

Case Studies: Framing Matters

How we frame issues of race matters. Consider the false dichotomies we often use when we think and talk about race: Black/White; Post-racial/Civil Rights; Race is not important/Race matters. These binaries are “frames” that are used to make sense of the world quickly. Post Hurricane Katrina media coverage provides a particularly stark example in which the Black/White frame reinforces implicit bias that pits Black against White to the detriment of building unity and community in a time of collective need. Yahoo News published two similar photographs on the same day, using racialized terms to describe the images:

- A. “A young [African American] man walks through chest deep flood after **looting** a grocery store in New Orleans”[1](#), vs.
- B. “Two [white] residents waded through chest-deep water after **finding** bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina”[2](#)

To counter implicit bias and the dominant framework that presumes scarcity, when we tell our stories:

- **Lead with values** by reminding people of their conscious values, particularly when their conscious values and unconscious emotions are in conflict,
- **Define “we”** to foster empathy and identification with those who have been wronged, rather than reinforcing an us vs. them mindset[3](#),
- **Reframe** opponents’ legitimate critiques into a story that creates a national or global “calling” to do something about collective indifference, and
- **Offer an alternative** or a solution to the problem facing us

The excerpt below from Barak Obama’s speech, *A More Perfect Union*, demonstrates the use of effective ways to talk about race and build unity:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible[4](#).

The above examples demonstrate that how messages are framed affects how they are perceived. The post Hurricane Katrina example is divisive, while the excerpt from Obama’s *A More Perfect Union* exemplifies the principles offered by Drew

Westen and in the *Race Matters: How to Talk About Race Tool Kit*, emphasizing the importance of creating empathetic space and building connections through personal narratives⁵.

Techniques to Use:

- Frame using the norms and values of your audience
- Emphasize ‘We’, ‘Us’, and ‘Our’
- **Acknowledge** that individualism is important but healthiest individuals are nurtured by a community invested in everyone’s success,
- **Underscore shared values:** Unity, Security, Opportunity, Community, Mobility, Redemption, Fairness, and Liberty.

Techniques to Avoid:

- Present disparities only
- Frame using Us vs. Them
- Separate people in need from everybody else
- Glide over fears
- Dismiss individual effort

Research suggests that these values are deeply held in the United States:

Equity	Linked Fate	Opportunity	Security	Redemption
Mobility	Liberty	Fairness	Community	Unity

Since research strongly suggests that order matters when talking about structural racialization, try using this framework to develop your story⁶.

1. Associated Press, Tuesday, August 30, 11:31 AM ET
2. Agence France-Presse, 3:47 AM ET
3. *ibid.* p. 226
4. Obama, Barack, *A More Perfect Union*, March 18, 2008
5. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2006) *Race Matters: How to Talk About Race Toolkit*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={0A76C6CA-93A3-4F2E-B58B-5DB2585BE938}>
6. Casey, A.E. (2006). Race Matters toolkit, How to Talk About Race. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={0A76c6ca-93a3-4f2e-b58b-5db2585be938}>; and Center for Social Inclusion for The Kirwan Institute’s Diversity Advancement Project (2005). “Race, Framing and the Public Conversation on Diversity. What Social Science Tells Advocates About Winning Support for Racial Justice Policies. Thinking Change”. From <http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/publications/?url=the-diveristy-advancement-project-thinking-change>

Lifting Up Values in Your Stories

Facilitation Goal: Practice telling stories that make space to have a constructive conversation about race and that create a shared and urgent need to act.

Instructions: Research suggests that these values are deeply held in the United States:

Equity	Linked Fate	Opportunity	Security	Redemption
Mobility	Liberty	Fairness	Community	Unity

Since research strongly suggests that order matters when talking about structural racialization, try using this framework to develop your story. What values do you want your story to lift up?

Lead with Values:	<i>All students should have access to good teachers and well resourced schools.</i>
Counter Reality, Lead with WE:	<i>However, today, there are not enough resources going to our schools. There are many low-income rural white communities that do not have access to highly qualified teachers. In urban areas, many black and Latino schools are also under resourced and have inexperienced teachers. Even middle class, suburban schools are feeling the strain of inadequate resources.</i>
Define WE to be Inclusive:	<i>We, as a state, are failing our students.</i>
Values Based Call to ACT:	<i>This is not only unfair it is not smart.</i>
Offer/Solution:	<i>We need to assure that all students have the opportunity to go to a well-resourced school with high quality teachers.</i>