

Navigating Cultural Mindsets of Race and Place in the United States

A Strategic Brief

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Introduction

The places where we live shape our lives. In the United States, a country built on colonialism and slavery, white supremacy shapes our places. Decades of disinvestment, discriminatory policies, and violence based on race have shaped the lives of millions of Americans. Structural racism has shaped and continues to shape where and how Americans live.

However, the link between race and place is obscured and erased by popular narratives that blame oppressed groups for their living conditions. Widespread narratives and dominant cultural mindsets undercut the pursuit of spatial justice—the distribution of power and resources within and between places needed to establish racial equity.

In this brief, we highlight key insights from research into the cultural mindsets that members of the American public use to think about the relationship between race and place. We discuss the ways in which existing mindsets thwart the pursuit of spatial justice, but also highlight how some existing ways of thinking can facilitate this pursuit. We discuss how communicators can most productively navigate this cultural terrain to advance spatial justice.

This brief is accompanied by a [longer report](#) that discusses our research findings at length. That report gets into much greater depth on findings and explores commonalities and differences in thinking across groups.

What are cultural mindsets?

Cultural mindsets are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world and what we do. In shaping how we think, mindsets structure and produce our beliefs and attitudes. Mindsets can alternately normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order.

How does cultural mindsets research differ from public opinion research?

Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences that people hold regarding specific issues. Cultural mindsets research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that shape and explain these patterns in public opinion. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, cultural mindsets research examines *how* people think.

The Impact of Structural Racism on Place

Structural racism “represents the myriad of ways in which racial discrimination is embedded in society through interlocking social, legal, and political institutions and systems, which in turn, reinforce values, beliefs, norms, and resource distribution that privileges whiteness and white racialized identity.”¹ Structural racism has long affected where and how people live in the United States, and places reflect, perpetuate, and amplify the racism that structures US society.

Structural racism shapes places through both the legacy of the past and current policies and institutions. The legacy of the past—from slavery and Jim Crow to redlining and “urban renewal” projects—extracted wealth from Black Americans that was never returned, leaving Black people and communities with fewer resources and constrained mobility. Extractive racial capitalism continues today through discriminatory mortgage practices, exclusionary zoning laws, public-private partnerships in urban development that extract wealth from predominantly Black communities, placement of environmental hazards, and other policies and practices. The legacy of genocide, land theft, assimilation policies, and other forms of violence similarly shape the current experience of Indigenous people and places in the United States. The displacement and destruction of Indigenous communities have contributed to disproportionate poverty levels, higher mortality rates, and higher suicide rates compared to the general US population.² The stolen land has never been returned, with tribes now owning only 1 percent of their historical land (under US law).³ Even on land that tribes have fought to retain, communities have sued the US government to force it to respect the treaties governing this land. Indigenous communities also face a disproportionate risk of experiencing extreme heat and other hazards of climate change because, historically, settlers forced them into less desirable land.⁴

We cannot cover the depth and breadth of how racism has impacted places in the United States. Yet even these brief gestures make clear how profoundly racism is built into places. In turn, advancing racial justice in the United States requires the pursuit of spatial justice.

What do we mean by spatial justice and place?

We understand spatial justice as the distribution of power and resources within and between places needed to establish racial equity. Moving toward this goal will require changes to policies, institutions, and structures to redress the racism built into places. By place, we primarily mean local geographic communities at various levels, including neighborhoods, cities, suburbs, towns, and counties.

We recognize that spatial justice also operates at larger scales—at the levels of provinces or states, countries, regions, and continents—but in this project, we focus on the local level.

While different movements and fields are concerned with different aspects of spatial justice, this general articulation enables us—drawing on learnings from key partners and stakeholders—to identify a few core ideas at the crux of spatial justice that people must understand or support in order to contribute to its pursuit. These ideas are quite basic, but as we discuss below, they are not yet widely shared by members of the American public.

The Ideas behind Spatial Justice: Four Target Opinions

We can think of the following four ideas as *target opinions*—the opinions that those pushing for social justice want to advance.

- **Opinion #1: Structural racism affects place.** Members of the public must recognize that structural racism has historically played and continues to play a fundamental role in shaping how places, especially at the local level, are constituted.
- **Opinion #2: Spatial justice is an important issue.** Members of the public must see spatial justice as an important issue and prioritize policies that advance this end.
- **Opinion #3: Spatial justice is a collective responsibility.** People must believe that society has a responsibility to act through collective institutions to redress racist place-shaping policies and practices and to create racial equity between and within communities.
- **Opinion #4: We can achieve spatial justice by acting collectively.** People must believe that we, as a society, are capable of reshaping places in ways that redress racist place-shaping policies and create racial equity between and within communities.

We used these target opinions to design the research and guide our interpretations of the data. By examining how cultural mindsets lead people to support or reject these basic ideas at the heart of spatial justice, we can understand how the existing cultural terrain alternatively enables or obstructs its pursuit.

Four Key Insights from the Research and Their Implications for How We Communicate

To map how the American public thinks about place, race, and racism, and their intersection today, FrameWorks researchers conducted 52 one-on-one, two-hour interviews with a diverse group of participants from across the country. To ensure that we were able to understand mindsets held across groups, we recruited 10 to 12 members each from five broadly defined racial or ethnic groups. After identifying the cultural mindsets that people use to think about these issues, we fielded two surveys with over 3,000 total participants to examine the relationship between these cultural mindsets and the target opinions.

We identified four key insights from the research. In what follows, we describe each of the insights and explain how specific patterns of thinking make it either harder or easier to promote spatial justice. Generally speaking, cueing mindsets that support or align with the target opinions makes it easier to promote spatial justice, while cueing mindsets that act counter to the target opinions makes it more difficult to promote spatial justice. We offer practical communications advice where possible, with the caveat that further research is needed to identify more specific, evidence-based framing strategies to build understanding of and support for spatial justice.

INSIGHT #1

Many people struggle to understand how policies shape places in ways that (re)produce racial inequities.

Our research revealed that many people struggle to understand how policy shapes places. Across demographic groups and political parties, people frequently see places as an outgrowth of the character of the people who live there and a product of individuals' choices. When thinking in these ways, people don't see how policies shape places. This kind of individualistic thinking is also sometimes applied to thinking about racial segregation, as people attribute segregation to individuals' preferences to be near

others who share their identity or culture, rather than recognizing it as the result of policies. Relatedly, people sometimes see places—housing and community resources—as the natural and inevitable product of a housing market beyond our control. When thinking in this way, people can see how cost constrains people's choices, but they see no role for policy in shaping or reshaping places.

However, there are mindsets that can enable people to see how policies shape places in ways that create and perpetuate racial inequities. At times, people see that government decisions and public policies play a role in designing places. There are also systemic models of racism that enable people to see how racism works through policies, laws, and institutions, although the mechanisms for how this works are often unclear. Most promisingly, at times, people combine this understanding of place as designed with a structural understanding of racism, which enables them to see how place-shaping policies have produced and continue to reproduce racial segregation and inequitable treatment across places. These more systemic models are, not surprisingly, most strongly held and most frequently used by Democrats, Black people, and younger people, but they are available in some form across groups.

How these patterns of thinking make it harder or easier to promote spatial justice

People are unlikely to prioritize policies to advance spatial justice if they struggle to understand that policy shapes place, that racism is built into systems through policy, and that place-shaping policies are a key mechanism through which structural racism works.

Understanding that places are designed through policy choices is foundational to people believing that, collectively, we can impact how places are shaped. It enables people to see that there is collective agency and responsibility around the resources and composition of places. In addition, strengthening a structural understanding of racism is a precondition for people to see how place-shaping policies reproduce white supremacy and undermine racial justice, and how changes in policy are necessary to promote spatial justice.

Implications for how we communicate

More research is needed to identify a range of framing tools for effectively communicating the complicated links between policy, place, and people. One thing we do know, from our recent research on [how to talk about neighborhood revitalization](#), is that a two-step explanation works well. Step one: Describe the effects of a particular policy on a specific place. (*How was its appearance altered, its landscape reshaped, or its functionality impacted?*) Supportive data can help relay the magnitude and materiality of the consequences. (For example, “60 percent of the area’s trees were cut down.”) Step two: Connect those place-based changes to concrete outcomes for people. (*For example, fewer trees = less shade = higher rates of exhaustion and heat stroke among residents.*)

More generally, strengthening structural thinking about racism is a precondition for people to understand and support spatial justice. Explaining how place-based policies create racial inequities can potentially be a way to deepen structural thinking about racism in general—as racial justice organizers and advocates have already done through repetition of the example of redlining (an example we increasingly hear mentioned by research participants). A broader array of such examples could potentially help broaden thinking about structural racism beyond the top-of-mind issues of police violence and employment discrimination.

INSIGHT #2

Familiar dehumanizing mindsets that pathologize the cultures of Black and Latinx people lead to harmful views of Black and Latinx neighborhoods.

As we have found in other FrameWorks projects, and as many other researchers have found, members of the public—most often, but not exclusively, white people and Republicans—at times draw on dehumanizing mindsets about Black and Latinx people. Sometimes people rely on the assumption that Black and Latinx people would face less racism if they assimilated into the dominant culture. At times, people draw on racist mindsets that assume Black communities specifically are dysfunctional. Many Black neighborhoods have faced state-sanctioned disinvestment over generations, but when people draw on these mindsets, they don't see the role of structural racism in this disinvestment. Instead, these stereotypical and harmful views of Black and Latinx people lead people to blame the individuals who live in these neighborhoods for the state of the environment and lack of resources. Thinking in this way, people associate low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods with disorder—things like trash, crime, and noise—and see disorder in the physical environment as a reflection of the supposed moral disorder of these communities.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to promote spatial justice

These dehumanizing and pathologizing mindsets about Black and Latinx people are straightforwardly racist and harmful. The application of these mindsets is directly harmful to Black and Latinx people and undermines the pursuit of spatial justice. These mindsets buttress white supremacy and provide cover for systemic racism. By blaming Black and Latinx communities for problems that are due to a long and continuing history of racist policy, these mindsets undercut the pursuit of racial and spatial justice. These mindsets undercut understanding of the role of structural racism, as well as a sense of collective responsibility for addressing disinvestment, concentrated poverty, and other problems created by racist policies. When people assume that the individuals who live in a place are at fault, they conclude it is the residents' responsibility to fix their own neighborhood.

Implications for how we communicate

It is tempting to want to tackle ugly and dehumanizing stereotypes head on—to call them out by name and refute them forcefully. Unfortunately, this tactic routinely backfires. Framing research shows, time and time again, that repeating harmful ideas, even with the intention to quash them, has a way of feeding them even more oxygen. Instead, we need to take an asset-based approach. Future research is needed to help us identify targeted framing tools for shifting toxic mindsets and dislodging white supremacist thinking. For now, we can begin to counter harmful associations by introducing, and continually reinforcing, more productive ones. It's critical to highlight the many positive features and beautiful attributes of Black and Latinx cultures and neighborhoods and celebrate what makes them unique. Over time, these ideas will infiltrate the public narrative and gradually leave less and less room for dehumanizing deficit thinking.

We can also displace these mindsets by providing structural and policy explanations for place-based challenges, as we discussed above. This can help people understand where blame should actually be placed—on disinvestment and other racially inequitable policies.

INSIGHT #3

Some mindsets lead people to deny the reality of racism and the role of race in shaping place. Yet people frequently can and do see racism as an ongoing problem, and— sometimes—one that affects places.

“Color blindness” is a familiar and insidious idea that undercuts the reality of racism. When people draw on this idea, they assume that race only exists in talk and that if we just stopped talking about race, racial division and discrimination would disappear. This mindset is used to deflect claims of racial injustice and justify ignoring them.

This idea is often accompanied by another mindset that minimizes concerns about racial injustice—the idea that racism *previously* existed in the United States but has steadily declined over time and largely disappeared. This mindset does not fully deny that racism exists, but it does deny the scale and scope of present-day racism, particularly systemic racism.

When applied to thinking about place, this idea that we've progressed beyond racism turns into the idea that residential segregation and inequitable treatment between places is really a product of class, not race. Since racism is assumed to be a thing of the past, patterns of segregation and inequitable treatment are explained as by-products of class and affordability constraints, which themselves are typically seen as a natural and inevitable aspect of modern society.

While these racism-denying mindsets exist, there are, alongside them, more productive ways of thinking that lead people to see racism as an ongoing and urgent problem, and—sometimes—as one that affects places. For example, one mindset, relied on especially by those who have experienced racism, sees both structural and interpersonal racism as violence. Understanding racism as violence could be a step toward acknowledging the urgency of racism and may be a tool to build solidarity between those who experience it. Recognizing the urgency of promoting racial justice generally is a critical precondition for prioritizing spatial justice.

At times, members of the public—including not only Black people and other people of color but also many white people—recognize that we all have a responsibility to address racism. As we discuss below (see Insight #4), people can understand racism in several distinct ways, and each of these leads to particular ways of understanding how racism affects place.

How these patterns of thinking make it harder or easier to promote spatial justice

When people think in “color blind” ways, or see racism as in the past, they—inadvertently or not—support white supremacy by dismissing the existence or severity of present-day racism. These patterns of thinking undermine the belief that structural racism affects places by minimizing the impact of racism generally. When the impact of racism is minimized, it is unlikely that people will see issues of spatial justice as particularly urgent or important. “Color blind” ways of thinking are especially likely to absolve people of responsibility for redressing racism.

However, the understanding of racism as violent could be a productive frame for helping people understand the urgency of addressing racism and, by extension, see the importance of making spatial justice a priority. Understanding racism as violence may also spur a sense of collective responsibility for addressing spatial justice.

Implications for how we communicate

The idea that “racism isn’t real” represents a significant barrier to productive communications—about spatial justice and so many other things. More framing research is needed to identify strategies for effectively countering mindsets and narratives that minimize and undercut the reality and severity of racism. Here’s what we know already: Explaining the impacts of structural racism by directly connecting the outcomes to harmful policies can undermine attempts to deny or minimize the impacts of these policies. Further research should be done to explore helpful ways of explaining structural racism and what needs to be done to advance racial and spatial justice.

INSIGHT #4

People can think about racism in a range of ways—with different implications for thinking about place.

People can think about racism in different ways—through an interpersonal model, which understands racism in terms of personal bias, and through several different systemic models. These different models of racism lead to different ways of thinking about how racism works in and through places.

When people think about racism strictly in interpersonal terms, they see racial residential segregation as the result of individual behavior. Most prominently, they attribute segregation to white people's deliberate attempts to distance themselves from Black people and other people of color, through white flight and by making neighborhoods unwelcoming for Black neighbors. At other times, people—often Black people and other people of color—view racial segregation as, at least in part, the result of people of color not wanting to live in places where they experience the violence of racism. These mindsets acknowledge the effects of racism on place, but through individualized and interpersonal pathways.

At times, people think of racism in interpersonal terms yet also recognize that when leaders are biased, that bias can shape policy and have systemic effects. This opens the door for a recognition of how policy can produce racial inequities in and between places, but it leads people to focus on a single solution—getting racist leaders out of power.

Another, more genuinely systemic mindset understands racism as a collective inheritance. This mindset locates racist systems primarily in the past, focusing on slavery and Jim Crow, but recognizes that this past has an ongoing legacy, both culturally and economically. When people think in this way, they see how racist stereotypes and narratives have been passed down and, most notably, how racist regimes created racial wealth gaps that persist and continue to affect people's lives. When people think about place, they widely recognize that wealth and income shape where people can and do live. In turn, when they understand wealth gaps as a racist inheritance, they see how racism continues to shape where people can live and the resources available to them.

As we noted above, there is also a fully structural model of racism—an understanding that racism is built into systems and structures throughout American society, not just in the past but also in the present. This mindset is quite thin—people often aren't sure exactly how any of this works—but, when coupled with an understanding of places as designed, it opens up the recognition that racist policies have shaped and continue to shape where people live and what places are like.

How these patterns of thinking make it harder or easier to promote spatial justice

These different models of racism bring into view different aspects of the ways in which racism shapes place and different ideas about what must be done to advance spatial justice. The collective inheritance and structural mindsets are particularly important for building an understanding of how racism is collectively built into places. These mindsets must be strengthened, along with understandings of the role of policy in structuring and shaping places, in order for people to prioritize spatial justice as a shared imperative.

Implications for how we communicate

By understanding these different models of racism, communicators can strategically navigate conversations about racism and place, making sure to cue the models that enable people to see and understand the specific issues they want to discuss. For example, when communicators are engaged in political campaigns, they may want to lean into the idea that leaders' views and biases have systemic effects. Yet when they're arguing for deepening investment in neighborhoods that have been subject to systemic disinvestment, they can tap into the idea that we've inherited the legacy of a racist past that has enduring effects. More generally, communicators must highlight examples of how current policies continue to perpetuate racial inequities between communities in order to strengthen a structural understanding of racism and help people see the wide range of policy changes needed to advance spatial justice.

Conclusion

The mindsets that members of the American public use to think about race and place frequently get in the way of spatial justice. Dehumanizing understandings of Black and Latinx communities and mindsets that lead to the denial of racism's reality or severity undercut the pursuit of spatial justice in obvious ways. So too do mindsets that naturalize places or that explain the characteristics of places by pointing solely to individual choices and community character.

Yet there are some existing ways of thinking that, if strengthened and deepened, can support the pursuit of spatial justice. The existing recognition that places are designed through policy, when coupled with a structural understanding of racism, enables people to see how place-based policies (re)produce racial inequities and creates a framework for understanding the types of changes that are needed to promote spatial justice.

Understanding this cultural terrain is critical as we look to advance spatial justice in specific communities and in American society as a whole. While further research is needed to understand which frames and narratives can change this terrain in more fundamental ways, this brief offers communicators an initial resource as they work to navigate this landscape.

Endnotes

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