
**Operationalizing A Structural Racism Framework:
A Guide for Community Level Research and Action**

The Aspen Roundtable
Structural Racism and Community Revitalization Project

July 2002
Stacey A. Sutton

Section One: Racial Equity and Governance Narrative

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| A) Current Snapshot of Community | Issues addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ <i>Demographic composition</i>❖ <i>Inter-group dynamics</i>❖ <i>Community-Region relationships</i>❖ <i>Distribution of power</i>❖ <i>The local economy</i>❖ <i>Regional alliances</i> |
| B) Reflections on Change | |
| C) Vision for the Future | |

Section Two: Regional Dynamics

- | | |
|---|--|
| A) Healthy Region Indicators and Racial Disparities | Issues addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ <i>Regional identity</i>❖ <i>Dominant players and decision makers</i>❖ <i>Public policy and the region</i>❖ <i>Strengthening regional dynamics</i>❖ <i>Building strategic alliances</i> |
| B) Institutional Practices & Public Policies | |
| C) Points of Leverage | |

Section Three: A Domain Specific Agenda

- | | |
|--|--|
| A) Indicators & Disparities | Issues addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ <i>“Hot topics” in: Education, Employment and Criminal Justice</i>❖ <i>Racial disparity data</i>❖ <i>Powerful institutions and inequitable practices</i>❖ <i>The impact of public policy</i>❖ <i>Important historical moments</i>❖ <i>Building strategic alliances</i> |
| B) Progress and Retrenchment | |
| C) Institutional Practices & Public Policies | |
| D) Points of Leverage | |

Section Four: Moving Toward Racial Equity

- A) Visions for the Future:
Defining the Place You Want to Create
- B) Indicators:
Assessing the Effect of a Structural Racism Framework

C)

Section One: Racial Equity and Governance Narrative

Purpose:

This section will provide a series of questions and insights designed to help users interrogate the conventional wisdom on *racial equity** and power in the community and region. It is intended to encourage leaders in the community building system to construct a new narrative on racial equity, one that highlights incongruities and widespread misconceptions about race and disparate social, economic and political outcomes. The added value of this research protocol will be the rigorous application of the *structural racism** framework, which purports a dynamic relationship between contemporary racial disparities, and the spatial, institutional and individual sorting mechanisms that continuously produce and reproduce inequities over time.

Accordingly, a new racial equity narrative informed by the logic of the structural racism analysis should consist of: (a) a *current snapshot of community*, with a focus on a number of crucial variables, such as demographic shifts, inter-group dynamics, resource allocation, power dynamics, and the local economy, that both shape and mirror the conventional wisdom on race; (b) *reflections on community change*, with a timeframe appropriate for unearthing critical historical moments for change, and patterns of racial progress and retrenchment; and (c) *visions for a racially equitable future*, with an emphasis on strategies for building strategic alliances, governance coalitions, and a race-conscious change in the community development leadership culture.

Sample Questions:

Research Questions: Unearthing Inequitable Racial Outcomes	Probing Questions: Applying A More Critical Structural Racism Lens
1. What is the socioeconomic composition of the groups and neighborhood?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Categorize the racial and ethnic groups in the various neighborhoods according class and race.➤ Where do the poor whites live? Where do poor blacks, Latinos and Asians live? Where does the middle class live?➤ Is there income parity among middle class whites, blacks, Latinos and Asians?➤ Are there racial/ethnic differences among the “middle class” in terms of: occupation, status, neighborhood composition, quality of life, etc.?
2. What is the conventional wisdom on race?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Begin to unearth the hidden hostility and indifference regarding race. How is race discussed? What aspects of race and the allocation of resources to different groups are discussed? How are disparities normalized?
3. What are the accepted racial stereotypes? What are the ramifications on the group and other groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How are different racial and ethnic groups assigned positions in society?➤ Which groups are considered: hard working, educated, able to assimilate, “model minorities”, lazy, comfortable living in cramped quarters, willing to “pull themselves up”, willing to work for low wages until they advance, hostile, etc.
4. What is the perception of the racial/ethnic hierarchy? How does it manifest in the neighborhood or region?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How does sorting happen through the media, the educational system, employment, criminal justice, housing, etc. Which groups are continuously made better off by the perpetuation of stereotypes.
5. What institutional practices perpetuate the stereotypes? How?	
6. Describe the “powerful” institutions / governing bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How were these governing bodies constructed?➤ For any particular issue (e.g., education, economic development, environmental justice, youth development, etc.) where are the tables of power?
7. What types of decisions do they make?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What is the racial and ethnic composition of the participants?➤ Who sits at the decision making table? Who is excluded from the table?
8. What are the primary groups affected by the decisions? How do they participate in the decision making process?	

* see glossary for explanation of terms

Section Two: Regional Dynamics

Purpose:

The questions and insights in this section will be designed to help users identify the spatial aspects of racial disparities, by pointing to the public policies and institutional practices that maintain the racial order in society. While community building leaders often point to local action, operationalizing a structural racism analysis highlights the importance of understanding and attending to the linkages between regional and neighborhood outcomes. Interrogating regional dynamics through a structural racial lens is intended to help users (a) outline the *regional identity* and develop a set of *regional indicators*; (b) identify critical *decision makers* and “power brokers” by locating the places in the region that decisions are made; and (c) delineate *points of leverage* at the regional level as opposed to a purely local agenda for change.

Sample Questions:

Research Questions: Unearthing Inequitable Racial Outcomes	Probing Questions: Applying A More Critical Structural Racism Lens
1. What are the <i>strengths</i> of the region?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are the attractions of the area in terms of industry, culture, public services, environment, etc.? ➤ How equitably are the regions' strengths distributed among the different racial/ethnic groups? ➤ Who gets to take advantage of regional strengths?
2. What <i>challenges</i> does the region face?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Outline issues such as the economy; gentrification and displacement; polarization; educational outcomes; skills mismatch; environment, etc ➤ Which groups are most widely affected by regional challenges?
3. Which sections of the region are <i>better off</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Define the parameters of “better off” sections of the region ➤ Why are these sections considered “better off”? ➤ Which group(s) have access to these sections in terms of owning property, renting, operating a business, access to public education, access to entertainment venues, etc.? Are any groups denied (implicitly or explicitly) access to these sections of the region?
4. Are the region's resources clustered into particular areas? Where? Why?	
5. Which sections of the region are worse off? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Define the parameters of “worse off”? ➤ Why are these sections considered “worse off”? ➤ Which group(s) occupy these sections in terms of owning property, renting, operating a business? How do local public services (including education) compare? Do residents have access to entertainment venues? ➤ What types of industries are located in this area (how do these businesses measure on environmental concerns? hiring? beautification issues? etc.) ➤ Where are these sections on the map
6. How is the regional economy dispersed? Who bears the burden? What are some of the indicators to help measure how regional costs are dispersed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What factors contribute to racial stratification in the region? ➤ How have housing mortgage policies contributed to racial disparities? ➤ How have zoning regulations contributed to racial disparities? ➤ How have shifts in the location businesses altered the municipal tax base and affected public services? ➤ How have shifts in the population altered the tax base and affected public services?

Section Three: A Domain Specific Agenda

Purpose:

This section is designed to assist users interested in attending to racial equity in particular domains: employment, education, and criminal justice. For each domain, the protocol will provide a set of research questions that can help construct a thematic narrative about present and past racial inequities in the region, which are maintained through public policies, institutional practices, and obstructive individual behaviors. By unearthing the “hot topics” in each domain and pointing to the embedded disadvantage of “blackness” and privilege of “whiteness,” the users will be challenged to rethink the meaning and application of existing disparity data, as well as begin to develop strategies for collecting new data. The strength of this section should hinge on (a) displaying the ways that important historical moments of racial *progress* in each domain are followed by a realignment of policy and practices, thereby creating periods of racial *retrenchment*; and (b) pointing to places where civic actors could have *leverage*.

Employment

Sample Questions:

Research Questions: Unearthing Inequitable Racial Outcomes	Probing Questions: Applying A More Critical Structural Racism Lens
1. Is your regional economy in a period of growth or decline? What effect did the recent economic expansion have on the region?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ During the recent economic expansion, which racial/ethnic groups were made better off? Which groups remained fairly constant? ➤ Why were some groups able to advance and not others? ➤ Was any group made worse off? If no, how did the public perception of abundant opportunities affect those who were unable to advance? ➤ Where does the blame for underemployment reside?
2. What are the growth industries and occupations in the region? What racial/ethnic groups are obtaining these opportunities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are the particular occupations within the service and manufacturing sectors, public and private sectors that are expanding or declining?
3. What are the major differences in the local economy (over the past three decades)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Has the economy undergone shifts toward advanced services? ➤ Has the role of the manufacturing sector changed, how? ➤ What were the primary industries in the region? What are they now? How and why did the change occur? What regional (or local) resources attract employers?
4. How do these economic shifts correlate with demographic shifts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What was the timing of economic shifts and central city “white flight”?
5. How has the industry composition changed? How has this affected the types of jobs available?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How has the local economy been restructured? Which groups were able to maintain their position in the labor market? Which groups were most vulnerable? Which groups were able to find new opportunities? ➤ What new opportunities arose as a result of economic changes?
6. What groups were able to essentially remain constant in terms of access to economic resources?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What groups were able to maintain their assets? ➤ What groups gained a foothold in society through programs such as the GI Bill and other educational and home ownership programs? Who was precluded from fully participating in such programs? What are the long-term ramifications?
7. What are some of the policies that have allowed some groups to advance and others to remain constant or become worse off?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ List public programs in the areas of: employment, education, health, criminal justice, housing, finance/banking that advantaged some and helped create embedded disadvantage for others.
8. What groups of people were made worse off by corporate restructuring and the new economy? What types of jobs did displaced workers find? How did they compare?	

Section Four: Moving Toward Racial Equity

Purpose:

The purpose of this section is to offer a set of inquiries that essentially “check-in” with users and provides way for measuring change in underlying assumption about racial disparities. Additionally, users can reflect on possible strategies for civic actors working toward racial equity at the local and regional levels.

Sample Questions:

Follow-Up Questions:

Unearthing Inequitable Racial Outcomes & Strategies for Action

1. What is your vision for a racially equitable future?
2. Describe the neighborhood. Describe the region.
3. What SYSTEMS, public policies, institutional practices and popular representations need to be targeted for change?
4. What other organizations have a vested interest in changing these systems?
5. Is there potential room of alliances?
6. What specific SKILLS and CAPACITIES are necessary to affect these systems and move toward racial equity?
7. In what ways are you thinking differently as a result of the Structural Racism Framework?
8. In what ways has this new thinking affected STRATEGIC ACTION?

Glossary

Racial Equity

In translating a structural racism perspective into concrete, local and regional community building strategies, one important guiding principle is “racial equity.” Two ideas deriving from the character of American democracy are central to our understanding of this concept. Recognition that there is a pluralistic aspect to American society is one of them. Americans simultaneously identify with individualism as well as various group memberships. Racial group membership is particularly important because, historically, race has mattered so much to social outcomes. Indeed, the overwhelming verdict of those outcomes since the founding of the nation is that there has been a racial hierarchy, which most favors white Americans. Racial group outcomes, then, are legitimate indicators for evaluating national institutions that claim to allocate resources and opportunity in ways that are race-neutral.

Another fundamental American idea is social equity, or to use a more straightforward term, “fairness.” This is commonly understood in the context of the American liberal social contract promising that government will provide equal opportunity in return for adherence to an “creed” of personal progress through individual “worth”: that is, personal industry, discipline, ability and, of course, civic virtue. In other words, there are obligations on both the collective and individual sides of the equity equation.

Most Americans might agree that an equitable society should allocate benefits and burdens across its citizenry according to individual worth. Since “worth” as defined above is universal to any human population, the inference to be drawn is that social equity would be synonymous with “racial equity,” (or with equity across any set of randomly defined social groups). In a socially equitable America there would be no permanent association between racial status and social outcomes. This is because scientists widely agree that race is a social construction, and that individual merit is randomly distributed across races.

When we acknowledge the reality of racial hierarchy, then, racial “proportionality” becomes a reasonable standard for determining broad social equity and for evaluating social outcomes. In an equitable America, no racial group would enjoy a disproportionate share of its benefits, or bear a disproportionate share of its burdens.

All individuals with the same inherent capacities and resolve would share the same likelihood of success or failure.

Racial equity acknowledges, in a sense, that the inherent limitations of our political economy and culture will generate unequal outcomes. But it suggests that these are tolerable as long as they are merit-based, and not racially driven.

In the short term, it may be more within the scope of local community builders to identify and possibly influence governance mechanisms that contribute to racial inequity. Of course, this is no small challenge. But local community builders could work pragmatically toward securing the fair share of resources and opportunities owed to the communities of color they serve.

Structural Racism

Structural racism refers to the complex ways in which historical oppression, culture, ideology interact through our political economy, public policies and institutional practices to produce social dynamics that reproduce and reinforce a hierarchy of color that privileges whiteness and marginalizes blackness. One of these dynamics is “racial sorting.” This label describes processes operating at the spatial, institutional, cultural, and cognitive levels in our society to maintain white privilege. Another dynamic can be described as “racial progress and retrenchment.” This captures the historical and ongoing reality that various forms of civic resistance to racial inequity bring discrete areas of racial progress. But at the same time, it recognizes that those racial equity gains tend to be undermined by racial outcomes that may remain uninvestigated and unchallenged in related areas. The two broad dynamics may play out differently in different regions and policy domains, but the general proposition is that “sorting” and the “progress-retrenchment” syndrome continually work to preserve historically embedded racial disadvantage