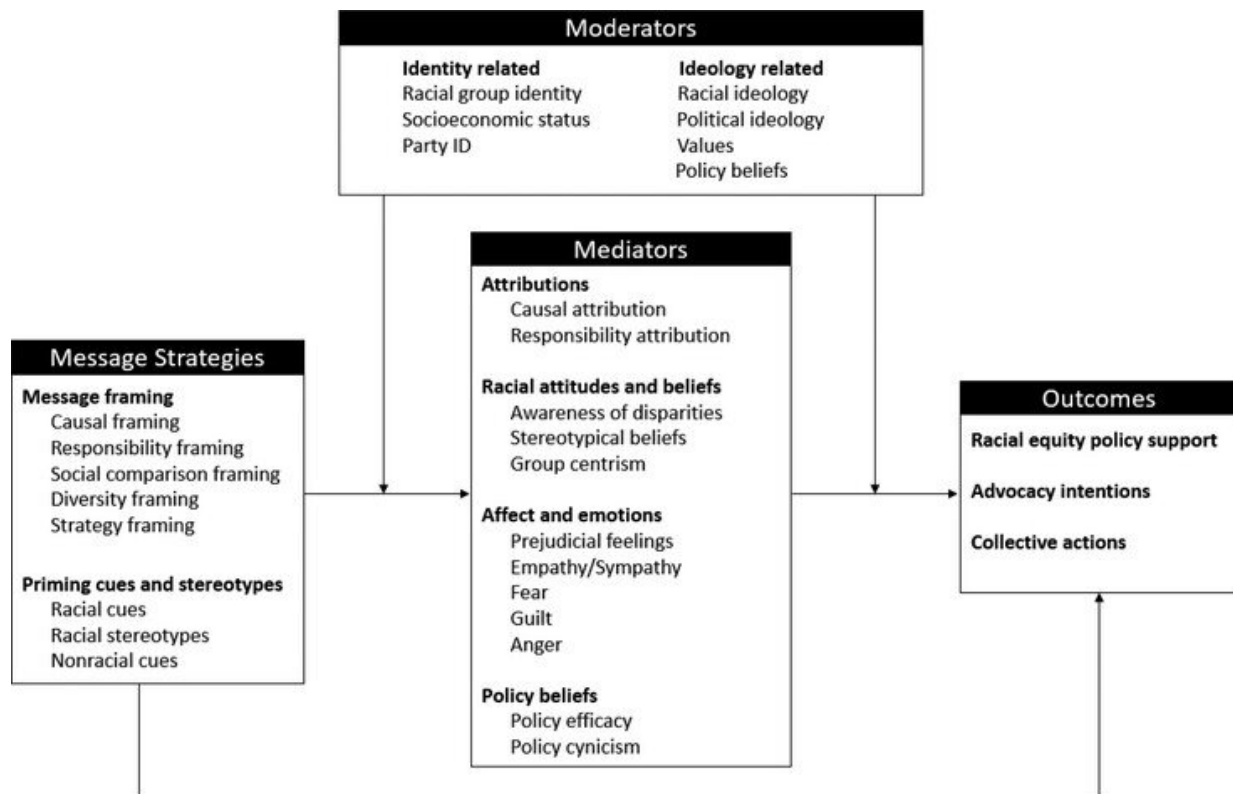


# Racial equity messaging must be more inclusive

April 27 2023, by Tom Fleischman



Message Strategies, Psychological Processes, and Outcomes. Credit: *The Milbank Quarterly* (2023). DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12651

In a review of more than three decades' worth of studies that examine support for, or opposition to, policies with racial equity implications, a Cornell-led research group found that more research on messaging that

includes the voices of historically marginalized people is necessary in the push toward equity.

"It is quite striking, given that these are messages about racial [equity](#), but most of the studies are about what [white people](#) think about these issues," said Jeff Niederdeppe, professor of communication and [public policy](#) in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CAL S) and senior associate dean of faculty development in the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. "Ironically, this research on racial equity centers the perspectives of white people."

Niederdeppe is corresponding author of "Strategic Messaging to Promote Policies that Advance Racial Equity: What Do We Know, And What Do We Need to Learn?" published April 25 in *Milbank Quarterly*.

Co-authors include Neil Lewis Jr. '13, assistant professor of communication (CAL S) and co-director of the Action Research Collaborative in CAL S and the College of Human Ecology; Jiawei Liu, postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Communication (CAL S); and Mikaela Spruill, doctoral candidate in [social psychology](#).

This research—initiated in the summer of 2019—was informed by an observation Niederdeppe, Lewis and their collaborators noticed in how research about racial equity-related issues were being communicated by scientists and more broadly being discussed in public discourse. There were bold claims regarding the discussion of race and racial equity that were based on single studies, which nonetheless garnered a lot of media attention.

"There are lots of statements and messages about advancing racial equity," Lewis said. "Especially over the past two to three years, there's been a lot of, 'This is what we should say, this is what we shouldn't say,' and so on. We've seen these messages a lot. But it's worth taking a

moment to ask, 'What do these messages do? Are they helpful, or do they just make us feel good for saying them?'"

Niederdeppe and his team—including researchers from Wesleyan University and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, part of the Collaborative on Media and Messaging (COMM)—analyzed 55 papers reporting on 80 different studies, published between January 1990 and April 2021, that tested the effects of one or more message strategies in shaping support for racial equity-related policies.

The messaging strategies featured in each study were put into one (or more, if relevant) of the following categories:

- racial cues (brief messaging identifying the race of the people involved in an issue);
- [racial stereotypes](#) (messaging that includes race-related stereotype information);
- non-racial cues (messages that could invite racial connotations but that do not explicitly mention race);
- social comparison frames (messages that explicitly compare social conditions and/or outcomes between racial groups);
- causal frames (messages that include statements about the root cause of racial inequity);
- responsibility frames (messages focusing on who is responsible for addressing a particular social issue);
- diversity frames (messages describing the value of diversity); and
- strategy frames (lengthier messages that depict policymaking as a strategic move to win votes).

Of the studies analyzed, 45% featured messaging strategies that employed racial cues; social comparison framing was featured in 24%. Most studies (91%) analyzed short-form messaging, and all were cross-sectional (i.e. in the moment, not studying the effects of [messages](#) over

time).

One overarching finding: Brief cues that signal the Black identity of victim(s) or perpetrator(s) in the context of a social problem, in the absence of a broader contextual discussion of the causes of social issues, can undermine support for racial equity-promoting policies among white respondents. However, very few studies explore how these broader contextual discussions can move people toward greater support for racial equity, and several studies suggest that this is indeed possible.

Another takeaway for Niederdeppe and Lewis: It's not just an issue of Black and white, yet that's what most of the studies are about.

"The nation and broader world are much more complex than that," Lewis said. "We don't study as much how race intersects with things like gender, sexuality and many other factors that we know impact people's lives and experiences. We need to move forward with studying some of those complexities, if we really want to have a better understanding of how these things are going to work in real life."

There's no one-size-fits-all answer, Niederdeppe said, and researchers must examine this issue with a sense of humility.

"There are different kinds of policies to talk about, different audiences, different political landscapes," he said. "There's no checklist—'You do this, and you will magically achieve your communication outcome.' It's a moving target; that's part of the humility. Even if we studied this really well, we're going to have to continue to learn and evolve and respond."

The authors concluded with a call to action: "The time has arrived to invest the effort and resources to develop, test and disseminate communication interventions that advance racial equity through policy advocacy, community mobilization and collective action."

**More information:** Jeff Niederdeppe et al, Strategic Messaging to Promote Policies that Advance Racial Equity: What Do We Know, and What Do We Need to Learn?, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12651](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12651)

Provided by Cornell University

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