
HOW CAN WE ASSESS OUR COMMUNITY, AND WHAT ARE THE INITIAL STEPS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR DOING RACIAL EQUITY WORK?

Groups often begin racial equity work by gathering current and specific information about how a particular issue plays out in a particular place – this work is often described as “community assessment.” The process can also be a way of increasing knowledge and awareness of how race, racism and privilege have helped shape the place, and how various groups experienced it in the past and now. All of this information can build motivation to dismantle structural racism.

Who Is Assessing?

Before beginning the assessment process, step back and think about who is doing the assessing. The perspective from which the assessment is made has deep implications for the work moving forward. While the assessment process surely has time and budgetary constraints, try to be as inclusive as possible in its design and implementation. Being inclusive is not about just having representatives from different groups but creating a process in which multiple perspectives are voiced, decision-making is collective, and different opinions and worldviews are respected. Being inclusive also includes making sure different truths are shared in findings, in ways that can influence next steps. (See [Tip Sheet: How Can We Create an Inclusive and Equitable Planning Process?](#))

“How Did Things Get This Way?”—Developing a Racial Equity Story

In order to move forward, it is essential to know where you have been. Developing a racial equity story, then, is an important part of the assessment process. Examine with members of the community the history of policies, social and institutional practices, as well as the attitude and belief systems that played roles in shaping neighborhoods, schools, employment systems, and so on. Think through formal and informal power relations, how work gets done, and who does what work. As you develop your racial equity story, it is also important to be aware of what reform efforts have come before and what outcomes they produced. Reflect as well on how communities have changed in the past, and pay particular attention to governance coalitions and alliances that may have facilitated the changes.

Listen to elders and youth from different racial and ethnic groups, people who were in unions and those who ran companies, people whose families have been in your community for many years and those who have recently arrived. Talk with people who are affiliated with faith institutions and those who are not. Ask various people of different racial/ethnic groups about the variety of experiences members of their families have lived – looking for within group differences and cross-group differences. People don’t just have different perspectives about the same events, they also experience different realities related to race, ethnicity, culture and privilege.

As you build your group’s racial equity story, take the time to examine the explanations for racial inequity taught in schools, by the media, and within various groups to which you belong, and the assumptions that underlie those explanations. For example, what were you taught about why some people are poor and some are rich? What is the “common sense” about the way our neighborhoods, cities and institutions are organized? Take a common example: the contrast between suburbs that are white and have mostly affluent populations, and urban neighborhoods with large concentrations of unemployed and economically struggling people of color. Why do people believe those differences exist? Whose story is about the diligence of whites and the

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laziness of people of color, and whose is about the public policies that opened opportunities to white Americans (the G.I. Bill, FHA mortgages) and closed those same opportunities to Americans of color? It is important to find a way of telling an accurate story that makes clear the tremendous advantage whites had so that their individual diligence paid off and continues to open doors for themselves and their heirs, while the individual diligence of people of color – which may have been greater given the tremendous disadvantage of policies that excluded them – paid off less fully and at greater individual cost in terms of lowered life expectancy and many other painful (or negative) consequences.

As you bring your racial equity story up to date, it will be important to think about what disparities still remain unchallenged and are accepted as “cultural norms” (e.g., more blacks are in prison because they commit more crimes than whites), or as “natural market functions” (e.g., unemployment figures are higher among blacks because they do not want to work). Consider how these cultural norms are reinforced for everyone through internalized superiority and internalized oppression ([including internalized racism](#)) – that is, even people whose groups are being blamed for policies that harm them may accept these norms. Look further into these types of explanations of the way things are to make sure you can describe in your racial equity story the types of policing and sentencing practices that are in place in different communities, and the education, training and hiring practices that are in place in different communities and different sectors. Undoubtedly what emerges is a complex picture that can help to raise awareness and, one hopes, motivate others to act to change the uneven status quo. (See - [Making the Case](#))

Scale of Your Inquiry

While many efforts are undertaken because of a situation existing *within* a particular community, one of the first things that should be done is to look *outside* the community at the larger contexts in which they are nested. The disparities and challenges in place may not always be attributed to outside causes. In some cases the cause is plainly identifiable within a community. But when looking to change the deeply embedded and racially disparate outcomes in health, education and employment, the causes, and many of the solutions, often require action both within and outside of the control of the immediate community.

Current Dynamics

Just as it is important to take the time to develop an accurate and compelling racial equity story about how things got to be the way they are, it is equally important to develop a picture or map of current power dynamics. What are the racial and ethnic groups and how are the relations between them? What are important within-group differences? How are demographics and relationships shifting and what are the impacts of these shifts?

One important part of the maintenance of racial disparities is the phenomenon of sorting. Understanding what sorting mechanisms are in place and how they determine outcomes for those of different races is vital to understanding racial dynamics and what can be done to change them.

Just as racial dynamics were determined in the past by various policies, social and institutional practices, attitudes and beliefs, so too do they help to maintain the sorting mechanisms of the current era. Whether the sorting mechanisms are intentional is not the issue; instead, it is important to focus on the results. What, for example, is the result of the current formula for funding education via property taxes?

Behind the sorting functions of the policies, practices, attitudes and beliefs of our time are power relations. Key to assessing your community is knowledge of the power brokers on the local, regional, and national levels. Power brokers may be in positions of leadership and decision-making, or they may be influential for others reasons (behind the scenes, as elders, through family ties, because they are trusted by many, or because many people are indebted or obligated to them, or afraid of them). As you

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did for the racial equity story, gather multiple perspectives about how power flows in your place, from people in a position to know. The importance of knowing where critical decisions are made is not to be underestimated. In order to facilitate knowledge of the power brokers relevant to your work, it is helpful to create a power map of the major employers, institutions, schools, corporations and business districts, public spaces, transportation lines and so on. It is also helpful to trace the flow of money in a community. Another useful approach is to look at a recent decision, especially one that was disputed, that impacts some groups positively and some groups negatively (such as where to locate a community college or trash transfer station) and track the chain of decision-making.

Because attitude and belief systems play such important roles in the maintenance of racial disparities, it is important to look at how different media forms shape attitudes and beliefs about race. Does the media sensationalize racial conflict, does it normalize racial and ethnic inequities, or does it fall somewhere in between? While “the media” can seem like an impossible target, its influence is significant enough to warrant attention to the role that it plays as you develop your map of current dynamics.

Taking Inventory of Capacities

Once you have achieved an understanding of your community’s racial history and current dynamics, it is time to turn inward and reflect on what capacities you have in place to effect change. There are a number of ways to assess your capacity, though when the purpose is to assess capacity to undertake racial equity work, we suggest six different areas to investigate, each of which are described briefly below:

- *Political Capacity:* Political capacity refers to an organization’s and/or coalition’s capacity to affect political awareness and change. Political capacity requires access to local and regional actors. These actors include political representatives, public and private sector stakeholders, community organizations and community residents.
- *Organizational Capacity:* Organizational capacity refers to the ways organizations and collaborations effectively collect data, conduct research, transfer information, share knowledge, engage in strategic planning and develop a collective vision for a place, such as a neighborhood or region.
- *Resource Capacity:* Resource capacity refers to an organization’s ability to leverage human and material resources to address racial equity. These resources may reside inside or outside of the organization.
- *Programmatic Capacity:* Programmatic capacity refers to an organization’s ability to leverage power through its areas of specialization. Areas of programmatic strength are often areas where organizations have the most power to affect change.
- *Networking Capacity:* Networking capacity refers to an organization’s ability to participate in formal and informal networks. Networking capacity requires that organizations are able to build and maintain alliances with other community organizations, funders, political representatives, the media and residents. Networking also refers to an organization’s ability to leverage resources through strategic alliances.
- *Communicative Capacity:* Communicative capacity refers to an organization’s ability to convey their message to affect change. Communicative capacity requires organizations to use media to disseminate a message, but also to challenge popular representations and misconceptions.

Please note that the above list of capacities is extensive. Also note that not having capacity in one or more of these areas does not mean that racial equity work should not be undertaken. The list of capacities is intended to serve as a backboard against which to reflect on what an initiative can

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realistically do on its own, on what collaborations might need to be undertaken, and/or on which of these capacities might need to be developed further to achieve the most.

Moving to Action

Once a careful assessment has been conducted, a group can then move to producing meaningful racial equity goals and indicators of progress. The assessment process will allow you to identify the most promising points of leverage.

Please review the following related Tip Sheets:

- [How Can We Assess Our Community, And Implement An Assessment Process?](#)
- [How Can We Lay Out Assumptions To Understand Our Theory Of Change?](#)
- [How Can We Choose Strategies For Our Action Plan?](#)