and challenges that community foundations could effectively address,
- strengthen the network of community foundations committed to improving race relations, and
- share findings on effective strategies and promising approaches with community foundations and other key audiences.

A series of regional reflective forums held in 2000 was the Project’s centerpiece. Staff and board leaders from over 60 community foundations participated in these overnight peer learning retreats, along with a smaller number of interested private foundations, regional grantmaker association representatives, and experienced anti-racist practitioners.

The Project conducted a survey on current race relations practices that was completed by 70 community foundations. In total we gathered information from 116 community foundations. Rainbow Research conducted a review of recent literature on reducing racism and improving race relations, and spoke with over 20 consultants, researchers, and organizational leaders experienced in this field.

This publication summarizes key findings from the Learning Project. It is intended to help community foundations venture into the waters of race relations and anti-racism leadership, and to help those already active go deeper and achieve greater impact.

**Why is it important for community foundations to be leaders on race relations?**

**Diversity is increasing**

Improving race relations is important because we live and work now in a global village, with people, capital and goods flowing round the globe. The communities and institu-
tions that learn to understand and work effectively in this context will be those that grow and prosper in the 21st century.

Our U.S. communities are more diverse and complex, culturally and racially, than ever before. Achieving a high quality of life, a strong economy, and effective public problem solving will depend on building bridges across lines of race, language, culture and class.

This complexity includes unprecedented wealth within communities of color. Tribes with casinos, the largest African-American professional and executive population in history, and growing numbers of corporations owned or led by people of color are all part of this reality. Rapidly expanding Latino and Asian populations are economically as well as culturally diverse. It is grossly inaccurate, not to mention condescending, to think that communities of color are only poor and in need of services. Community foundations, dedicated to the purpose of building endowments for community improvement, would be remiss if they failed to engage with the diverse cultural groups in their community.

Even those places with less ethnic diversity, such as Iowa ("Iowa State Leaders Seek Diversity and Immigration." The Minneapolis Star Tribune, 2000), are moving to adopt public policies that encourage more immigration and diversity, recognizing that this is crucial for staying competitive and prosperous in the 21st century.

**Systemic discrimination persists**

Building healthy inter-racial relations is important not only because of the growing cultural complexity of our communities. A second reason for playing a leadership role in race relations is to help remove systemic discrimination that continues to work against people of color, especially people of African heritage, in this country. The continuing persistence of this discrimination is a drag on upward progress and morally offensive. Sadly, we are still a nation divided to a troubling extent. When we consign large numbers of children of color to inferior school systems, it injures the workforce and community leadership of tomorrow. Building more prisons to warehouse massive percentages of Latino, Native American and African American men is terribly expensive and it keeps these people, with their language, cultural and technical skills, out of the productive economy. It also blocks these men from playing constructive roles as fathers and family members.

The moral seriousness of the U.S.' historic legacy of race-based discrimination is signaled by the growing movement in support of reparations to African Americans for the economic contributions expropriated, and punitive damages experienced, by their forebears during publicly-enforced enslavement and Jim Crow discrimination. Compensation has been awarded to survivors of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe from their oppressors, and to Japanese-Americans who were forcibly placed in internment camps during World War II by the federal government. Proponents of reparations for African Americans point out that people of African descent in this country were subjected to government-enforced hardship and exploitation of almost unimaginable proportions for centuries. How can we clean this stain from our national record?
Similarly, the seriousness of the moral charges against the United States for its official treatment of indigenous peoples is signaled by the public apology in 2000 made by the head of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. He apologized for the "ethnic cleansing," intended to exterminate or subjugate indigenous people, practiced by that agency and its predecessors for over 100 years.

The topic of reparations is bigger than community foundations alone can solve. But its very magnitude underscores the importance of community foundations, as leadership institutions, becoming engaged with issues of racial reconciliation. Clearly, communities are still searching for healing and justice, and community foundations can contribute to that healing process.

**Community foundations are well-equipped to make a difference**

Community foundations can play a leadership role in improving race relations and dismantling systemic racism because they bring unique qualifications and strengths to the task. First, their **mission** makes them generally the most public, broad-based and community-focused of all organized philanthropy: their mission is to lead and steward their communities' long-term well-being. Community foundations are relatively apolitical and ecumenical champions of community improvement. What is more central to this mission than undoing the legacy of centuries of racializing and race-based discrimination?

Second, a community foundation's **linkages** are a powerful asset for improving community race relations. Community foundations have boards, committees, donors, and informal relationships that are (or could be) broadly inclusive of a community's racial and cultural as well as professional and institutional diversity. That is, a community foundation has relationships with people from all segments of the community, and this is a crucial asset for achieving understanding, reconciliation and cooperation across racial and ethnic lines.

Third, community foundations bring distinctive **skills** to the task of leading race relations efforts. Community foundations are skilled and experienced at convening and building bridges. They know how to invite and mobilize resources for addressing important community priorities. They know how to stimulate community dialogue.

Fourth, community foundations bring **grantmaking resources** to the table -- and these include not only funds but also program conceptualization and evaluation skills, and established relationships with many nonprofit actors.

Finally, community foundations possess valuable **knowledge** relevant to addressing race relations. Because of its mission, linkages, skills and grantmaking resources, a community foundation is often the most knowledgeable institution in the community about the nature and scope of local challenges and possible solution strategies to those challenges.
Community foundations can trust their own abilities to work with partners to explore local race relations problems and generate innovative, appropriate steps in response.

**Improving race relations benefits a community foundation**

Becoming engaged in improving race relations and ending racism serves a community foundation's own interests.

- A community foundation broadens its pool of program partners and prospective donors as it reaches out and extends its networks into all the racial and cultural groups in its community. This will increase the likelihood of excellent programming, a large and diverse donor base, capable board leadership and talented staff.
- A community foundation becomes more attractive to prospective donors who want to see programming on significant community challenges, as it becomes more knowledgeable about the contours of local race relations and how to improve them.
- A community foundation acquires a more distinct identity, with a clear values base, as it becomes better known for its knowledge and commitment on improving race relations. This helps the community foundation “stand out from the crowd” of philanthropic and civic actors. Becoming more visible and recognizable like this can be useful for attracting donors, partners and allies of all kinds.

If community foundations don't become knowledgeable and engaged in multi-cultural relations, they risk being left behind by the growing numbers of potential donors and community partners of diverse racial identities, and those who care about ending discrimination.

Working to improve race relations is difficult. There are many barriers. Separation and discrimination based on socially-constructed “racial” identities has been practiced for centuries - since the beginning of European settlement in this hemisphere, if not before. Only in the last couple of generations has there been a concerted, broad-based effort to treat all people equally regardless of their ethnic heritage, and to identify and dismantle the institutional and cultural patterns that helped perpetuate race-based disparities. This is a persistent, sensitive, complex and multi-dimensional issue. But it is an important issue, central to the continued maturation of American culture and society. And community foundations can make a difference!
A framework and some definitions

We are all on our own journeys to understand race relations and deal with racism. In the effort to understand and to improve, several conceptual frameworks may be used, each with particular emphases.

- Some frameworks emphasize greater **harmony**, in which people of different racial groups get along peacefully.
- Some frameworks emphasize greater **connection**: bridging racial divides, knitting us together across our racial differences.
- Some seek greater **understanding**: better recognition and comprehension of differences and commonalities, historically and presently, among racial/cultural identity groups. This may include efforts to understand disparities in opportunity, access, status, health, and power, through such questions as: Why do these disparities exist? What caused them? Whose interests are served by these disparities? Who is injured, in what ways? What are the institutional, cultural, and individual practices, policies and beliefs that create and maintain these disparities?
- Some frameworks aim for greater **justice**, so that unfair advantages are ended and people no longer experience arbitrary difficulties or privileges because of their racial identities.

In the Community Foundations Race Relations Learning Project, we developed a framework that included all four of these dimensions. In our analysis, harmonious relations rest upon greater connection, understanding and justice. Our framework assumed that improving race relations had to include a willingness eventually to face questions of justice and fairness across racial lines, or the effort would be doomed to triviality.

Sometimes “diversity” is interpreted as code for “racial diversity,” but this project recognized that there are many dimensions of diversity among (and within!) people. These include diversity of age, gender, faith identity or belief system, income, social class, national or cultural origin, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities.

We further recognized that there are dynamics in common between privilege and oppression based on racial identities, and those based on gender, sexual orientation and many other dimensions of diversity. We are committed to helping the day arrive when none of those identifiers are the basis for arbitrary advantage or disadvantage.

However, this project chose as its special focus not the broad issue of diversity and all forms of systemic group oppression and privilege, but the narrower issue of racial constructs and race-based divides and disparities. This topic is sufficiently deep and complex that it was plenty challenging to limit ourselves to this focus, within the constraints of this project. Participants in this project were welcome to talk about other forms of group oppression and privilege, but with a purpose of helping illuminate issues of race relations and racism.
The language of race relations varies from place to place and among groups, we found as we conducted the Learning Project in different regions of the United States. Here are working definitions used in the Learning Project for certain prominent terms:

- **Race relations**: how people of different racial identities interact; includes dimensions of inter-racial harmony, connection, understanding, and justice.

- **Racism**: structural arrangements, that can include individual, cultural and institutional arrangements, that distribute advantage and disadvantage arbitrarily and often seemingly unintentionally on the basis of people’s racial identity. We subscribe to the view that racism couples prejudice with power -- the institutional and systemic power to enact privilege or oppression on people of different racial identities.

- **Minority** and **people of color**: people identified as having African, Asian, Native American/American Indian or Hispanic heritage. “Minority” was a term whose usage and felt overtones varied widely among regions and groups in this project. Our preference is to find the language that people use to describe themselves, and use that to describe them. The word “minorities” is sometimes used to describe people of African, Asian, Native American/American Indian, and Hispanic descent — all racial/cultural categories that historically have been discriminated against in U.S. culture and policies. The word “minorities” reflects their historical status within the U.S. citizenry, in political power terms at least. In this context, “majority” refers to those of strictly non-Hispanic European descent.

However, on the world stage, people of European heritage are also a minority, and this is becoming true in more and more U.S. communities. Many people who are aware of this believe that calling non-Europeans “minorities” prejudicially diminishes these groups and inflates the power of those identified by their European heritage, thereby perpetuating historic inequities between these groups.

When it is necessary to choose a shorthand to refer to groups with more or other than non-Hispanic European heritage, therefore, we prefer the term “people of color.” Both “people of color” and “minority” are used by some people with heritages other than non-Hispanic European. We prefer “people of color” because it does not falsely impute majority or minority status, and it contrasts appropriately with the racial construct of “white” -- the category that excludes those other heritages.

Sometimes language is intentionally ambiguous, to soften the tensions possible between sharply different viewpoints. Other times, language has simply evolved differently over time in different groups or regions. Whatever the reason, we learned that clarity of language -- so that people in the same conversation understand the same meaning when specific words or phrases are used -- is enormously helpful for achieving common understanding and mutual learning.