Talking About Disparities:
The Effect of Frame Choices on Support for Race-Based Policies

A FrameWorks Institute Message Brief

There is an important question in the field of social issues advocacy about how best to explain race-based disparities in outcomes in order to improve public understanding of and support for policies that will address those disparities. The assumption evidenced in practice, for advocates across a variety of issue areas – from early childhood, to education to public health – is that disparities in outcomes should be explained with specific reference to disparities in access to opportunity, quality of programs and services, etc. This is a reasonable assumption and one well suited to communications research. The research presented here looks at the validity of this logic by examining the effects of disparities-explicit and disparities-neutral frames on support for policies that seek to redress differential outcomes. In short, the question posed by this research is, "Does talking about disparities actually get advocates what they want?" The scope of this Message Brief is to provide advocates and experts interested in garnering support for policies that would prevent or remediate disparities with a communications roadmap of how best to get there.

This work is grounded in FrameWorks' multi-year multi -method investigation of how Americans think about race. When advocates enter the public conversation about disparities, they also enter an ongoing conversation about race. Long-standing patterns of thinking that attach to race are evoked merely by the mention of disparities in outcomes. If advocates are not familiar with these traps and habits of thinking, they run the risk of entering public discourse unprepared. Whether discussions about disparities attach to public health or education or early child development, they inevitably are also "about" race, insofar as they draw upon learned assumptions about who lags behind, for what reason, with what available solutions. This toolkit is designed to help those who wish to engage the public in a more constructive dialogue about preventing and ameliorating disparities to do so more effectively.

Since 2003, the FrameWorks Institute has been funded by a group of foundations (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The California Endowment, the Ford Foundation, JEHT Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation) to pursue an ongoing inquiry into how Americans think and talk about race. As with all its research endeavors, FrameWorks

applied multi-method, multi-disciplinary empirical research to discern the dominant race frames in public discourse and to test potential reframes capable of improving support for solutions that would reduce racial inequality. We recommend readers of this Message Brief repair to the individual research reports[1], and the more comprehensive Message Memo, "The Architecture of a New Racial Discourse"[2], in order to more fully understand the findings and recommendations excerpted here.

This brief highlights findings from FrameWorks Institute's recent national experimental survey, sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, that examined the impact on support for race-oriented policies (in the domains of health, education, early childhood, social welfare and immigration) of a number of values frames that had proved salient in the research to date. We were primarily interested in submitting to empirical investigation the question of whether talking explicitly about disparities and discrimination furthers support for policies designed to reduce racial disparities. In more colloquial terms, our questions were:

1) Does talking explicitly about disparities between groups improve support for policies aimed at reducing racial inequity;
2) Does talking explicitly about discrimination in both the quality of and access to programs and services improve support for policies aimed at reducing racial inequality; and
3) How does talking explicitly about disparities and discrimination compare, in terms of support for race-oriented policies, to using broader values frames (such as Ingenuity, Interdependence, Opportunity for All)?

We begin with a review of findings from FrameWorks' extant research. First, we highlight "what we're up against" by describing the shape of public thinking about race (Research Findings, Obstacles and Challenges). We next explain the framing strategies that were empirically tested and found to be incapable of overcoming any of a number of the more pernicious aspects of the dominant racial discourse (The Graveyard of Framing Hypotheses). Finally, we describe for advocates and experts the framing strategies that have been shown to significantly improve support for race-oriented policies (Successful Framing Propositions).

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[1] The full slate of research includes an array of cultural models interviews, peer discourse sessions, media content analyses, talkback testing, survey research and online experiments, all of which, along with a comprehensive Message Memo that explains the findings and recommendations, are posted on the Frameworks Institute website at
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/race.html

[2] Gilliam, F. (2006). *The architecture of a new racial discourse: A FrameWorks message memo*. Washington DC: FrameWorks Institute. Available at:
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/message_memo_race.pdf

I. The Dominant Racial Discourse

As reported in the original Message Memo noted above, FrameWorks' research revealed three core narrative elements that represent the dominant race frame in public discourse, or how Americans currently think and talk about race:

1. *Historical Progress and Personal Racism;*
2. *The Self Making Person; and*
3. *Separate Fates.*

1. 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 in the last 50 years. The improvement, many people believe, is the direct result of changes in antidiscrimination laws and policies. 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 behaviors. What we are left with, then, is the notion that racism exists primarily at the level of the individual person.

Moreover, because racism exists within individuals, it has the capacity to go "both ways", with reverse discrimination, or discrimination of whites, presumed to be just as prevalent and just as problematic as discrimination by whites. When reasoning in this way, further solutions to racial problems are considered misguided if they seek to legislate or litigate change. In other words, the powerful narrative that racism exists only in individuals crowds out any consideration of systemic solutions or policy reforms. Put simply, it is assumed that this residual racism cannot be addressed systemically and may not be addressable at all. That notion also leads directly to the second element of the dominant race frame, the Self-Making Person.

2. Self-Making Person

The Self-Making Person narrative is the notion that one's success or failure in life is individually constructed. In other words, a person's ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on those persons themselves – their character, their effort, etc. This is not surprising, given that individualism and personal responsibility are core tenets of the American belief system.
For some time now, social science research 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 violate the value of individualism as represented in the Self Making Person model. Racial inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to exhibit appropriate values.

The main story line here is that whites (and to some degree Asians and some Latinos) are perceived to reflect the Self Making Person, while minorities in general (blacks and recent Latino immigrants, more pointedly) are seen as the opposite. Importantly, when equally

compelling alternative explanations are not available for people to use in their thinking about race, unconscious beliefs about personal responsibility become extremely difficult to dislodge.

3. Separate Fates

The final piece of the dominant race narrative is the degree to which minority concerns are understood as being disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Whites and non-whites are perceived as having separate fates. Put differently, when the explanations for life chances between whites and non-whites are seen as determined by different forces (self-makingness by whites; failure of self-makingness by non-whites), the result is different paths, different lives.

The notion of separate fates has three important consequences for the public conversation about race:
o It makes it easier to characterize minorities as the "Other" and, by definition, out of the system.
o It allows people to place the concerns of minorities "over there" and not connected to themselves; and
o It makes it much harder to make the connection between minority life chances and structural factors.

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 hold to the core American values of effort and achievement. Seeing the world through this lens makes it extremely hard to see conditions and influences that affect whites and non-whites alike. It makes it hard to see, for example, that we are all bound by the same 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 many racial differences in success or failure.

Negative Consequences of the Dominant Race Frame
People believe that….

1. We have made tremendous progress on matters of race.

2. To the extent that racism persists, it is in the hearts and minds of "bad" people who unfortunately pass it on to their children.

3. Therefore, a certain level of racism is likely to remain constant over time.

4. Dramatic changes in laws and policies have, for the most part, leveled the playing field.

5. Individual responsibility, not discrimination, is the driving value in the modern era.

6. Racial inequality is 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.

The Graveyard of Framing Hypotheses

FrameWorks Institute conducts both qualitative and quantitative research to discover potential reframes for social problems. It is our belief that reframing propositions are just that: testable propositions that are either supported or defeated by scientific evidence. Those that are defeated are relegated to what we often refer to as "the graveyard of framing hypotheses." In this research inquiry, each of the frames proposed was tested to see the extent to which they could move two kinds of indicators – attitudes about race and racial policy preferences. We begin this section by detailing several reframes that were unable to move public perceptions of racial matters, and so were relegated to the graveyard of framing hypotheses.

1. ***Framing Diversity as Strength*** – This narrative asserts that our society is stronger as the result of diverse perspectives and experiences; the country is becoming much more diverse and we benefit from a variety of ideas and cultures.

   Why This Didn't Work: In theory, people agree with the idea that a company or organization is better off as a result of its diversity. In reality, they quickly become stuck in a discussion about hiring the individual with the best skills or talking about political correctness. From this perspective, diversity is an obstacle to overcome, not an asset. Once people reason from this position, it is difficult to get them to think at the level of systems.

2. ***Framing Prevention via The Miner's Canary*** – This frame is built around the idea of the "canary in a coal mine," made famous by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in their book The Miner's Canary. The basic idea is that miners use canaries as early warning detectors for high levels of toxins in the mineshaft. When the canaries get sick, it is time for the miners to come up. When applied to minorities, the analogy is that stress fractures in minority communities (e.g., drugs, disease, loss of jobs, etc.) are an early indicator of trouble for the broader society.

   Why This Didn't Work: This frame ties the value of prevention explicitly to race and evokes, in the general public, two very powerful and negative perceptions of minorities. The first is that they are weak and vulnerable, thus implicitly less deserving. Second, they are a threat to the broader society that must be contained and quarantined. In both instances, the explanation for disparities is located in the sub-group, so the responsibility for the solution falls to the sub-group. If the sub-group is unable to change, then it is the responsibility of the system to control the spread of negative influences. An alternative way of framing prevention, to overcome the entailments associated with the racial explicitness of the Miner's Canary theme, was tested subsequently and with different results (explained below).

3. ***Framing White Privilege -*** We frequently heard concern from advocates in the field that there was little recognition of the concept of "white privilege" by the broader American public. Many advocates hypothesized that an understanding of white privilege might improve support for structural resolutions to racial inequities. We tested a standard description of this

concept in our research; namely, that whites enjoy the advantages of intergenerational transmission of assets abetted by a set of institutional arrangements and practices, exclusionary social structures, and unequal allocations of goods, services, and power.

> **Why This Didn't Work:** The critical learning from this tested narrative is that the dominant and default belief that life chances are determined by the individual trumps the idea that certain groups may have stored "credit" that gives them an advantage. Put differently, because the model is rooted in individual "little picture" thinking, people cannot acquire a "big picture" perspective on how bias in the system accounts for racial disparities.

4. ***Framing Disparities as Structurally Driven-*** Given the role that historical and structural racism plays in both creating and maintaining disparities in access to programs and services, and disparities in life outcomes, it was, of course, natural to test whether framing disparities in outcomes as *about* differences in the quality of and access to programs and services could be an effective strategy in lifting support for policies that will reduce racial disparities. We tested this idea in three ways, the first focused on discrimination driving disparities; the second focused on the value of achieving a color-blind society; the third focused on the value of fairness. More specifically, the first frame, which highlighted *Disparities*, explained that discrimination continues to create differences in the quality of programs and services available to people, which puts some groups at greater risk for problems than others. The second, *Color Blindness*, discussed the value of a color blind society as achievable only when we resolve differences in the quality of programs and services that racial and ethnic groups have access to. The third frame, *Fairness Between Groups*, suggests that some groups are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well, and that this is because programs and services are not fairly distributed among all groups in our country.

> **Why These Didn't Work:** These frames were simply trumped by the negative consequences of the dominant race discourse, noted above, which favor explanations of racial inequities as driven by the inability or unwillingness of communities of color to overcome difficult circumstances. In FrameWorks' most recent experimental survey, not one of these three frames was able to improve support for policies designed to improve racial inequities in the areas of health, education, or early childhood. All of the policies in these experiments were explicitly linked to race – for example, included in the set of early childhood policies was an assessment of support for increasing "access to Early Head Start and other comprehensive, high-quality settings for minority infants and toddlers." This is an important finding, namely, that being explicit about discrimination and the structural roots of inequality, does not, as a communications strategy, improve support for the very policies that will reduce inequity.

In sum, our research found little support for several oft deployed framing strategies – *Diversity as Strength; Prevention – The Miner's Canary; White Privilege; Structural Racism; Disparities/Discrimination; Color Blind Society; and Fairness Between Groups.* In each instance, the dominant understanding of race overwhelmed any attempts to move thinking in the direction of supporting solutions that would address racial inequality. This, of course, was due to

the fact that individual responsibility trumped diversity, prevention, and inherited privilege as explanations for racial disparities.

The communications implications are clear. Effective conversations about race:
- Cannot begin by priming the historical legacy or structural roots of racism;
- Cannot lead the audience to think about the issue as being about people, as opposed to being about situations;
- Cannot focus on the triumphant individual or invigorate the notion of Self-Making Person;
- Cannot pit one group against another, resulting in zero sum thinking;
- Cannot engage in a rhetorical debate about the intentionality of bias; and
- Cannot focus on problems and disparities to the exclusion of solutions.

It is important to clear the practice of these compromised strategies in order to focus on more promising framing propositions, which we put forward in the following section.

Successful Framing Propositions

Values and Metaphorical Models Matter:
The findings noted above on what did *not* work to improve support for policies designed to address racial inequality led researchers to test alternative frames, constructed in a way that held greater promise to shift conversations *away* from the stereotyped and dominant models in discourse and *toward* an understanding of the systemic nature of racial disparities. We further held these frames accountable to improving support for social policies that would reduce racial inequality.

What communicators will note about the findings is that the frames that increased support for policies that work to reduce racial inequality are, in fact, less explicit in priming consideration of racial disparities. Instead, the frames take the conversation out of the realm of racism per se and tap into widely held American values (e.g., ingenuity, opportunity for all) that are, nevertheless, racially neutral. These frames allow people to see the kinds of systemic barriers that constrain life chances, thus moving people away from ideas about the Self Making Person. Second, discussing these values in the context of all 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. We examine each of these successful frames below.

1. *Ingenuity/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, while routinely according inordinate attention to defining the problem, discussing disparities and inequities. What we know from years of communications experience is that this type of communications produces either 1) compassion fatigue, or the sense that there are just too many problems that deserve attention, or 2) an intractability interpretation, or the conclusion that the problem is so entrenched that nothing advocates promote can possibly work.

A common sub-theme is that people are unable to see practical solutions to the race question. Americans perceive there to be a lot of talk about problems related to race and little discussion of solutions. When people are presented with effective solutions, they are able to more clearly understand where the system breaks down and how we might fix it. The Ingenuity/Solutions First frame was successful in encouraging participants to understand racial disparities in terms of system inequity in access to social resources for communities of color, and to talk more concretely about policy solutions.

An Ingenuity/Solutions First frame emphasizes the need to use more innovation in our country and suggests that society needs to apply American ingenuity to promoting programs and improving services that benefit communities. Innovation is prioritized as the way forward.

2. *Opportunity for All:*

Across FrameWorks' research we have found consistent support for the value of ensuring equal opportunity for all. 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. People are able to acknowledge that there are many places where the system falls down. Insofar as we could show systemic breakdowns that left certain populations behind, we were able to move people to think about racial inequality in a fundamentally different and more productive way. As tested in our research, the Opportunity for All frame emphasizes that enhancing opportunity will result in a better quality of life for all. The frame explains that our country's ability to achieve is undermined when not enough people have access to the things that help one succeed. Further, for this reason, we need to ensure that everyone has access to the programs and services that strengthen opportunity in our country.

Cautions with the opportunity frame:
The opportunity frame breaks down if people think it is only about personal networks. When they do, it runs the risk of pushing the discussion back into the dominant frame of an individual- level understanding of racial disparities ("who you know").

The opportunity frame is impaired if it is not construed as opportunity for all, and if it is explicitly racialized in execution. In other words, communicators should avoid introducing cues that would move people to consider that this is "about" certain groups not taking advantage of opportunities that already exist.

3. *Interdependence*

Research revealed several promising effects as a result of using the idea of Interdependence to shift thinking about racial disparities. Interdependence helped participants see the reduction of racial disparities as critical to the common good and beneficial for all members of society. In Peer Discourse Sessions, the Interdependence prime shifted group discussions toward the notion of shared fate and also led to participants to envision solutions and changes. It is important to note, however, that in some discussions, participants suggested that racism is an individual prejudice that can only be addressed when groups became more connected — a process that was seen as beyond the scope of public policy. As we have

repeatedly found, there is little room for consideration of policy solutions when ideas of personal racism enter the conversation.

In our research, the Interdependence frame suggests that what affects one part of the nation affects us all. It suggests that we need to give greater support to programs that get people to work together to solve social problems, which helps bond our communities together and deal effectively with the problems communities confront.

4. *Prevention as Access to Preventive Programs*

In FrameWorks Institute's research on framing Community Health[3], we found that the dominant cultural model of "health individualism" was used to explain disparities in health outcomes. In other words, access to information, personal choices and discipline were judged as the causes behind disparate outcomes. We found that the value of prevention - preventing problems from occurring before they get worse – was particularly successful in shifting the conversation away from health individualism and in improving support for policies that would improve community health. Similarly, in FrameWorks' extensive research on framing early childhood issues[4], we found the construct of prevention salient to the public, but one in need of strategic framing lest it be interpreted *only* as related to health and safety (prevention of disease; booster seats), and not to development writ large. Instead, as executed as part of an explanation about what develops in the child and how that development happens, prevention is explained via the notion of the brain's plasticity – the ability to change behavior decreases over time and getting it right early is less costly, to society and individuals, than trying to fix it later.

In FrameWorks' most recent investigation into framing disparities, researchers explored whether the concept of prevention might serve to shift the conversation away from attributions of individual responsibility for race-based disparities in outcomes toward more public and collective policies that address racial inequalities. We found significant effects of this Prevention frame on support for early childhood, education and health policies targeted toward minority populations. A successful Prevention frame explains that we can prevent problems before they occur, and when we don't, problems become worse and cost more to fix. It is therefore important to make good prevention programs easier for everyone to access.

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[3] Funded by The W.K. Kellogg Foundation and The California Endowment, FrameWorks Institute's investigation into framing food and fitness as a community health issue can be found on the FrameWorks Institute website at:
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/communityhealth.html

[4] The full slate of recommendations and research reports related to framing early childhood issues is available at: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html

5. *Fairness between _Places_*

Across several investigations related to improving support for race-based public policies, FrameWorks has found that priming the conversation with ensuring Fairness Between Groups produced consistently negative results (i.e., reduced support for policies that would address racial inequality). The suggestion that certain groups receive unequal treatment played right into the dominant race discourse and contributed to an "othering" effect – prompting consideration of group identity and out-group worthiness or zero sum thinking in which scarce resources are redistributed from one group to another. In FrameWorks' research investigation on rural issue and community health, however, we found that situating the issue of fairness not in persons, but in places or systems, improved support for redistributive policy. The Fairness Between Places frame is imbued with systems thinking, and identifies solutions that will reduce disparities across communities. When framed as being about place, in other words, the concept of fairness works to structuralize the issue of disparities. The effects of the Fairness Between Places frame on support for race-based policies are significant and consistent.

As executed in our research, the Fairness Between Places frame suggests that certain communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well – that programs and services are not fairly distributed across all communities. The solution is to level the playing field so that all communities have equal access to the resources they need to thrive.

6. *Prosperity Grid*

The Prosperity Grid prime also encourages consideration of differences in access to resources based on place, but does so through a concrete metaphorical idea of a "grid." Drawn from FrameWorks' investigation of Simplifying Models[5], this metaphorical idea of communities being on or off the grid allowed our research participants to discuss structural differences among communities and to support the redistribution of social resources in ways that would plug all communities into the grid.

As expressed in our research, the Prosperity Grid model explained the need to increase the flow of opportunity through the grid of American institutions, such as schools, hospitals, banks, etc. The notion of ensuring that all areas of the country are plugged into the grid – or have strong connections to the institutions that support communities – is a way to reduce racial disparities.

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[5] FrameWorks defines a simplifying model as a research-driven, empirically tested mechanistic metaphor that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor (and) contributes to understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads. For more on simplifying models, see the explanation of FrameWorks' research methods, here: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/methods.html
And the following framing digest, which explains why research is needed in developing effective metaphorical models for complex social problems:
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine37.html

Each of the frames presented above showed great promise in their ability to move both racial attitudes and policy preferences. Each of these frames overcomes "little picture thinking" about individual responsibility, which, in turn, makes it easier for people to have a conversation about systems reform. At the same time, the frames all work to elevate the notion of shared fate among people, thus negating the belief that minority concerns are unrelated to the concerns of the broader society.

Summary Dos and Don'ts

DO invoke common values that apply to all at the top of a communications, and subsequently explain how these values are derailed in minority communities

DO invoke the deeply embedded American values of Ingenuity and Interdependence with respect to solving tough problems

DO remind people of our common belief in Opportunity for All and how failures in the system hurt everyone

DO explain Prevention as promoting programs and improving services that keep problems from occurring in the first place and which should be accessible by all

DO use the metaphorical model of plugging communities into the Prosperity Grid to show people where systems that we all rely upon break down and specify how they might be fixed

DO communicate in a practical tone that emphasizes shared fate

DON'T lodge race, racism or racial disparities at the top of a communications

DON'T prime conversations with ideas about Fairness Between Groups or the historical legacy of racism

DON'T focus on the triumphant individual or other mechanisms that exceptionalize

DON'T focus on problems and disparities to the exclusion of solutions

DON'T engage in a rhetorical debate about the intentionality of discrimination

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Lynn Davey, for FrameWorks Institute, November 08, 2009
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About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis ™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at www.frameworksinstitute.org.