Build Healthy Places Network

Crafting a Health Equity Centered Narrative

Identifying our shared values builds support to advance health for all communities

Recent years have seen a focus on the increasing division in the national dialogue, particularly around issues of race and equity. This factsheet offers resources and ideas to help practitioners in their efforts to communicate across sectors and bridge ideas in conversations that promote racial and health equity by creating narratives that build mutually-beneficial relationships and trustworthiness.

There are myths that trace back to this country's founding that can sabotage productive conversations around advancing health for all. Myths about what it means to be American can cultivate unproductive cultural mindsets and ideologies that shape how people think about each other. As public health and community development sectors (and other multi-sector partners) build solidarity together, it is imperative to create spaces where we all can learn ways to identify what unproductive mindsets we may be holding on to. And, in turn, develop a shared language to change the narrative to one rooted in the values we want to see in our societal structures, communities and interpersonal relationships.

Crafting a narrative centered on racial and health equity requires finding common ground between individuals, institutions, and sectors on shared values and beliefs, while prioritizing the assets that communities already have.

> *"Values drive policy. It's not a science, it's about understanding what people value in their communities that begin to shape hearts and minds."*
>
> **—Roundtable participant**
> Thought Leader Roundtable: Building the Bridge between Public Health and Community Development Sectors to advance Health and Racial Equity

Communicating and Identifying Shared Values

- **Inclusive language instead of jargon**: Every sector has its jargon. Jargon can be effective at communicating concepts quickly when understood within a particular sector but often present barriers to successful interactions across sectors. Multi-sector coalitions rely on effective communication and BHPN's Jargon Buster clarifies common industry terms. The meaning of words are dynamic, culturally specific, and can change over time. Health equity narratives should be rooted in principles and values rather than a set of rules or specific vocabulary

- **Asset-based approach to identifying values**: An important component of identifying values through conversations is taking an asset-based approach to build on community strengths and resources that public health and community development can leverage together. Storytelling traditions have existed across generations and can both identify and uplift community values and connecting the past and present. Stories can be a place where imagination builds power, creating narratives that build solidarity and interdependence.

Evidence Bites

Supporting the Development of Equity-Centered Narratives

- Reinforcing a **Unifying Message**: Shared stewardship and strategic casemaking can be utilized to connect across differences, build the will and collective power for us all to thrive together. While it is expected that people will hold differing viewpoints and values across cultures, there is an opportunity to find common ground with individuals who are receptive to building coalition with each other across lines of race, ethnicity, and political party affiliation.

- Listening leading to *Bridging*: This work relies on our own ability to build connections and relationships with people from different social groups. The practice of bridging brings people, who may not agree, into contact with each other with the expressed purpose of listening to and acknowledging each other's humanity even if there is disagreement. A main emphasis of bridging is to center stories and narratives, not facts and data.

- **Navigating the negative**: When building support it is important to be mindful of dominant (damaging) narratives that negatively limit progress in conversations based on shared values. Explore resources to build narrative power by identifying and naming these narratives. Instead of repeating negative narratives, center your framing to focus on what's most important for people to know rather than primarily debating on opposing ideas.

DEFINITIONS

Asset-based approach emphasizes a group's strengths, knowledge, and aspirations; recognizes systemic issues as the problem. E.g. racism, sexism.

Participatory storytelling is a strengths-based method rooted in co-creation that works to elevate stories from within communities.

Narratives connect stories and help to shape our consciousness which can influence our beliefs, behaviors, and social norms.

Equity-centered approaches prioritize fairness, inclusion, and co-creation. These approaches seek to address the root causes of disparities that systematically limit the opportunities and outcomes for people living in historically marginalized communities.

Othering refers to the process of labeling people and communities in irreconcilable terms; this can be mediated through our systems as well as through people in our interactions.

Four Core Principles to Support Equity-Centered Conversations

Community

None of these actions, concepts or ideas work unless we create settings that accept and encourage community. It is important to intentionally design spaces that facilitate conversations that dismantle foundational myths of individualism and exceptionalism. For example, Healthy Contra Costa, formerly known as Healthy Richmond, facilitated dinners hosted by healthcare leaders and attended by resident leaders, called Dine and Learns in Richmond, CA. Breaking bread with healthcare decision-makers gave resident leaders a platform to build relationships, discuss varied topics, and foster trust for future collaborations. Building community is an important practice that emphasizes connection and bridging. Deep active, empathetic listening can lead people to find commonalities with each other if done with care. Which, in turn, can build bridges across the perceived divide to create trust.

Courage

Based on their specific context, there are many practitioners who can not say words that focus on racial equity and justice due to laws and policies aimed at removing this language from our work. Social justice progress has always been tied to risk. Challenging mandates and conventions in these conversations requires courage but is essential to advancing a vision of racial and health equity for all. In practice, this can look like (1) clear communication to combat harmful narratives around DEI initiatives, what they are and what they are not (2) using history as a tool to challenge myths about being a colorblind society, and, even if the language varies, (3) identify underlying values and stand firm in your commitment to racial and health equity. Understanding history enables a clear analysis of our systems, driving action and unifying messages.

Belonging (without othering)

Our systems do not always prioritize people, especially historically marginalized groups. Creating opportunities for belonging, presents practitioners with significant opportunities to help people feel seen and heard. The vital conditions framework for health and well-being positioned belonging at its core due to the immense power in having a place for oneself and one's ideas. "The feeling of belonging, of having a place for oneself and one's ideas, is at the core of the vital conditions framework for health and well-being, as it holds immense power. Belonging is for all of us and centers individuals as their full selves. The United Women of East Africa Support Team exemplified this by helping to build a community center where young men could foster belonging, connection, and mutual support. In this space, they are able to validate each other's experiences, engage in civic opportunities, and build resilience against unproductive cultural mindsets. It is important to focus on our shared humanity and create spaces where people can be themselves without othering and creating division.

Co-creation

The practice of co-creation establishes opportunities for people whose voices are often marginalized to be brought into the conversation. But, this practice goes beyond talking and listening. Practitioners across sectors have worked to co-create spaces for people to work together and strengthen best practices and policies related to racial equity and inclusion. East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) practiced creative placemaking in their community development work, partnering with The Healthy Havenscourt Collaborative to create a traveling art installation showcasing Oakland residents' dreams, strengths, barriers, and hopes around jobs and housing to foster belonging, inclusion and building common narratives that bridge divides. Virginia Community Voice's ARCA Program (Arts, Racial Reconciliation, and Civic Advocacy) community-designed project where primarily young Black and Latinx neighbors came together to co-create traffic-calming street art at a busy intersection in Richmond, VA.

Where to Start

To start conversations about racial and health equity with people in your communities and across sectors, consider these questions to help find shared values and bridge divides:

- How can you create space for diverse perspectives while maintaining solidarity? Radical imagination allows for overlapping and contradictory futures to coexist as long as the future we envision prioritizes shared values and a just, equitable world for everyone.

- How can you support equity-centered narratives through storytelling that emphasize our strengths and shared humanity? Participatory storytelling is one way to support your bridging practices.

- How can you navigate both safety and discomfort when discussing racial and health equity? Challenging conversations may bring a necessary discomfort for critical thinking and growth but spaces must also be safe for people to share their experiences and ideas.

- How can you practice speaking clearly across sectors without jargon? Identify what jargon exists in your daily practices and remove it when speaking to folks unfamiliar.

- What are your intentions? Clarifying your intention helps manage expectations. Remember rapport fosters collaboration to yield best results.

Tools to Move Forward

- **BHPN's Public Health Primer** provides an overview of tools for cross sector partnership to advance health and racial equity.

- **BHPN's Jargon Buster** demystifies common industry jargon across sectors.

- **BHPN's Partner Finder** is a directory of practitioners for possible collaboration with community development agencies near you.

- **Where We Thrive**—Prosperity Starts with Place

- **The Practice of Bridging** is an article by the Othering & Belonging Institute that discusses building connections with others, in a practice known as bridging.

- **Building the Will to Thrive Together**—Rippel Foundation and TheCaseMade

- **Building Narrative Power**—How public health departments can shape and influence narratives for a transformed, equitable future

- **Prevention Institute**—What is narrative change and why is it different from strategic communications