Racial equity and lived expertise systems change model

By Tori Russell and Candice Ward, ICF

Introduction

While many human services agencies recognize the need for advancing racial equity and inclusion throughout practice, finding and implementing approaches that lead to transformative and sustainable change may be difficult. As a result, Black and Indigenous children and families continue to experience racial inequities while receiving human services—including health disparities, economic insecurity, and family separation[1].

This paper champions ICF's "Racial Equity and Lived Expertise Systems Change Model" as a clear and adaptable framework that supports human services agencies in their efforts to advance racial equity, integrate lived expertise into systems change, and eliminate racial disparities.

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[1] (Davis, Dunnigan, & Stevens, 2022; Institute for Research on Poverty, 2021; McDaniel, Woods, Pratt, & Simms, 2017; Merritt, 2021; Parolin, 2021; Tripoli, Fishman, Hewitt, Ruff, & Sanders, 2021)

Advancing racial equity and inclusion in human services agencies

There is an urgent need to take meaningful action to embed racial equity and inclusion in all aspects of human services. The pursuit of equity for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color increases the quality of life for all communities[2], which is the primary objective of human services agencies.

"Equity is the key to prosperity. Eliminating racial inequities in income would result in a multitrillion dollar annual increase in the United States GDP (gross domestic product)."

— (National Equity Alliance, n.d.)

According to the Corporate Racial Equity Alliance, most Americans will be people of color by 2045 and, at the same time, the racial income and employment gap is expanding[3]. In 2021, the Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government executive order charged federal human services agencies with determining "whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other underserved groups" and using their findings to address inequities in policies and programs to more equitably deliver resources and benefits to the people they serve[4].

While organizational assessments can help human services agencies understand inequities in their policy and practice, they do little to help the agencies address them. There is a need for strategies, concrete tools, and technical assistance to:

- Partner with people currently experiencing direct human services to make necessary practice changes and partner with people who have lived expertise to lead change efforts that result in relevant, equitable solutions.

- Assess, leverage, and adapt existing efforts to embed racial equity and inclusion as a foundational aspect of all internal and external practice.

- Target organizational culture and capacity building to facilitate sustainability.

- Develop and measure indicators of behavior change within a continuous quality improvement approach.

- Use concurrent approaches to practice and systems change with support for understanding how each influences the other.

- Ensure agency readiness for change is robust.

"Transformative change…is the reframing of dominant attitudes, beliefs, and cultural values; the shifting of power dynamics; and the development of new policies and practices that maintain structures (Kania, et al., 2018) and 'govern collective, individual, and institutional practices' (Hillenbrand et al., 2015, p. 5)."

— (Venkateswaran, et al., 2023)

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[2] (Powell, Menendian, & Ake, 2019)

[3] (Corporate Racial Equity Alliance, 2023).

[4] (The White House, January 20, 2021)

The challenge

Identifying the right problems and solutions requires the integration and leadership of people with lived expertise, including Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. While human services agencies recognize the need to integrate these experts into their work, very little support is available to help agencies do that work authentically and sustainably. Too often technical assistance approaches struggle to embed a culture of racial equity and inclusion in program, practice, policy, and service delivery—without which desired change is unlikely.

Black, Indigenous, and other people of color receiving human services (either voluntarily or involuntarily) continue to experience the direct harmful effects of structural racism, including psychological trauma from disparate experiences. These negative effects are compounded for people who intersect with multiple human service systems.

Historical and current policies and practices shaped by racism have laid the groundwork for modern inequities. For example:

- The historical separation of enslaved and Indigenous families is linked to the current disproportionate separation of Black and Indigenous families involved in child welfare[5].

- The legacy of anti-Black racism in health care contributes to ongoing racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality[6].

- A history of racist immigration policies continues to affect non-White immigrant families' access to human services[7].

- Work requirements are entangled with the U.S. history of enslavement and Jim Crow policies[8].

"It is important to note that the association between socioeconomic status and race in the United States has its origins in discrete historical events but persists because of contemporary structural factors that perpetuate those historical injustices."

— (Jones, 2000)

These roots in racism affect human services agencies' ability to transform their systems to be both equitable and inclusive. The deeply entrenched and interconnected nature of systemic racism in human services makes it difficult to identify and root out the hidden drivers of inequity baked into the system. To successfully advance racial equity, agencies need a deliberate approach that helps them dig beneath the surface to eradicate institutional barriers.

The risks of not taking sustainable and transformative action

Without proactive and meaningful action to embed equity into their work, agencies risk the perpetuation of direct harm to the Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. They also run the risk of maintaining the status quo—or potentially backtracking and reversing any progress already made. When change is elusive, staff and leaders may experience equity and "inclusion fatigue" that could lead to diminished, defunded, or discontinued efforts, particularly when efforts are tied to a particular initiative or leader.

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[5] (Minoff, 2018)

[6] (Winny & Bervell, 2023)

[7] (Arce, 2021)

[8] (Minoff, 2020)

The limitations of typical approaches

Sustainable and transformative action requires culture, policy, and program shifts to identify and dismantle racist structures.

While multiple frameworks and models are available for organizations pursuing racial equity, those available for use in human services settings have limitations that may create challenges for agencies seeking to fully embed racial equity and inclusion throughout their organizations and systems.[9]

These limitations include:

- **Tokenized or limited involvement of people with lived experience, particularly those who reflect the racial, ethnic, and intersectional identities of those who experience the most disparate outcomes.**
  When people with lived expertise are included in change efforts, it is typically in ways that limit meaningful contributions. For example, they may be asked to share input late in change efforts as opposed to involved from the beginning, they may be invited performatively but not given decision-making power, individuals may be asked to represent whole communities, or people may be invited simply to share their stories and not their expertise.

- **Initiative approaches that are added on top of existing work, as opposed to embedded within.**
  These types of approaches are especially susceptible to elimination following leadership changes and equity and inclusion fatigue. Approaches that are dependent on individual leaders, are difficult to implement, or do not realize desired change, are easy to pause, defund, or phase out.

- **Complex or difficult to understand.**
  These approaches can be frustrating or confusing to implement in practice and agency staff, leaders, and partners can lose sight of the intended impact and long-term outcomes.

- **Unclear indicators of behavior change.**
  Agencies are unable to measure or track progress if there is a limited understanding of the behaviors associated with desired change.

- **A narrow focus on either practice or systems change without attention to the other.**
  These approaches are hampered by a divided approach in which real change is elusive and unsustainable.

- **Action without sufficient preparation.**
  Without examining and addressing what needs to be in place for change efforts to succeed, agencies' efforts are likely to hit barriers and stall, causing limited resources to be wasted.

- **Difficult to adapt and scale.**
  To adapt and scale, the agency will need a clear understanding of change drivers, what challenges might surface, and the resources needed for full implementation—all of which will be hampered by the limitations listed above.

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[9] Limitations were identified through a scan of 16 publicly available racial equity frameworks applicable to human service systems.

Racial equity and lived expertise systems change model

Overview

ICF's "Racial Equity and Lived Expertise Systems Change Model" rises above typical limitations to support sustainable change throughout human services agencies. It addresses change at multiple levels, including:

- **Individual** and team practice that enhances staff knowledge and skills and encourages individual and team growth.

- **Organizational** and systemic structures that work to embed racial equity in foundational operational areas such as agency mission, vision, guiding principles, recruitment and hiring policies.

- **External** service delivery needs and practice components that improve disparate experiences and outcomes for communities and families served by agencies.

The model includes five core components:

1. **Prepare** to integrate racial equity and lived expertise into systems and practices.

2. **Assess/explore** gaps and needs.

3. **Adapt/develop** new and/or existing practices and programs to integrate racial equity and inclusion.

4. **Implement/scale** adaptations.

5. **Monitor/evaluate** to understand what is working and what needs to be further refined.

Throughout each model component, there is an intentional focus on building individual and organizational capacity to support a healthy and motivated organizational culture that will embrace and sustain the integration of equity and inclusion over the long term.

Grounded in theory and practice

The "Racial Equity and Lived Expertise Systems Change Model" is informed by research, literature, and practice experience[10], including ICF's internal efforts to advance racial equity and inclusion.

Implementation science and organizational change management literature inform the model's cyclical and interconnected approach; its inclusion of time and attention to thoughtful preparation, training, coaching, and monitoring; and its use of continuous quality improvement processes to track progress and shift course as needed.

Recognizing the limitations of research that is reliant on white supremacist norms, the model draws from co-design and community-based participatory research (CBPR) to address and mitigate power differentials, build trusting relationships, and learn from lived experience.

In addition to the literature, the model relies on organizational experience embedding racial equity and inclusion into individual and team practice, organizational structures, and service delivery.

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[10] See more in the Change and Implementation at a Glance series developed by the Capacity Building Center for States.

Benefits to human services agencies

This model has broad applicability across human service systems. The potential benefits of using ICF's model in human services agencies are clear and tangible and include:

- Improved outcomes for the children, families, and communities served by human services agencies.

- Increased capacity to root out structural racism within organizations and systems.

- Tools and resources that equip human services agencies to sustain efforts without continued reliance on external technical assistance.

By addressing the limitations of typical approaches, the model embeds sustainable changes throughout individual practice, organizational structures and systems, and external service delivery. The following table illustrates how ICF's model addresses the limitations of typical equity and inclusion models and frameworks.

Other models…	ICF's Racial Equity and Lived Expertise Systems Change Model…
…do not include people with lived experience and expertise in meaningful ways	… is founded upon the belief that advancing racial equity within human services requires the integration and leadership of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color with lived expertise in human service systems
	…helps agencies build capacity to meaningfully engage people with lived experience and expertise as partners and decision-makers in all aspects of direct service and systems change efforts
…use "initiative" approaches that are added on top of existing work, as opposed to embedded within	…helps agencies assess what existing efforts can be leveraged and adapted to embed racial equity and inclusion more intentionally into individual and team practice, organizational structures, and external service delivery
	…targets culture and capacity building to facilitate sustainability
…are unclear, complex, or difficult to understand	…uses a clear, systematic, stepwise approach with tools, resources, and technical assistance to support uptake
…have unclear indicators of behavior change	…includes a usable "how to" process for developing and measuring indicators of behavior change within a continuous quality improvement approach to help agencies understand when and how progress is being made and when it might be time to pivot
…focus narrowly on either practice or systems change without attention to the other	…includes concurrent approaches to practice and systems change with support for understanding how each influences the other
…take action without sufficient preparation	…includes an intentional focus on preparation to ensure readiness for organizational change rooted in racial equity is robust
…are difficult to adapt and scale	…is adaptable to meet the needs and context of individual agencies, communities, and teams, and can scale to embed racial equity and inclusion throughout all aspects of an organization's work

Conclusion

ICF believes in a future in which disparities are eliminated, equity and justice are expected, and communities thrive. In contrast to other models, our "Racial Equity and Lived Expertise Systems Change Model" offers concrete tools to realize sustainable and equitable change. Partner with us to make our shared vision for the future a reality.

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Appendix: Terminology

Capacity building: Capacity building is an ongoing, evidence-informed process used to develop a system's potential to be productive and effective (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019). Capacity building technical assistance is a process in which a technical assistance provider works alongside an organization to identify and develop capacities needed for independent and sustainable work.

Disparities: Disparities are the unequal experiences or outcomes of one racial or ethnic group as compared to the experiences or outcomes of another group (adapted from Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Disparities are evident through comparisons of two or more groups when looking at the same issue, experience, or outcome (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022).

Inclusion: Inclusion involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging in which people with different backgrounds and identities feel welcomed and valued as decision-makers and collaborators (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019). Inclusion also refers to the ongoing process of working toward this state of belonging by welcoming, respecting, and supporting people of all backgrounds and identities and offering them opportunities to apply their talents and to grow (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022).

Lived experience: People with lived experience are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues, inclusive of those participating or eligible to participate in human services and those employed by human services agencies (Ramirez, et al., 2023).

Lived expertise: Lived expertise is the knowledge, insights, understanding, and wisdom gathered through lived experience and used to inform the work of social purpose organizations, to drive and lead social change, and/or to drive their social impact work (Sandhu, 2017).

Racial equity: Racial equity describes circumstances when race is no longer a predictor of outcomes and treatment of people of all races is consistent, systematic, fair, just, and impartial (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022).

Structural racism: Structural and systemic racism refers to historical, social, political, institutional, and cultural factors that contribute to, normalize, legitimize, and maintain racial disparities, which routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative adverse outcomes for people of color (adapted from Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019; Lawrence & Keleher, 2004).

For more information, please contact:

Tori Russell

Consulting Director, Change and Implementation

Tori.Russell@icf.com

Candice Ward

Senior Manager, Primary Prevention/Child Protection

Candice.Ward@icf.com

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