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## **Talking and Thinking About Race**



## Why we need to talk about race

Research suggests that even when we are not talking about race, we are thinking about it. This notion is easy to understand when we consider how visible race has been in the social, economic, and political history of the United States. Race has been—and continues to be—a strong force in determining how opportunity is distributed in our society. Race influences many of the important decisions we make in our personal, professional, and social lives: where we live, who our friends are, which political candidates we vote for, and which social programs we support. For most Americans, all of these issues include some considerations of race.

Research also suggests that most of us are guided by a set of very subtle “symbolic attitudes” that develop from our earliest experiences—attitudes like racial prejudice or liberal/conservative political ideology. These attitudes, often invisible to us, are so powerful that they can control our position on critical issues involving race—issues like affordable housing, affirmative action, school integration, and even the size and role of government.

In his book, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, Drew Westen tells us that “Irrespective of what we may feel and believe consciously, most White Americans—including many who hold consciously progressive values and attitudes—harbor negative associations toward people of color.” These subtle, unconscious, negative attitudes are often referred to as “implicit bias.”

Symbolic attitudes operate in what researchers call our “implicit mind,” the part of the brain that we commonly call the “subconscious.” Very often, these implicit attitudes are in conflict with attitudes located in our conscious mind, or what we explicitly think about race. Westen suggests that our subconscious attitudes typically are less egalitarian than our conscious attitudes. When we talk about race, we have the opportunity to examine and challenge these attitudes and to reinforce our conscious beliefs. If we do not talk about race, our more negative implicit attitudes about race are left unchallenged and can grow more powerful.

# Why framing is important in the dialogue on race

When we use the term “framing,” we are talking not only about the way that messages about race are presented to various audiences, but also about the way that these messages are actually received and interpreted by these audiences. At an individual level, framing gives us our view of reality. Typically, messages about race are framed to appeal to both our conscious and subconscious attitudes. Messages that appeal directly to implicit (subconscious) attitudes are often called “primes.” For example, a political campaign message that says Barack Obama “cannot be trusted” might be framed to stimulate the negative associations toward people of color that are shared by many White Americans. However, research suggests that if a person does not have a negative racial frame, a negative radicalized message will be rejected, no matter how strongly it is framed.



## What we mean by colorblind racism

Many Americans believe that all citizens have an equal opportunity to achieve the “American dream,” regardless of race. This notion—and the attitudes, behaviors, and policies that stem from it—is called “colorblindness.” Individuals who embrace a colorblind frame often search for information to support it. So, for example, successful people of color like Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods, and Barack Obama are offered as proof that anyone can achieve success in American regardless of race.

A colorblind interpretation of racial hyper-segregation in our cities similarly focuses on individual autonomy, holding that people of color freely choose to live with each other. However, research suggests that many Blacks and Latinos live in low-opportunity, segregated communities not because of preference, but because they

face a range of structural obstacles to securing housing in stronger, more diverse neighborhoods. As groups, African Americans and Latinos continue to face greater barriers to opportunity than Whites in all critical life domains. Colorblind attitudes, behaviors, and policies often have disparate racial effects, and therefore function as forms of racism.

These misperceptions about racial equality in the United States can lead to opposition toward policies and programs designed to eliminate barriers to opportunity in housing, education, health care, and other critical life domains. If we fashion our programs and policies as if race and ethnicity no longer matter in the distribution of social and economic opportunity, these programs and policies are likely to deepen racial inequity, regardless of their intent.



*At the Kirwan Institute, we are aware that racialized meaning harms all people and distorts our democratic ideal and our economic vitality. Racial discrimination ultimately hinders the life chances of Whites as well as people of color, although not in equal measure. We strongly believe that racial justice is in everyone's interest and consistent with strong democratic ideals.*

The Kirwan Institute  
works to **create** a just  
and inclusive society where all people  
and communities have  
**opportunity**  
to succeed.



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