



# The Structural Racism Concept and Its Impact on Philanthropy

by Daniel Martinez HoSang

In the mid-1990s, public policies to promote racial justice faced a new round of attacks. In California, the bluest of blue states, voters approved ballot measures eliminating public affirmative action and bilingual education programs – ending public education and health care for many immigrants, and expanding the state’s already massive and deeply racialized prison system. Affirmative action programs soon fell in six other states, and the rise of “colorblind” rhetoric among liberals and conservatives alike seemed to signal a decisive transformation in public attitudes about civil rights and racial justice.<sup>1</sup>

Critics argued that as the nation grew more tolerant and diverse, attention to race in public policy had become divisive and outdated. They contended that race-conscious remedies such as affirmative action and school desegregation were themselves racist. If individual racial hostility was declining (as public opinion surveys suggested), and racially discriminatory laws were illegal, an explicit focus on race within public policy was unjustified. The era of *post-racialism* had arrived.<sup>2</sup>

## The Emergence of Structural Racism Analysis

Within this political context, a network of racial justice policy groups, academics, activists and think tanks developed new theories explaining the enduring impact of racial hierarchies across a broad range of issues – even in the absence of intentional animus. Rather than emphasizing the individual dimensions of bigotry and prejudice, their analysis highlighted the systemic nature of racism and its interactive and cumulative impact across multiple institutions.

Out of these explorations, the concept of “structural racism” gained currency in the national discourse on race in the late 1990s. The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, which convened a series of meetings on the concept and authored several related publications, defines structural

racism as “a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with ‘whiteness’ and disadvantages associated with ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time.”<sup>3</sup>

The term “structure,” by definition, refers to relationships between entities or parts within a broader system. In contrast to prevailing conceptions of racism that focused on individual prejudice or incidents of discriminatory conduct, the structural racism framework explains (1) how multiple institutions interact to reinforce and reproduce inequities between racial groups; and (2) how on a cultural level, “common sense” explanations for racial group differences minimize the impact of ongoing and historic state-sanctioned racism. Racialized disparities in outcomes – as in the areas of incarceration, health, education or income – became the lingua franca of the structural racism framework. These disparate outcomes demonstrate the impact of structural racism on individual life chances, even in the absence of intentional discrimination.

In many ways, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) was a product of this groundswell of research and analysis on why racism persists. PRE was formed to educate and engage funders about the importance of incorporating a racial equity and structural racism analysis within their grantmaking. In 2004, PRE helped convene a Structural Racism Caucus to link practitioners and academics to further develop and popularize a structural racism analysis. The group included representatives from the Aspen Roundtable, Applied Research Center (now called Race Forward), the Center for Social Inclusion, and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University. Over several years, caucus members discussed opportunities to link academics, funders and practitioners around a structural racism analysis, and to disseminate research, communications strategy and analysis.<sup>4</sup>

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Program officers at several foundations – including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation – lent critical support to these early meetings and publications. They became interested in the ways that a structural racism analysis could be brought to bear on diverse areas of grantmaking such as public education, youth development, public health and criminal justice. Funders supporting place-based strategies centered in a particular locality or city used the framework to consider the interaction of different institutions (i.e., public schools, criminal justice and public health) and their impact on racialized outcomes.

From the mid-2000s on, more foundations began supporting efforts to build a knowledge base on structural racism – including the Akonadi Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute and the Rockefeller Foundation. Others were exploring how to apply the structural racism lens to their grantmaking across different issue areas, such as the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, the Surdna Foundation and The California Endowment. Beginning in the late 1990s, the Annie E. Casey Foundation incorporated a racial equity framework across many of its initiatives and publications with an explicit focus on ending racial and ethnic disparities

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in child welfare and other systems. More recently, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s “America Healing” initiative included an explicit program area focusing on racial equity.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, the impact of efforts to popularize a structural racism analysis can be seen across a number of issues and sectors. In the last decade, some funders have gained new awareness of systems and structures that are racialized, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, that cut across conventional grantmaking areas. There is also more attention to racial disparities in household wealth, health outcomes, graduation rates, criminal prosecutions and sentencing. Some public entities, including city governments (most notably the the City of Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative), school boards, public health agencies and child welfare agencies, have also sought to incorporate the analysis into their work and to more explicitly address the racial inequities they identify.<sup>6</sup> Advocacy coalitions in several states, including Washington, Oregon and Iowa, regularly publish racial equity report cards to publicize the voting record of legislators on specified racial equity issues.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as public recognition of racial disparities

has grown, these examples suggest that there is a growing counterbalance to the notion of colorblindness.

## Challenges: Translating Structural Racism Analysis to Action

While a structural racism analysis has certainly been adopted in some sectors of philanthropy and in a number of policymaking circles, this approach has also faced important challenges.

First, relatively few issue-based grassroots organizing groups have directly taken up the language of structural racism, if not the framework. For example, a recent report by the Ear to the Ground Project to identify promising new directions for community organizing and movement building interviewed 150 organizers in 30 communities, many of whom work on racial justice issues and organize within communities of color. Yet the report makes no mention of the structural racism framework.<sup>8</sup> Peruse the websites and publications of the leading community organizing networks and intermediaries nationally, including the Center for Popular Democracy, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Center for Community Change and others, and you will find a similar pattern; those working on racial justice issues do not generally reference structural racism.

To be sure, many organizing groups and networks working on issues such as immigrant rights, public education, LGBTQ issues, reproductive justice, access to financial services, mass incarceration and workers’ rights have incorporated a racial justice analysis in their campaigns. But few of these groups have explicitly drawn from a structural racism framework, or reference or incorporate the term in their work. It may be that these organizations are using different language and terms for the same concepts; or that as issue-based efforts, their public attention remains focused on particular institutions rather than on broad structures of racial power. For these or perhaps other reasons, few grassroots community organizations make use of the structural racism concept in their organizing campaigns.

Community-based organizations and leaders did not generally play an active role in developing the structural racism concept or analysis at the outset, which perhaps explains some of this gap. But another limitation may simply be that organizations or advocacy groups attempting to win measurable and concrete reforms in accordance with their

mission statements in specific issue areas (such as public education or housing) find it difficult to advance policy reforms involving multiple institutions and their interaction. To put it another way, while a structural racism framework has had some impact as a useful *descriptive* tool – helping to name or define outcomes by race – it may have less impact as a *prescriptive* tool to generate concrete policy-reform solutions and strategies.

What would deeper incorporation of a structural racism framework look like in community organizing? We might see fundamental innovations in organizing campaigns and advocacy efforts: new policy demands, research directions, communication tactics, recruitment methods and broader strategic directions. These new organizing strategies would explicitly link disparate racialized outcomes to novel issue frames, explanations and narratives. In short, organizers and advocates would use the framework to demonstrate the role race plays in reproducing and naturalizing the relations of power, exploitation and hierarchy of the issues they address.

Second, the emphasis of the structural racism analysis on correcting racial disparities as the primary measure of racial justice has been subject to some debate. As scholar and activist John A. Powell has recently explained, “While disparities may be an expression of structural inequalities, the absence of disparities does not mean a racially just society.”<sup>9</sup>

By way of example, if the elimination of disparities alone indicated the presence of racial justice, the closing of swimming pools in the South in response to desegregation could be described as a move towards racial equity. Using another example, a prison system that incarcerates millions of people would be considered “racially just” as long as the racial percentages of prisoners mirrored their groups’ share of the general population. The same could be said for rates of poverty, unemployment, homelessness or exposure to environmental toxins.

A focus on racial disparities alone, Powell continues, also “presumes that the baseline position of the dominant, higher-performing group is the appropriate goal for reducing or eliminating the disparity.” That is, it risks naturalizing or presuming a “White norm” that should be the standard policy goal to measure racial justice (for example White rates of wealth, income, graduation, home ownership, etc.) rather than rethinking the ways such systems must be more fundamentally transformed.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars Adolph Reed Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun have argued that race-disparity discourse often describes inequitable outcomes by race without offering any systematic or nuanced analysis and explanation of the underlying causes. That is, we may know that African-American and Latino households lost a higher proportion of their wealth during the recent financial crisis as compared

to White households. But reporting that disparity, in and of itself, may not give us any new insight into the broader causes of household debt over the last 30 years, or its contribution to historic levels of income inequality. As they explain: “Repetitiously noting the existence of segregated neighborhoods and how they decrease property value (real and perceived) and increase the likelihood of subprime mortgage is to identify a result, albeit one that is surely repellent. It does not tell us with much exactitude what institutions, policies, actuarial models and systems of valuation produce those results.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, in some cases, political groups with diametrically opposed interests might cite the same racial disparity data to justify their policy agendas. For example in *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, conservative scholars Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom use race-disparity data to argue for heightened enforcement of “zero tolerance” school discipline policies, an end to tenure for teachers, increased use of high stakes testing, and expansion of charter schools. Others use the same data to justify their opposition to these very same policies.

For Powell, Reed and Chowkwanyun, a structural racism analysis must be tied to a political analysis and vision of social transformation. Describing or criticizing disparities alone is not sufficient. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, explicitly linked his vision of racial justice in the U.S. to the broad eradication of poverty and the end of militarism. For Dr. King, the goal was not simply to correct disparities within particular systems (like employment or health care), but to profoundly transform the orientation of those systems and the relations of power that they naturalize.<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, the application of a structural racism framework need not be reduced to an analysis of racial disparities alone, and this was not the intention of the original proponents of the framework. But perhaps because disparities are relatively easy to document and communicate, they often stand in for the entirety of a structural racism analysis.

## Moving Forward

In retrospect, the structural racism framework has made an important contribution to discussions among funders, academics and some policymakers about the continued importance of race in structuring a broad range of social, economic and political problems in the country today. At a moment when a growing number of commentators declared that the nation was somehow “beyond race,” this work bolstered arguments that racism and racial hierarchies continue to matter in important ways.

Yet the very benefits of such a broad framework also reveal some of its limitations. As others have argued, to acknowledge the presence and injustice of racial disparities represents the start – rather than the conclusion – of a

transformative political analysis and strategy. How might a structural racism analysis offer novel explanations (rather than just descriptions) of important social crises? How can we ensure that a structural racism framework remains dynamic, sensitive to important variations across time and place? What new political alignments and policy transformations can a structural racism framework help to produce?

Funders, scholars, policy advocates and other practitioners must engage these questions, and demonstrate the ways that a structural racism framework can, not only describe the world, but also transform it.

One example of such transformation is the growing number of school districts that have eliminated or dramatically reduced their reliance on “zero tolerance” school discipline policies. Zero tolerance policies first came under scrutiny because of evidence of dramatic racial disparities in their application. But rather than simply call for “equity” in the application of such policies (or even their heightened enforcement, as Thernstrom and Thernstrom advocated), youth organizers and other advocates called for a broad overhaul of the foundations of school discipline policy, emphasizing every student’s right to learn, the value of alternative dispute resolution models such as restorative justice, and the long-term consequences of pushing students into the criminal justice system. After more than a decade of organizing, these alternative principles have finally received national attention including a recent endorsement by President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder.<sup>13</sup> This work has explicitly challenged the racialized basis of such policies, while also pursuing solutions that push beyond the framework of equity alone.


To support and develop similar models and examples, funders should keep in mind that the success of any effort to dismantle structural racism will depend on accurate analysis of a specific context. This requires a nuanced account of the histories, politics and conflicts that have produced the conditions that need to be changed. A structural racism

framework is best conceptualized as a template that organizations and analysts can use to engage and explain the issues they address – it cannot be applied in the abstract. It is a question as much as an answer.

Philanthropic support could assist grantees in deepening the application of a structural racism analysis to their work with the goal of creating more robust organizing and advocacy approaches. Moving beyond merely reporting racial disparities to explain the ideological, cultural and institutional mechanisms that underlie such conditions framework requires groups to engage in a process, in partnership with local allies, intermediaries and academics. While much of the contemporary culture of philanthropy emphasizes short-term deliverables and returns, funders committed to ending structural racism must be prepared to afford groups the time, space and resources that this type of analysis requires. The impact could be transformative.

## Endnotes

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**Daniel Martinez HoSang** is an associate professor of Ethnic Studies and Political Science at the University of Oregon. He is the author of “Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California,” which explores the history of organizing campaigns around racialized ballot measures in California since 1945. Before graduate school, HoSang worked as a community organizer and trainer for 10 years in the San Francisco Bay Area. He currently serves on the boards of directors of several social justice organizations, including Forward Together, the Alliance for a Just Society, and the Partnership for Safety and Justice.