



DISMANTLING STRUCTURAL RACISM: A RACIAL EQUITY THEORY OF CHANGE

What is a Racial Equity Theory of Change?

The Racial Equity Theory of Change (RETOC) is a step-by-step guide for defining what is needed to change a specific racial outcome picture in a given context. It “unpacks” a change process and identifies specific barriers and challenges that must be considered to eliminate racial outcome disparities in areas critical to community progress.

Here is a brief explanation of what we mean by “racial equity.”

Racial Equity

Racial equity is the desired alternative to white privilege. Racial equity paints a radically different social outcomes “picture” in which race is not consistently and predictably associated with disadvantage. It envisions a fairer America in which race is not linked with merit and social opportunities. With racial equity, we would not have social strata, prisons, schools, boardrooms and communities that are distinguished by their skewed racial profiles.

A racial equity vision takes for granted that the nation possesses sufficient resources to offer everyone an equal chance to succeed.

RETOC’s Premise and Strategic Focus

The basic premise of the RETOC is that chronic racial gaps in important opportunity areas, such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare, are strongly associated with **structural racism**.

STRUCTURAL RACISM is a shorthand term for the many systemic factors that work to produce and maintain racial inequities in America today. These are aspects of our history and culture that allow the privileges associated with “whiteness” and the disadvantages associated with “color” to remain deeply embedded within the political economy. Public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations contribute to structural racism by reproducing outcomes that are racially inequitable.

Structural racism is a very complex, dynamic system. Three elements of the structural racism system are identified in the RETOC as strategic priorities for social change planners. We highlight, also, a societal dynamic created by the structural racism system as a whole.

The three elements are:

- *public policies*
- *institutional practices*
- *cultural representations*

and we describe the societal dynamic as one of “*progress and retrenchment.*”

Public policies include 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*).

Institutional practices include 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 include the 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 in them; conventional wisdom that blacks do not value parenting, educational excellence, work*).

Progress and retrenchment describes structural racism’s self-sustaining dynamic. The system works to restore a steady state of white privilege wherever there is progress toward racial equity. (*e.g, black and Latino gains in many substantive areas since the 1960s have been significantly reversed by crime policies and practices—particularly those associated with the “War on Drugs” — that overincarcerate young men of color, and by violent, predatory representations of black and brown males that mark them as unsuitable for full social inclusion*).

Summary of the RETOC Steps

The RETOC is designed to do two things:

- Assist community change leaders in unpacking the root causes and dynamics of problems, and
- Help leaders begin thinking about action strategies likely to dismantle structural racism and promote racial equity.

To help facilitate group deliberation, we have come up with guidelines for building a pathway of change. We construct the pathway by working backwards from a desired Racial Equity

Outcome to identify the stepping stones most likely to lead to that goal. We call this approach “backward mapping.”

Step 1: What We Want

Define the desired Racial Equity Outcome (REO)

Produce an outcomes statement that specifies the racial disparities that you want to reduce or eliminate in a given place. As the example shows, this may be a very broad vision that you will need to “unpack” later on.

“Elimination of racial disparities in juvenile sentencing in (my city/county/region) by the year 2011”

Important Note: As you go through this visioning process, you may realize that some internal work on race is needed in your organization. Staff may hold divergent views on race, on the causes of racial disparities, and on what are appropriate levels of remedial intervention. You may also realize that your organization has overlooked or avoided its own racial inequities. If these are true, you might make internal organizational change, or at least consensus around an appropriate race analysis, your first priority.¹ This might be undertaken as a complementary project to the RETOC process.

Step 2: Setting Our Priorities

Identify the “Building Blocks” of our Racial Equity Outcome

Specify critical building blocks that we believe will add up to our desired REO. Think comprehensively here! Do not limit your imagination only to building blocks that seem to be within easy personal or organizational reach. Develop a list that captures the full complexity of your desired REO.

Then, separate building blocks that you believe are both critical and within your reach as an organization, from those well beyond your expertise and capacity, or that you might only be able to shape marginally, perhaps with the help of other organizations.

¹ These resources might be helpful:

Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. 2002. “Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs.” Ilana Shapiro, Ph.D. Washington D.C: The Aspen Institute.

Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. 2004. “Structural Racism and Community Building.” Keith Lawrence, Stacey Sutton, Anne Kubisch, Gretchen Susi and Karen Fulbright-Anderson, authors. Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute.

EXAMPLE: Continuing with the juvenile justice example, suppose you conclude that five building blocks are critical:

- *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.*
- *Preventive rather than aggressive community policing, that does not emphasize stop-and-frisk tactics or quality-of-life sweeps in poor neighborhoods.*
- *Culturally competent police officers and juvenile justice officials.*

You decide, however, that your organizational posture and capacity will not allow you to influence creation of the last two building blocks (a new community policing paradigm, and culturally competent officers).

So you decide to work directly on the first three and to seek out and lend whatever support you can to allies and initiatives better positioned to take on the latter pair.

Step 3: What Helps or Stands in the Way

Identify Public Policies, Institutional Practices and Cultural Representations (PPRs) that shape each Building Block you choose

Now that you know where to concentrate your attention fruitfully, you're ready to set strategic priorities consistent with your understanding of how structural racism works.

For each building block you choose (*say, similar arrest rates*) identify public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations (PPRs) most likely to determine whether or not that building block materializes and or stays in place. These PPRs are the specific things that community change stakeholders must promote or target for change.

Identifying relevant cultural representations is hard, but crucial. Cultural representations are popular assumptions, images and “wisdoms” associated with different groups of color. These shape the political, business and other contexts in which decisions about the allocation of social resources are made. This “common sense” plays a huge role in sustaining inequities.

EXAMPLE: To create racial equity in juvenile arrest rates, you might look closely at the systems and procedures of public schools, child welfare agencies, police departments and other youth serving institutions to identify key decision criteria that may be ostensibly neutral, but racially biased—often due to the disproportionate contact of youth of color with social control institutions.

The “PPR” step requires significant research and expert assessment of what might most obstruct a specific building block. Remember to take a cross-sectoral approach, since policies and

practices across multiple sectors (e.g., education, housing, employment) often cumulatively reinforce inequities.

You may come up with a sizeable list here. Narrow it down to two or three items that, based on your research, represent the most significant barriers to each building block.

EXAMPLE: An “alternatives to prison” building block might be opposed by a convergence of mandatory sentencing laws, prison construction as a favored rural economic development strategy, public housing regulations requiring eviction of convicted felons, employer policies against hiring individuals with criminal records, and such pervasive images of inner cities crime and violence, that the mass incarceration of its youth seems the only rational option. You may decide to concentrate just on the sentencing laws and employer practices.

Step 4: What We Must Know

Understand the Politics of Change – the “Nuts and Bolts” of Local Power

Here, two areas of knowledge are essential:

- Who the key “players” are in your community context
- How the governance process works

First, develop a picture of the key public, private and civic powerbrokers and stakeholders associated with your PPRs. This should reveal who are critical “gatekeepers” and “authorizers” on particular policy issues, media postures, and so on.

These “players” will be elected officials, interest groups, government bureaucrats, business executives, media and entertainment organizations, unions, opinion leaders, and other important local/state actors who must be (a) engaged or challenged to bring about change, and (b) monitored, either because they have opposed such change historically, or can be expected to oppose this proposed change.

Historical understanding of this landscape is vital not only for making progress, but for limiting retrenchment: for anticipating the type, sources, and timing of local resistance to the establishment of these equity building blocks.

To be comprehensive, remember to look closely at the organizations and individuals within the government, business and civic sectors as you do your power analysis.

Next, after you identify the key power “players” and alliances associated with a particular policy, practice or representation, identify the processes and dynamics that actually produce or maintain them. Learn how governance works in your particular context: where the critical decisions are made, and what current and past alliances influence specific issue-areas. Without this knowledge, it will be hard to know where and how to intervene to make change. Be prepared for

a challenge here, since much of the bargaining and influencing that takes place among power elites can be informal.

Some aspects of a public contracting process, for example, can be formal, transparent, and accessible, while others can be very obscure. Public agencies may have a standard process for soliciting and evaluating responses to requests for proposals (RFPs) for, say, at-risk youth services. But at the same time, it can be hard to know when such RFPs are issued if elites informally agree to limit public notification. Informal deals are also routinely made to craft RFPs in ways that favor particular applicants.

You also may need to master very arcane “policy knowledge” to engage power elites effectively. This is often the crucial advantage they hold over the general public. For example, remedial education resources for high-school dropouts may be allocated according to funding formulas known only to a few budget insiders. They, and a few legislators, also may be the only ones familiar with the timetables and processes for changing those formulas.

So, here are four broad questions you should ask:

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

Step 5. What We Must Do:

Assess our Capacity, Plan, Take Action

You are now ready to assess your organizational capacity to change specific policies, institutional practices and cultural representations.

Start by asking this general question:

“Does my organization have the will and capacity to take on this work for a sustained period?”

Then, ask these specific questions:

- **What capacities does my organization have for doing what is necessary to change or promote PPRs?**

Here are four types of capacities that may be required:

- *analytical* – e.g., deep knowledge of specific policy, legislative and regulatory environments; familiarity with racial features and outcomes of specific institutions; capacity to identify and assess power of narratives, images, and other representations linked to race; strategic thinking capacity
 - *convening* – e.g., capacity to bring together disparate stakeholder groups; provide “safe space” for honest discussion with agenda that moves process forward; support ongoing learning community.
 - *communicative* – e.g., ability to gather and frame information for, and reach, critical audiences in local govt., business and civic sectors
 - *networking* – e.g., ability to develop, participate in, and actual membership of, formal and informal networks and coalitions; ability to acquire resources through those relationships.
- **What staff, financial, and other resources can my organization devote to an initiative that may take a long time and not quickly produce tangible outcomes?**

With this clearer sense of what your organization can actually invest in producing the desired racial equity outcome, you can develop a more detailed action plan that is both realistic and likely to contribute to racial equity.

- **What can my organization do as a first step? What would we like to accomplish by the end of the first year?**

Now that you’ve gone through this visioning, priority-setting, and self-assessment process, it’s time to set concrete goals and act strategically.

Conclusion: Pulling the RETOC Juvenile Justice Scenario Together

This hypothetical scenario supposes that you are a small community-focused organization concerned about chronic racial disparities in youth outcomes.

Your desired long-term racial equity outcome is elimination of racial disparities in juvenile sentencing in the region you serve by the year 2011.

Applying the early RETOC steps, you conclude that any prospect for change in this status quo depends on at least five building blocks:

- *Similar racial arrest rates*
- *A wider menu of positive youth recreational options*
- *Alternative sentencing*
- *Preventive community policing*
- *Culturally competent officers and juvenile justice officials*

You realize that all five are important, but know that your organization lacks the resources and expertise to tackle them all. You spend some time doing policy research, reaching out to experts, and talking to local residents and other stakeholders in order to make informed choices about what you can handle, and decide to take on only the first three.

Guided by your insights about how racism “works,” you then set out to determine the key policies, practices and representations (PPRs) shaping each of those three building blocks. You identify specific youth sentencing guidelines, policing practices, and local media biases that must change to equalize arrests, generate more recreational programs, and institutionalize “community justice” sentencing alternatives.

Next, you develop a picture of the local political, business, and civic actors most instrumental in promoting or opposing these PPRs.

However, you are not really familiar with how the local governance process works relating to these issues. You have a general sense of the “key players” at City Hall, on Main Street, and at the local community foundation, but little else regarding the crafting and introduction of policy proposals, and the bargaining, negotiating and pressuring required to see them through. So you seek out organizational partners with this expertise who share your broad social vision, and join coalitions already engaged in the governance process. (These include coalitions of local tenant organizers, criminal justice experts, youth development advocates, concerned parents, and business leaders working to improve youth opportunities). Your contribution to these coalitions is your extensive peer network, your convening power, and your credibility with local leaders.

You see that although these coalitions are race conscious, most have not systematically applied a structural analysis or planning tool similar to the RETOC. So you take opportunities to introduce them to this process, and you work with them to build consensus around a range of goals and priorities that includes your juvenile justice outcomes.

Together, you develop a citywide campaign with these foci:

- *Year One Focus #1: Ending the disproportionate contact between law enforcement and youth of color due to the targeted, aggressive community policing that leads to disproportionate arrests for minor infractions, e.g., marijuana possession, traffic violations.*

Three action priorities might be:

- *To publicize disparities between high levels of surveillance, patrolling and arrests and low rates of serious crime in targeted neighborhoods*
 - *To gather data on and publicize contrasts between the disposition of such arrests for inner city youth and white youth in neighboring suburban communities.*
 - *To strengthen “probable cause” and “informed consent” criteria that allow officers to stop and frisk youth of color*
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- *Year One Focus #2: Creation of more community courts for nonviolent youth offenders, with sentencing structures based on restorative principles rather than the incarceration punishment model.*

Two action priorities might be:

- *Community forums that engage residents in setting up courts, determining where restorative remedies are appropriate, designing sentences, and supervision and accountability structures*
 - *Working with Dept. of Corrections to secure early release of nonviolent juveniles to community re-entry programs.*
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