A NARRATIVE GOAL FOR EQUALITY

Measuring Individual Progress Toward Demanding, Creating, and Maintaining Systemic Equality—A Strategic Research Synthesis

INTRODUCTION

This strategic research synthesis aims to define the "narrative goal" needed to end systemic racism—the minimum set of narrative elements that, if believed and acted upon by everyone, would represent progress toward systemic equality.

As measurement specialists, we recognize that measuring progress toward transforming systemic racism requires precise definitions of our destination. We can only evaluate whether stories successfully combat systemic racism if we first define what success looks like.

Complicating the problem is that we are experts in story and media consumption by individuals. While systemic racism is conventionally measured by observing disparities in group outcomes in the aggregate, we need a way to assess an individual's ability and willingness to contribute to a more equal system.

While not intended as a comprehensive literature review of systemic racism, this synthesis organizes the psychological constructs associated with narratives about race and thriving to identify the necessary elements of transformative change.

To organize the psychological constructs that build up to a narrative goal, we identified three essential pillars that form our shared vision for ending systemic racism. These pillars represent the fundamental beliefs and understandings that must be widely held to achieve systemic equality, and they guide our measurement framework:

- A shared vision for an equal future
- A shared vision for human agency
- A shared vision for the needed action

The framework developed here will inform our next phase of research: conducting survey-based studies to understand which audiences hold which beliefs and attitudes about race, allowing us to better target and evaluate narrative interventions.

PRODUCING THIS SYNTHESIS

This initiative extends our work on the power of media to shape a positive, pluralistic future through narratives about health equity, democracy, immigration, and more. It emerges from Harmony Labs' participation in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Mindset Consortium, a community of practice convened to advance more effective, aligned, and coordinated efforts to understand, address, and shift mindsets that prevent racial and health equity in America.

To create this synthesis, we reviewed literature on systemic racism from scholarly sources and from advocacy with a focus on these questions:

- How is systemic racism measured, and how might a diminishment be measured?
- What policies and principles do advocates suggest might lead to the diminishment of systemic racism?

Not in scope for the review presented here are the *causes* of systemic racism or the *conditions* under which it persists. This is not because those elements are not important—indeed, we conducted a separate review of those and will include questions about many of them in a major survey on the subject we conduct in Q1 of 2025. However, the scope of this review is specifically the goal we want audiences to agree to achieve.

We used Perplexity and Google Scholar to search for literature and created a survey of that literature for review by a panel of

project advisors including <u>Dr. Aletha Maybank</u>, MD, MPH, Health and Narrative Strategist; <u>Marya Bangee</u>, Former Vice President of Representation and Inclusion Strategies at Disney; <u>Sun Joo Grace Ahn</u>, Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of Georgia; <u>Nikko Viquiera</u>, Deputy Senior Vice President of Programs at Race Forward; and <u>Tanaya Winder</u>, author, poet, motivational speaker, and Director of People, Culture, and Belonging at the NDN Collective. We used advisor input and resources to extend the initial survey into a proposed strategy, and then we solicited feedback on the strategy from a broader set of stakeholders including the RWJF Consortium participants. The result is this set of minimum viable principles which represent the future free from systemic racism.

PILLAR 1: A SHARED VISION FOR AN EQUAL FUTURE

The mechanisms of systemic racist harms are, of course, systems (Boynton-Jarrett, Raj, & Inwards-Breland, 2021)[1]. When researchers measure systemic racism, they create indices or averages of disparities across housing, incarceration, health, education, political power, and other systems (Wien, Miller, & Kramer, 2023).

That means that the goal for our systems—the one that we need to work toward—is average equality of outcomes or the absence of disparities. When we measure whether a system "works," it's not working until racial economic stratification is eliminated (Darity, 2005); average flourishing across race groups is equal, and average disparities do not exist. While individual differences in outcomes will naturally occur, what matters is that these differences don't rise to the population level in the form of significant patterns.

The ACLU (2021) terms this "systemic equality," the opposite of systemic inequality. They write:

> *The goal is to build a nation where every person can achieve their highest potential, unhampered by structural and institutional racism.*

Race Forward describes a similar construct in their definition of racial justice:

> *A vision and transformation of society to eliminate racial hierarchies and advance collective liberation, where Black, Indigenous and People of Color, in particular, have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive.*

EQUALITY IS THE GOAL; EQUITY IS PART OF THE PROCESS

Some authors including Kendi (2019) use the term equity to refer to this same equality of average outcomes or the absence of systemic disparities:

> *Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing. An example of racial equity would be if there were relatively equitable percentages of all three racial groups living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties.*

However, other advocates and organizations, including, for example, <u>Race Forward</u> use the term "equity" to refer to the *process* of obtaining our goals, not just the outcome. They write:

---

[1] We are aware of a distinction between structural racism which concerns these kinds of institutions and systemic racism which also includes the individual and cultural forces which keep the institutional harms in place (Boynton-Jarrett, R., Raj, A., & Inwards-Breland, D. J. (2021)). In this project, we intend to take on the causes of both of these, and for simplicity, we refer to the problem to be solved overall as "systemic racism".

Racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color.

Equity-objective policies are often contrasted with equality-objective policies. While both approaches aim for equal outcomes, they differ in how to get there. An equity approach recognizes that achieving equal outcomes may require unequal or disproportional distribution of resources based on need, while an equality-driven approach advocates for identical distribution of resources to all. In this work, we think it is important to distinguish between individual support for a *goal* of systemic equality (where every person can achieve their highest potential, unhampered by structural and institutional racism), and support for the *process* of equity-driven resource distribution. Both of these are necessary parts of the solution here, so we use the terms to separate these two very different ideas.

SYSTEMIC EQUALITY IS EQUALITY OF AVERAGE FLOURISHING

Race Forward's definition refers to "thriving" which is different from ACLU's "achieve their highest potential." Since this document is primarily concerned with finding ways to measure these constructs at the individual level, we propose to measure "flourishing" which is associated with tested measures. Models of flourishing (e.g., Diener, 2010) identify achievement or mastery as just one dimension of positive human experience. Ekman, & Simon-Thomas, 2021 define flourishing as:

an overarching quality of life, "the good life," grounded in everyday connection, positivity, and resilience

Researchers have noted that individual perception of thriving is influenced by the very system barriers we hope to replace here with systemic equality (Willen, et al., 2022). That means that individual flourishing is a good measure of progress toward the end of systemic racism, but for it to represent justice as defined by Race Forward, it must come with power and agency. We propose that justice-rooted flourishing is:

an overarching quality of life, "the good life," grounded in everyday connection, positivity, resilience, and the ability to shape one's own path

Tactically speaking, this means that we add the concept of perceived power and agency—an internal locus of control—to the set of measured concepts in flourishing.

We have named "average flourishing" here, and this is important. The end of systemic racism won't mean that everyone flourishes all the time (which would be both unrealistic and a worthy project in itself); it will mean that there is no longer any difference between groups in the degree to which they flourish on *average*.

THE FUTURE MUST BE EQUAL

The set of measures we create must be the necessary and sufficient set of beliefs that—when everyone in America believes them—will represent the end of systemic racism at the individual level.

This set of beliefs must include beliefs about (1) what the future will be like (2) who is responsible for getting us there, and (3) what those people need to do. We propose that the analysis above yields a simple answer to the first of these. For systemic racism to come to an end, everyone must agree that:

The future must be equal. In the future, people of all races will be equally likely to experience flourishing including

connection, positivity, resilience, and power.

PILLAR 2: A SHARED VISION FOR HUMAN AGENCY

Harmony Labs' goal is to understand the individual psychological processes that we can measure to know whether stories and other narrative interventions are helping to create systemic equality. To do this, we need to do more than measure whether people hold racist beliefs; we need to understand how people as "systems-programmers" can allow systems that create racist harms to arise and exist, and how individuals can demand, build, and maintain systems that heal those harms and actively create equality. The systems themselves provide structures for disparities, but the root cause of all these harms is ultimately human (Wien, Miller, & Kramer, 2023).

INDIVIDUALS PROGRAM SYSTEMS

Here, we think of anyone who contributes a rule or priority to any kind of system as a "systems-programmer," so this group of individuals includes politicians and machine learning engineers but also teachers who make classroom rules, food bank workers who make delivery routes, parents who set policies for play dates, and so on. Of course, different people in different roles have very different degrees of power to affect systemic racism itself, but they are all contributing to creating, maintaining, and changing the cultural and institutional systems within which we operate.

SYSTEMS PROGRAM INDIVIDUALS

The relationship between systems and individuals is deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The influence here arises from individuals, but it swiftly becomes bidirectional (Skinner-Dorkenoo, 2023). The rules that people encode in systems affect who thrives, and those patterns create descriptive norms or perceptions of what is normal or typical, and those descriptive norms can easily become "injunctive" norms or beliefs about what should and should not be true. All humans tend toward system justification. We use "appraisals of legitimacy, fairness, deservingness, and entitlement; judgments about individuals, groups, and social systems; and the doctrinal contents of religious and political belief systems" (Jost, 2021) to tell ourselves stories about why "how things are" is "how things should be."

Justifying our systems helps us feel safe. It promotes social stability, and it's something members of most groups do. Under certain circumstances, members of less powerful groups can be just as likely to justify the system as their more privileged counterparts (Osborne, Sengupta & Sibley, 2019).

INDIVIDUAL APATHY IS A MAJOR BARRIER TO PROGRESS

We assert that for us to demand, create, and sustain systems which actively generate equality, we all need to know not just what those systems should produce (equality of outcomes), but who is responsible for getting us there. In our review of the literature, we noted a growing interest among researchers in the barrier that racial apathy poses to progress on systemic racism (Brown, Culver, Bento, & Gorman, 2023).

ALL OF US ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING AN EQUAL FUTURE

While the original responsibility for programming systems which create racist harms lies largely with White people, we all live with the consequences of that programming and must work to interrupt the impacts of systems on our beliefs about how

things should be. For us to create systemic equality, we offer that everyone needs to agree that:

All of us are responsible for creating an equal future. Systems are entirely products of human programming. Only humans can change systems to remediate historical racist harms and prevent new future harms. All of us are affected by systems, and all of us have the power and responsibility to make new rules in every aspect of our lives that actively create equality.

PILLAR 3: A SHARED VISION FOR NEEDED ACTION

We considered using specific policy support to measure whether people understand what needs to happen, and we found more than a hundred policies in the context of health equity alone from the American Heart Association (Albert, et al., 2024) and others. This is because solving the problem won't be a matter of pulling a few levers; it really requires us to understand not just what is wrong but how it went wrong so we can fix it and prevent its recurrence.

To make the "how" of solving systemic racism more accessible to all individuals, we sought broader principles for ethical systems design. The rich literature in AI (including equality-promoting AI) delivered. Many thinkers and publications have noted that AI can reinforce systemic racism especially by encoding racist opinions and preferences and turning them into rules in a black-box system (e.g., Zalnieriute & Cutts, 2022). In response to that and other harms of these systems, scholarship is awash in proposals for the design of responsible AI (see Goellner, Tropmann-Frick, & Brumen, 2024 for a systematic review).

SYSTEMIC HARMS ARISE FROM SYSTEMS PROGRAMMERS OPTIMIZING FOR OBJECTIVES OTHER THAN EQUALITY

The human process which produces rules and priorities for systems is goal-setting. We decide what rules to put into a system based on what we want to get out, such as efficiency or profit. Racist harm is sometimes an explicit goal, as in government food programs intended to interrupt cultural foodways for Indigenous peoples (Mihesuah, & Hoover, 2019). Sometimes the explicit goals are efficiency, profit, or something else, but systems-programmers are also unintentionally influenced by implicit racism (Banaji, Fiske, & Massey, 2021). And sometimes, especially recently, systems programmers have attempted to actively ignore race but use race-biased data or otherwise to introduce racism into their systems (Lynch, et al., 2021).

For instance, Weber et al. (2020) describe an incident in which a credit card company issued much lower rate limits to women than to men even though gender was not included as a predictor in the credit rating algorithm. They observe that the women who were selectively targeted by this discrimination tended to be married, and they offer that the bias could have come into the algorithm through an occupation variable—homemaker—because men and women are not equally represented within that occupation. We don't actually know what happened in this case, but it's easy to imagine many cases in which simply deleting race groups from the set of features which contribute to algorithms doesn't eliminate all the representations of systemic racism that could exist elsewhere in the system.

Thus, explicit racism, implicit racism, and the widely criticized concept of "race-blindness" all produce systems which create, propagate, and perpetuate racist harm.

WHEN WE ACHIEVE EQUALITY, WE WILL HOLD OUR ALGORITHMS ACCOUNTABLE FOR EQUALITY

Because active racism isn't the only cause here, we can't prevent new racist harms just by being "not racist." For as long as systems use inputs based on history (whether those are quantitative data or just our perceptions of what is normal) to set expectations for what can and should be true in the future, we will need to keep actively double-checking that those rules create equality because when we stop and begin optimizing for other things, we will risk reintroducing these biases.

By accountability here, we specifically mean that algorithms which measure the success of systems from education to banking must include metrics for efficiency, profit, and whatever goals those systems have and *also* metrics which measure racial equality in positive outcomes.

As an example, Weber et al. (2020) propose one such approach to measure the success of a mortgage lending algorithm. They propose a metric called distributionally robust fairness (DRF) and a companion method to enforce it which observes unfairness in the algorithm and then generates data to illuminate the specific cases which are affected and updates the algorithm until it is fair for all combinations of cases.

DRF is just one example of a specific operationalization of accountability for mortgage lending in particular. It is math, but it's a mathematical implementation of the principle that when Black women (Combahee River Collective, 1977)—or Black trans-women (Lavender Rights Project, n.d.)—are free, we will all be free. The impacts of these biases are worse for some populations defined by intersecting identities, and we must work to prevent recurrence not just at the center of each race group, but in subgroups.

TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY OF OUTCOMES, WE WILL NEED TO OFFER EQUITY IN OPPORTUNITIES

Above, we noted that equality and equity sometimes overlap, but here we define equality as the objective, and equity as a process we can use to reach that objective. In particular, the racist inequities in outcomes (disparities) created by systems won't solve themselves. We will need to make it easier for some groups to achieve flourishing until disparities in those outcomes are gone.

Importantly, this doesn't mean that the only tools that systems programmers have are race-based. Many advocates are interested in programs like baby bonds (ACLU, 2023) which use income, not race, to distribute resources, for instance.

EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE NECESSARY PROCESSES FOR HEALING AND FLOURISHING.

While we do not think that everyone in America needs to know the specific policies that will change (since there are hundreds), we do believe that everyone must agree that:

> **Healing requires equity.** Historic inequities won't heal themselves. To achieve equality now, we will need to make it easier for some groups to flourish while we achieve balance and eliminate disparities.

> **Maintaining equality requires measuring equality.** Systems design follows the rules we give it. Only by consistently measuring and monitoring the equality metrics we built into the system can we hold ourselves accountable for actively preserving equality rather than reverting to disparities.

A PROPOSED NARRATIVE GOAL

The goal of this review was to create a comprehensive set of measures that could help us assess whether we're achieving the change in individuals needed to achieve changes in systems. We think all the people need to believe these things:

The future must be equal. In the future, people of all races will be equally likely to experience flourishing including connection, positivity, and resilience.

All of us contribute to creating an equal future. Systems are entirely products of human programming. Only humans can change systems to remediate historical racist harms and prevent new future harms. All of us are affected by systems, and all of us have the power and responsibility to make new rules in every aspect of our lives that actively create equality.

Equity will drive healing. Historic inequities won't heal themselves. To achieve equality now, we will need to make it easier for some groups to flourish while we achieve balance and eliminate disparities.

We will maintain equality by measuring equality. Systems design follows the rules we give it. One of those rules will have to be racial equality for us to preserve the equality we create.

WHAT'S NEXT: MEASURING EXISTING AUDIENCE NARRATIVES

This strategic research synthesis gives us a helpful picture of a set of beliefs that individuals can hold which will demonstrate that they understand and are committed to ending systemic racism. Collectively, we can use these as the basis for a narrative goal that can help us measure progress towards this end goal.

But we also know that these aren't the beliefs that all audiences hold today, rather these are the narratives we want to move them closer to. In order to understand the starting point for audiences, our next step is to develop and deploy a new, large-scale quarterly research initiative designed to explore and track deep narratives people have about race, wealth, climate, connection, and more. The first iteration of the Deep Story Survey System will launch in March 2025 to more than 4,000 people and will be focused on narratives about race and flourishing, giving us a first look at where people are relative to the narrative goal established here.

The aim is to generate a set of foundational insights that can inform the Consortium's ongoing work to address and counter structural racism, and inspire new storytelling practices that help people imagine and create systemic equality.

REFERENCES

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). (2023). Baby bonds: A path toward prosperity for future generations. Retrieved December 26, 2024, from https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/baby-bonds-a-path-toward-prosperity-for-future-generations

Albert, M. A., Churchwell, K., Desai, N., Johnson, J. C., Johnson, M. N., Khera, A., Mieres, J. H., Rodriguez, F., Velarde, G., Williams, D. R., Wu, J. C., & American Heart Association Advocacy Coordinating Committee. (2024). Addressing structural racism through public policy advocacy: A policy statement from the American Heart Association. Circulation, 149(6), e312-e329.

American Civil Liberties Union. (2021). Ending systemic racism requires ensuring systemic equality. ACLU.

Banaji, M. R., Fiske, S. T., & Massey, D. S. (2021). Systemic racism: Individuals and interactions, institutions and society. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6, Article 82.

Boynton-Jarrett, R., Raj, A., & Inwards-Breland, D. J. (2021). Structural integrity: Recognizing, measuring, and addressing systemic racism and its health impacts. *EClinicalMedicine*, 36.

Brown, T. N., Culver, J., Bento, A., & Gorman Jr, Q. (2023). Changes in Racial Apathy Among White Young Adults: A Five-Year National Panel Study. *Sociological Inquiry*, 93(1), 35-58.

Combahee River Collective. (1977). The Combahee River Collective Statement.

Darity, W. (2005). Stratification economics: the role of intergroup inequality. *Journal of Economics and finance*, 29(2), 144.

Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D. W., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 97(2), 143-156.

Goellner, S., Tropmann-Frick, M., & Brumen, B. (2024). Responsible Artificial Intelligence: A Structured Literature Review. arXiv preprint arXiv:2403.06910.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). How to be an antiracist. One world.

Lavender Rights Project. (n.d.). Your trans family. Retrieved December 26, 2024, from https://www.lavenderrightsproject.org/your-trans-family

Lynch, E. E., Malcoe, L. H., Laurent, S. E., Richardson, J., Mitchell, B. C., & Meier, H. C. (2021). The legacy of structural racism: associations between historic redlining, current mortgage lending, and health. *SSM-population health*, 14, 100793.

REFERENCES CONT.

Mihesuah, D. A., & Hoover, E. (Eds.). (2019). Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health. University of Oklahoma Press.

Osborne, D., Sengupta, N. K., & Sibley, C. G. (2019). System justification theory at 25: Evaluating a paradigm shift in psychology and looking towards the future. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 58(2), 340-361.

Race Forward. (n.d.). What is racial equity? Race Forward. https://www.raceforward.org/what-racial-equity-0

Skinner-Dorkenoo, A. L., George, M., Wages III, J. E., Sánchez, S., & Perry, S. P. (2023). A systemic approach to the psychology of racial bias within individuals and society. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 2(7), 392-406.

Weber, M., Yurochkin, M., Botros, S., & Markov, V. (2020, November 27). Black Loans Matter: Fighting Bias for AI Fairness in Lending. MIT-IBM Watson AI Lab. https://mitibmwatsonailab.mit.edu/research/blog/black-loans-matter-fighting-bias-for-ai-fairness-in-lending/

Wien, S., Miller, A. L., & Kramer, M. R. (2023). Structural racism theory, measurement, and methods: a scoping review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1069476.

Willen, S. S., Williamson, A. F., Walsh, C. C., Hyman, M., & Tootle, W. (2022). Rethinking flourishing: Critical insights and qualitative perspectives from the US Midwest. *SSM-mental Health*, 2, 100057.

Zalnieriute, M., & Cutts, T. (2022). How AI and new technologies reinforce systemic racism. 54th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, United Nations Office at Geneva, Geneva, 3rd oct.

ABOUT HARMONY LABS

Harmony Labs is a nonprofit media research lab, using science, data, and creativity to research and reshape society's relationship with media. For more than a decade, our work has helped storytellers and strategists, decision makers and dreamers, harness the immense power of media to shape a positive, pluralistic future. With the Narrative Observatory, for the first time ever, we're harnessing industry relationships to deliver one-of-a-kind data infrastructure that empowers partners to find, reach, and resonate with the right audience in today's media minefield. The Narrative Observatory delivers audience-based insights, narrative and network analysis, and empirical validation of cultural strategy and content—all derived from the actual behavior of real people and true audiences, not survey results, demographic groups, or inauthentic online activity.

We work with a wide range of partners on issues of existential importance, like climate, gun violence, education, democracy, artificial intelligence, and more, using an approach to research that is rigorous, participatory, and public. One of the first papers we co-authored looked at fracking narratives in documentary film. The outputs we've created with our partners include websites, presentations, peer-reviewed publications, toolkits, curriculum, interactives, white papers, and media. And our work has been covered in the press, like in this New York Times article.

Founded by John S. Johnson in 2008, Harmony Labs is a 501(c)3 incorporated in New York State. Funders include Atlantic Foundation, Gates Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Google, and more.

Learn more at harmonylabs.org.