
Dismantling Structural Racism: A Racial Equity Theory of Change

Background

The Roundtable has developed a process for crafting a *Theory of Change* (TOC) for communities that are planning new initiatives, or articulating theories for programs that are already in existence. This is a “backward mapping” process to define the intermediate and early requirements for achieving a desired long term change. It allows reformers to answer the simple, yet crucial question: “What will it really take for us to achieve the long term change we want?”

Backwards mapping is pursued to sketch out an adequate set of intermediate and early requirements for achieving long term change. While it is always hard to know what is “adequate,” planners should generally stop working backwards when they have reached the step that makes sense to them as an early goal for their work.

This document blends “theory of change” logic with a *Structural Racism* (SR) analysis. In so doing, it offers a methodology for designing initiatives that promote *racial equity*. We call this methodology 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 disparity outcome in a given context. By setting long-term change targets and identifying the early and intermediate requirements or benchmarks that are logically associated with those targets, it “unpacks” a change process and identifies specific challenges and barriers that must be addressed.

The basic premise of the RETOC is that chronic racial gaps in important opportunity areas like 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 endure and adapt within the political economy. Public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations are shaped by structural racism to reproduce outcomes that are racially inequitable.

Structural racism is a very complex, dynamic system. However, the RETOC isolates three critical elements for special attention by social change planners: policies and institutions, cultural representations, and self-sustaining power dynamics.

Before turning to a discussion of these elements and steps in the mapping process, a brief explanation of what is meant by “racial equity.”

Racial Equity?

Racial equity is taken to be the desired alternative to structural racism. Structural racism maintains a status quo of white privilege. This is the de facto social norm. Racial equity paints a radically different social outcomes “picture” in which race is not consistently and predictably associated with disadvantage. Rather than the society of white privilege we still have, racial equity envisions one in which race is not associated with substantive opportunities and outcomes – good and bad.¹

RETOC’s Strategic Focus

The RETOC focuses strategically on three essential features of structural racism system’s “hardware” and “software.”

- **Public policies and institutional practices** across sectors that are vital to wealth accumulation and opportunity (e.g., public education, homeownership, employment, criminal justice) are important “hardware” elements. These take the form of legislation, regulations, and the standard, “colorblind” operating procedures of public and private agencies.
- **Cultural representations** include language, narratives, frames and knowledge relating to race that form the conventional wisdom. These words, discourses and cognitive cues constitute a kind of popular racial “software.” In the conventional wisdom about race generated by this software, white privilege and racial outcome disparities are normal, disconnected from history and institutions, and largely explainable by individual and racial group characteristics.
- Along with the hardware and software elements above (which we call “PPRs”) the structural racism system includes an important self-sustaining power dynamic: a cycle of **progress and retrenchment**. This works to maintain a steady state of white privilege wherever there is progress toward racial equity. For example, some criminal justice observers believe that civil rights gains of the 1960s and 70s have been significantly reversed by policies and practices that overincarcerate young men of color, and by cultural representations that mark African American males, especially, as unsuitable for full social inclusion.

¹ Racial equity is not conceived in the zero-sum sense that, for instance, would say that more whites or Asians should be in poverty or prison. Rather it assumes that our nation has sufficient resources to offer everyone the same basic life chances regardless of race.

Summary of the RETOC Steps

Step 1: What We Want: *Define our Racial Equity Outcome*

Produce a goal statement that specifies the racial disparities that are to be reduced or eliminated in a given place. If this statement outlines a comprehensive vision, tease out its components and determine which of these are highest priorities.

Step 2: What We Need: *Identify the “Building Blocks” for Change*

Identify the minimum necessary requirements for moving toward the desired change. Think of these as the “building blocks” of a new structure; in other words, specify what conditions we believe will add up to our desired racial equity outcome.

Step 3: What Stands in the Way: *Identify Public Policies, Institutional Practices and Cultural Representations (PPRs) that shape each Building Block*

For each building block, identify public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations most likely to determine whether or not it becomes a reality, and stays in place.

Step 4: What We Must Know: *Understand the Politics of Change – the “Nuts and Bolts” of Local Power*

Develop a picture of the key public, private and civic powerbrokers and stakeholders associated with your PPRs. This picture should reveal how governance works in your particular context: where the critical decisions are made, what current and past alliances influence specific issue-areas, who are critical “gatekeepers” and “authorizers” on particular policy issues, media postures, and so on.

Moreover, historical understanding this governance landscape is vital not only for making progress, but for limiting *retrenchment*. Knowing the history of local opposition to equity initiatives is vital for anticipating the type, sources, and timing of resistance to progressive gains.

Step 5: What We Must Do: *Gearing up for Action*

This presumes that a decision has been made to work aggressively to change specific policies, institutional practices and/or cultural representations. With these targets in mind, here are two broad suggestions:

a. Conduct a capacity assessment

Assess your capacity (political, organizational, resource, programmatic, networking and communicative) for achieving the desired racial equity outcome. Take note of important gaps in your own capacities.

b. Develop a list of stakeholders for strategic coalition building

Identify specific groups and organized interests likely to have a stake in the structural changes sought. These are potential strategic allies. Other strategic allies may have to be sought to fill critical resource gaps pinpointed by your capacity assessment.

c. Begin your action planning

Conclusion: What to keep in mind of when using the RETOC?

- *The RETOC process is a prerequisite for strategic planning, not a planning tool.*

It provides the actual planning process (which comes later) a better understanding of where and how race might be operating to cause persistent racial disparities. The RETOC thus suggests areas and types of intervention that may not be readily apparent to social change actors -- directions that might not come out of planning approaches that are race-neutral, and less meticulous about clarifying planners' assumptions at every level.

- *The process laid out by the RETOC is a guide, not a "cookbook."*

The RETOC is only a set of logical questions for defining problems, visions and assumptions in sufficient detail to see structural elements that may otherwise be overlooked. Ultimately, you must decide what is relevant to your context, and how much weight you give to each step.

- *Racial disparities are caused by the cumulative effects of multiple and integrated institutions and systems.*

The latter include systems of knowledge and meaning that can be particularly difficult to define. It might not be easy to see how these connect directly to your local disparity issue. Therefore, the RETOC will likely point to some actions that seem only indirectly related to the desired long-term change. You will have to set strategic priorities based on your capacities.

- *It is important to remember that achieving long-term change generally requires change in some areas beyond the reach and capacity of your group.*

Be realistic and objective in assessing your capacity to effect change. Sustainable improvements on the multiple fronts that generally present themselves usually require broad and deep collaboration. Typically, many different stakeholders have to work in concert; each contributing distinct resources and capacities for achieving racial equity.