

**Washington Regional Association of
Grantmakers’
“Putting Racism on the Table” Series:
An Independent Assessment**

By Benjamin Soskis
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I.

In 2013 and 2014, as a series of highly publicized violent encounters between police and African-American citizens sparked widespread public outrage and helped give birth to the “Black Lives Matter” movement, foundation leaders across the nation struggled with how to craft a response. The Washington region’s philanthropic community was not alone in experiencing contending feelings of anger, resolve, and helplessness. Tamara Copeland, the president of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers (WRAG), recalls receiving multiple calls from concerned funders, wondering what they could do. She did not have a ready answer.

Then in April 2015, when Baltimore resident Freddie Gray died from injuries sustained in police custody and the city’s African-American neighborhoods erupted in angry, and sometimes riotous, protest, the urgency of the crisis was brought to Washington’s doorstep, a city with its own complex, tangled history of racial discord. As Copeland has written,¹ “inaction was no longer an option.”

Some foundations in the region immediately took public stands. The Open Society Institute-Baltimore, for instance, issued a statement² expressing its anger that “the life of another young black male was cut short while in the custody of those who are sworn to protect and serve.” The Hill-Snowdon Foundation issued a warning not to let “chatter about ‘riots’ and ‘criminality’ drown out the righteous calls for justice” and distract from the demands for police accountability or attention to “the systemic,

¹ Tamara Lucas Copeland, “Tackling Racial Justice: Why, How and So What?” *National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy*, Summer 2016, <http://www.ncrp.org/publication/responsive-philanthropy-summer-2016/tackling-racial-justice-why-how-and-so-what>

² Open Society Institute-Baltimore, “Open Society Statement in Response to the Killing of Freddie Gray,” April 28, 2015, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/press-releases/open-society-statement-response-killing-freddie-gray>

generational and persistent deprivations and repressions suffered by the Black community.”

WRAG intensified its own considerations of a response. A meeting of the leaders of the area’s major foundations was called, and Copeland joined the head of DC-based Consumer Health Foundation, Yanique Redwood, in drafting a statement, with significant input from leaders in the field, such as Berkeley professor John Powell and Lori Villarosa, executive director of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. “The piece was written to empathize with Baltimore and calling out racism as a factor in what happened,” recalls Redwood.

But when they took the letter to the group of funders and ultimately to WRAG’s Board, they could not find sufficient consensus to release it to the public. A general agreement did emerge that racism lay behind the unrest in Baltimore and at the root of many of the problems the region’s foundations sought to address. There was, however, no shared understanding of how to define racism or how it was institutionally or societally manifested. A philanthropic Babel of varying perspectives held: different members of the board were using the language of racial justice in different ways. To the extent that some unanimity was able to coalesce in these meetings, it pointed to this confusion and signaled a desire to remedy it.

So a group of local foundation leaders committed to crafting a response convened, representing eleven of the major funders in the Washington region. Some pushed for the promotion of specific policy recommendations as a common rally point. But Copeland and a number of others insisted on the priority of learning: the philanthropic community

needed to arrive at a greater understanding of racism and the social, political and economic issues with which it was entangled before it could turn to action.

And so out of the unrest in the streets of Baltimore sprung the idea of a learning series on racism and racial equity: “Putting Racism on the Table.” A “Racial Equity Planning Committee” formed and quickly realized that the subjects encompassed a concatenation of topics, each building on and implicating the others and each of which would have to be addressed: structural racism, implicit bias, white privilege. They also appreciated the need to create a space where these subjects could be freely discussed, without fear of sanction or ridicule, and for a skilled facilitator to lead the discussion (WRAG ultimately chose Inca Mohamed, a former Ford Foundation official).

The group planned six three-hour sessions, one a month, beginning in January 2016; each would begin with an hour-long presentation by a noted academic or expert and would continue with two hours of small-group discussion. The sessions would first take on structural racism, white privilege, and implicit bias. Then, they would delve into a case study on mass incarceration, next, pursue an exploration of the nation’s “racial mosaic,” and then conclude with an examination of how philanthropy has sought to address racism.

Because each session would build on the last, participants would be strongly encouraged to attend all six. “We didn’t want them to hear about white privilege without understanding how structural racism undergirds it or to learn about implicit bias without seeing how these three phenomena interconnect in a specific case study—in our case, mass incarceration,” Copeland explains.

II.

In the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray, when WRAG leaders were initially debating their response, Nicky Goren, president of the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, introduced a quote from John Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and Independent Sector, which helped crystalize support for a lecture series. “The first step of leadership is not action,” Gardner had remarked, “it’s understanding.” The quote is emblazoned on the brochure that announced the series and Copeland invoked it in her own opening remarks during the start of the first session.

The quote posits a dynamic relationship between two imperatives—understanding and action—that structured the entire series. A key premise behind the series is that the first serves as a necessary precondition for the second; that naming a problem is necessary to address it. As Nat Chioke Williams, the executive director of the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, and a member of the Racial Equity Planning Committee, explained, “When dealing with racial equity, you need to be absolutely explicit. We must name anti-black structural racism in order to develop specific strategies to address it.”

But the series was also grounded in the recognition that understanding and naming could not be ends in themselves and that putting racism on the table was only a first step. There was even a subtle tension that occasionally emerged throughout the series, expressed in the fear that excessive attention to understanding could make the discussion excessively theoretical, academic, and detached from action. As Yanique

Redwood explained at a session on the series held at the 2016 Council on Foundations conference, she appreciated the need for greater understanding, but also felt compelled to act by a sense of urgency, one “that doesn’t necessarily lend itself to learning.” The planners had anticipated this concern. They had initially considered organizing a longer series, extending over the course of a year, but had settled on the shorter timespan of six months. As Redwood explained the motivation: “Let’s get educated but let’s get educated as fast and as deeply as we can, with a sense of urgency.”

But the planners also sought to check the impulse to move too fast, before the community of funders represented by WRAG was ready; they did not hold out the definite promise of some actionable policy prescription at the series’ conclusion. At its final session, Copeland had praised the participants for sticking through the series even without such an assurance. In a sense, although everyone attending appreciated that understanding was only a first step, because the next steps were so difficult and indeterminate, they also could be said to have completed “Putting Racism on the Table” “solely for the sake of learning.”

III.

I sat in on these sessions to chronicle the learning series for WRAG; over the course of the six months, I joined the 82 men and women who convened at the PNC building in northwest DC (52 of whom attended three or more sessions). Like many of the participants who I canvassed, I found the series enlightening, provocative, and occasionally frustrating. Taken as a whole, it represents a brave and ambitious, if imperfect, undertaking, one that both reflects the sector’s mounting commitment to

engaging with the issues of racism and racial equity and points to some of the leading strategies and challenges in doing so.

One of the more fascinating strains of conversation that emerged from the series was the question of why it was necessary in the first place. Why had it been so hard to get the philanthropic sector to confront issues of racial equity? Why had it taken the convulsive events of the past few years—the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Freddie Gray and Michael Brown and all the others and the anguished unrest that followed them—to spark the conversation? Why had it been so difficult to put racism on the table?

Of course, this was not a new question. Commentators for decades had noted that when it came to issues of racial justice, foundations were much more likely to follow than to lead, preferring to focus on areas of less social contention and controversy. In the 1972 assessment of Waldemar Nielsen, for long the most astute observer of the sector, “The race issue in all its complexity and intensity seems to lie largely beyond the outer boundaries of concern, self-confidence, and capability of the big foundations as they are now structured and staffed.” Even the most progressive of these foundations, he estimated, lagged behind the pace of events by five to ten years.

Philanthropy, it seems, had difficulty catching up to the present. Over the last few decades, the sector was stuck in the past in another sense as well. Foundations have approached their work on race from the vantage point of the achievements of the Civil Rights movement half a century ago, and their modest contributions to that effort have bankrolled the sector’s general self-congratulatory sense of racial progressivism. At the same time, society’s strong historical consciousness of the Civil Rights movement has fostered an understanding of racism stuck in the amber of the 1960s, one that no longer

fits contemporary exigencies. As Tamara Copeland explains, “When we think of racism we think of it in its violent manifestations of the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. We think of the dogs attacking people, and fire hoses, and the Klan.” The victories of the Civil Right generation became one key node in a historical trajectory, culminating in the election of Barack Obama in 2008, which in turn encouraged a narrative of inexorable racial progress, which was bringing about the imminent establishment of a post-racial America. Copeland has remarked that in the years after Obama’s ascent to the White House, she had detected this faith among many funders, which at times seemed to translate into a belief that the inevitable momentum of history could be relied upon to do much of the work in promoting racial equity. If the nation could elect an African-American president, then racism was not merely on the table; it had already, in fact, been *tabled*. This belief, according to Copeland, was one reason why some foundation leaders in the area didn’t initially pick up on her early insistence on the need to spark a conversation about racism. When she broached the subject to one foundation official early in the Obama presidency, the official didn’t seem to see the need: “Don’t we already know all of that?” she replied.

In fact, in a perverse way, as several of the organizers of the “Putting Racism on the Table” series explained, the fact that so many foundations within the sector seem comfortable talking about *race* has actually proved an obstacle to a frank confrontation with *racism*. As Copeland explained in a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*,³ and as several of the presenters in the series echoed, although the pursuit of racial diversity—in the workplace and in other professional settings—is certainly a

³ Tamara Lucas Copeland, “Nonprofits Need to Talk About Race, Not Just Diversity,” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Letter-to-the-Editor-/236461>. Also available at <https://dailywrag.com/2016/05/12/nonprofits-need-to-talk-about-race-not-just-diversity/>

worthy endeavor and programmatic goal, it has frequently served as “the deflection du jour” for foundations, diverting attention and energy from the deeper structural issues underlying structural racism, while satisfying the philanthropic sector’s sense of its own racial enlightenment.

The dangers of such rhetorical and thematic obfuscations emerged as a frequent theme of the learning series, a testament to the candor with which participants engaged their sector’s own failings. The Meyer Foundation’s Nicky Goren has spoken about how easy it was for her own foundation to hide behind the “low income” moniker, which allowed it to avoid engaging with the racial identity of the largely African-American populations they were serving, and so to sidestep the issue of racism. Similarly, Caitlin Duffy, a staffer at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy who attended the series in her capacity as a board member of the Diverse City Fund, explained in a blog post⁴ inspired by the series how a traditional fear of alienating some grantmakers (especially those from the South) has led many in the sector to sheathe the topic of racial equity in the more race-neutral tones of “systems change.” Similarly, in the discussions that followed the speakers, participants reflected on how foundations that did take a degree of interest in “racial equity” often assigned it to a single staffer, often a person of color, who was occasionally indulged (and could be dismissed when convenient, in the words of one participant, as “the one crazy person who is always talking about racism”), but rarely granted the opportunity or resources to make the cause a central concern of the institution.

⁴ Caitlin Duffy, “Philanthropy: Let’s Talk About Race, Baby,” *National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy*, May 2016, <https://www.ncrp.org/2016/05/philanthropy-lets-talk-race-baby.html>

In searching for a cause of philanthropy's neglect of racism and racial equity, an experiential gap was also often singled out. Most Americans, including those who control the largest foundations, several participants pointed out, have never experienced racism themselves; their understanding of it is, at best, theoretical. Michael Harreld, the regional president of the PNC Bank for the Greater Washington area, and a board member of the Meyer Foundation, made a similar observation. For all its good intentions, the business community, which provides the pool from which many area foundations draw their trustees, just does not have a comprehension of the overwhelming burdens and isolation faced by people of color in the region.

Finally, participants in the series also implicated the powerful technocratic strain within the philanthropic sector, which is drawn to problems that have clear, definable, and measurable solutions. Few considered entrenched racism to be such a problem; it is easy to be overwhelmed by its seeming intractability. During the series, one participant in fact commented on the importance of, and the difficulty of sustaining, a sort of philanthropic faith: those assembled were required to embark upon a learning process even though no solution to racism seemed on the horizon.

IV.

That faith could at least be sustained for the participants in the knowledge that they were not alone in embarking on that journey. The "Putting Racism on the Table" learning series joins a number of recent initiatives that suggest a willingness from within the philanthropic sector to engage issues of racism and racial equity more vocally and aggressively. The momentum reflects the urgency that many other foundation leaders felt

after the tumultuous events of the past few years. As Grant Oliphant, president of the Heinz Endowments, explained in a recent interview,⁵ “If we don’t respond to the fault line around equity in our society right now, particularly around race, around poverty and the widening divide between those who have and those who don’t, we are going to fundamentally fail in any mission we have—be it the environment or the arts or education—because this will tear us apart.”

Likewise, a standing-room only session on the “Putting Racism on the Table” series at the Council on Foundations annual meeting in April 2016, at which Copeland, Redwood, and Goren spoke, testified to widespread interest in the topic. Several audience members noted to the panel that it had become easier to speak about racism in their own institutional settings. This development reflects two strains of engagement. One involves the maturation and professionalization of racial equity grantmaking as an institutional practice in recent years, led by such foundations as the Ford Foundation, the Annie. E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the San Francisco Foundation, the Weingart Foundation, and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. These institutions have focused their lens outwards to address racial inequities in their local, regional or national communities. The other features a focus inward, reflecting a willingness to confront racial equity issues within the sector itself, exemplified by the Race and Equity in Philanthropy Group, the D5 Coalition, and the Philanthropic Initiative on Racial Equity, among others.

The organizers of the “Putting Racism on the Table” series could take some comfort from this sector-wide momentum, but comfort was not what they were really

⁵ Available at <http://www.tinyspark.org/podcasts/heinz-endowments-chief-philanthropy-facing-critical-test-on-racial-equity/>

after. In fact, one element that separated their efforts from many of the other philanthropic initiatives addressing racial equity was that it was directed both externally and internally. It combined the outrage and sense of injustice that is triggered when considering the effects of racism on society writ-large with the more intimate, deliberate reflection involved in institutional self-accounting. This required the series to engender a certain degree of discomfort among the participants; some even welcomed it as a necessary sign of growth. “I don’t think the sector is ready for it and that’s the exact point,” remarked Nat Chioke Williams before the first session. “The sector and society will never be ready for it until we do it.” In fact, he insisted that “discomfort should be at the center of the discourse.” That was because, he explained, unlike the term ‘race,’ which is passive and could be abstracted and depersonalized, racism is an active process with human agents.

So it was inevitable that the series would make some uncomfortable and might even offend others. But the participants could take these feelings as an opportunity; they could interrogate their desire to avert their eyes from certain subjects, Williams suggested, and gain important insights about the impediments to challenging the structures and policies that undergird racism. In other words, pushing past discomfort was an important part of the journey.

Of course, there was a limit to how hard they could push. In fact, John Powell, the Berkeley professor of African-American studies who presented at the first session (and who prefers the lower-case spelling of his name), opened his talk by comparing the proceedings to exercise: if you are not feeling a burn, you aren’t pushing yourself hard enough. But you also don’t want to push so hard that you injure yourself.

It required a delicate balance. In a blog post for WRAG,⁶ Nicky Goren and Joshua Bernstein, president and the then-chair of the Meyer Foundation, noted that the learning series represented a safe space where participants could allow themselves to become vulnerable and initiate difficult conversations about race and racism. In fact, it was in part for this reason that the series' organizers decided to restrict participation to foundation CEOs and trustees. Through WRAG, the region's foundation CEOs had already been meeting formally, several times a year, and many of the trustees knew each other from the region's business community. Furthermore, though the talks would be video-recorded, the subsequent discussions would not be; they would be entirely off-the-record. In this way, the participants in the series would begin with a certain level of comfort and familiarity that would, ideally, allow for freer conversations.

But it was also important that participants not feel too safe or too comfortable. Another reason why the series focused on CEOs and trustees was the assumption that they had been much slower to engage issues of racial equity in the past than had foundation staff. If they could more fully engage with issues of racial equity, their commitments would ripple out throughout the region's business and professional communities. So the series could be regarded as an opportunity—but also as a bit of an indictment.

The series' organizers also appreciated that there was a range of familiarity with these issues. Several area foundations, such as the Consumer Health Foundation and the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, had already made commitments to putting racial equity and

⁶ Nicky Goren and Josh Bernstein, "How We're 'Putting Racism on the Table': The Meyer Foundation," *The Daily WRAG*, February 1, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/02/01/how-were-putting-racism-on-the-table-the-meyer-foundation/>

combatting structural racism at the center of their work. In fact, while the planning for the series was underway, the Meyer Foundation was developing a strategic plan meant to do precisely that. Other participants had prior educational experience with racial equity. The executive director of the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, for instance, wrote a blog post for WRAG⁷ in which she recalled the anti-racism training she had previously received from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond as a board member of Grantmakers in the Arts.

For many other participants, especially those from smaller private and family foundations, who lacked diverse boards, the material was new, or at least, the charge to grapple with it so deliberately was. Even within the WRAG board itself, there was a range of commitment to the program, with some being much more supportive than others. Copeland and the other planning group members understood that it might take time for the group to congeal, to become fully comfortable with each other and with the material. “We have allowed 2 hours for the conversation in each session,” she said shortly before the start of the series. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we are out in an hour. I think people won’t really open up. It’s hard to say something that you think might offend someone. It’s hard to know the language to use...People who are open to the conversation are still afraid to have it because they don’t know what is going to happen.”

As the series began, many shared Copeland’s sense of apprehension—and of possibility. That mix was what made the prospect of coming together to confront racism so exciting.

⁷ Rose Ann Cleveland, “Reflections on Being White,” *The Daily WRAG*, February 25, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/02/25/reflections-on-being-white/>

V.

john a. powell, Berkeley professor of law and of African-American studies and ethnic studies, opened the first session on structural racism;⁸ discussion followed, and, despite Copeland's worries, took up the entire two hour allotment. Many participants would have likely stayed longer, if possible; there was much to talk about. Inca Mohamed set the tone, before powell began his remarks, by asking the participants to reflect on the feelings they had experienced when they had engaged in conversations about race and racism in the past. It was clear that this would not be an entirely academic exercise.

powell masterfully continued that balance between the personal and theoretical in his own presentation. Racism, he explained, is much like gravity, a powerful force that shapes all our actions, one that most people claim to understand, but don't give much actual thought to. He illustrated how historically race and racism have structured and undergirded most of our nation's key institutions—its political, economic, educational, and tax systems—all to the detriment of African-Americans. And he highlighted the primacy of racial anxiety in terms of understanding economic and political polarization.

powell's remarks were not abstract propositions; they were rooted in human agents, through the processes of racialization, the mechanism by which certain individuals were marginalized and others advantaged based on their racial identities. He made clear that it was actual men and women who marginalized and were marginalized, sometimes through explicit bias, but often through implicit bias, from cues buried deep within our institutional environment. For this reason, powell emphasized, preaching about the virtues of diversity would only get society so far. Instead, the focus must be

⁸ Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-john-powell-structural-racism-video>

structural and reform efforts must assume that focus as well, in order to develop a fully inclusive, equitable, multi-racial society. In this endeavor, powell maintained that philanthropy had an important, even an essential, role, both in pushing government to be more responsive to its citizens and to take risks and to make investments that government was not ready to do.

Robin DiAngelo, director of equity for Sound Generations and author of *What Does it Mean to be White?*, led the next session on the topic of “white privilege.”⁹ Like powell’s, her remarks also featured a mix of the personal and the theoretical. She began by reflecting on her own privilege as a white woman, and the gradual unfolding of her understanding of how that privilege allowed her to do and say things that others could not. In her remarks, she took direct aim at the myth of a race-blind society, held most fiercely, she maintained, by those who have benefited the most from racism. White privilege, she suggested, is what allows for white privilege to be ignored or denied.

For instance, when pressed, the white students she has taught in Washington state universities often commented about how little race mattered to them. They held onto color-blind narratives: “I was taught to treat everyone the same,” or “I just look at everyone as individuals.” Only their own whiteness allowed them to maintain this fiction, DiAngelo explained. They were blind to the ways that society constantly affirmed their own racial identity while degrading the identities of people of color. Whites are constantly presented as more attractive, more responsible, and more successful, than blacks in contemporary culture, DiAngelo demonstrated. What’s more, they are often

⁹ Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-robin-diangelo-white-privilege-video>

unaware of these advantages and the history of persecution that they are built upon and resentful when confronted with these inequities—it is the cardinal sin of “dragging race into a conversation.” So while the racial identity of a majority-black neighborhood is almost always granted analytic prominence, in the dominant discourse, a largely-white neighborhood is rarely assigned a race and thus the history of discriminatory policies that advantaged those white neighborhoods and brought segregation into being is ignored.

“Nothing in the dominant society gives us the information we need to have a complex and nuanced understanding of” white privilege, noted DiAngelo (although a participant did push back and suggest that much of the public was more conscious of racism’s power in society than DiAngelo allowed). She highlighted the ways in which the dominant culture obscures white privilege: through racial segregation; implicit bias; the construction of a strict binary between ‘bad’ racists and the well-thinking majority of the populace; an individualism that hinders focusing on larger structures; and the reliance on a diversified environment or an African-American friend as a guarantor of an individual’s commitment to anti-racism. Through this litany, DiAngelo called for participants in the series to be mindful of these failings, while also recognizing that we could never overcome them entirely. Examining one’s own biases and privileges was the crucial first step in mitigating their effects.

This session overlapped thematically with the next on implicit bias,¹⁰ led by Julie Nelson, the Director of the Government Alliance on Race & Equity at the Haas Institute

¹⁰ Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-implicit-bias-julie-nelson-video>

for a Fair and Inclusive Society. (Setting up its major theme, all participants were encouraged to take the Implicit Association Test on race in the days before the session). Nelson began by differentiating between explicit bias, which is most often expressed directly, at a conscious level, and of which people are often acutely aware, and implicit bias, which can be just as harmful, but of which individuals are often unaware. Like DiAngelo, she highlighted the dangers of a color-blind narrative given the pervasiveness and power of such implicit bias, which can shape individual and institutional attitudes toward minorities in pernicious ways.

Nelson provided a number of striking examples from her work in Seattle, overseeing a citywide effort to address structural racism. She discussed the divergent ways in which police treat drug offenses, based on the race of the accused; street-level drug dealing, with African-Americans as the most common buyers and sellers, is punished with much more severity than drug exchanges that take place at parties, dorm rooms, or other venues, in which the actors are more likely to be white—even when the drugs themselves are the same. In another example, her office found marked disparities in the experiences of whites and African-Americans in the housing rental market. When they approached the city's landlords with this data, the landlords expressed shock, claiming that they were fully committed to fair lending laws; they had been unaware of how their individual unconscious biases shaped their decisions not to grant leases to certain applicants. In response, Nelson's office instituted implicit bias training for the landlords and helped them to devise policies that would help mitigate those biases in practice.

In another example Nelson provided, her office struggled to understand why minority neighborhoods in Seattle often had burnt-out streetlights, a safety hazard and aesthetic eyesore. They ultimately traced the issue to a system that left it to households themselves to report outages; language difficulties, transience, and issues of trust with regard to local government caused households in minority neighborhoods to report outages less frequently. So Seattle switched from a complaints-based system to one of automatic, timed bulb replacement and began to look into how a consumer complaint based system could have disparate impacts on different communities and exacerbate racial inequity.

The session ended with a discussion of what could be done to correct implicit bias, specifically the sort exercised by grantmakers. Participants debated whether implicit bias tests should be administered at all area foundations; Nelson emphasized the importance of marshaling data, among other remedies. She also initiated a group discussion that was the most spirited and intense of those in the series, perhaps because, primed by the bias tests, the material implicated the participants so strongly. At one table, for instance, the discussion turned to how implicit bias shapes the grantmaking process; one participant, for instance, pointed out that an emphasis on funding “capacity” directed resources to largely white-led intermediary organizations and away from smaller black-led grassroots organizations.

The group discussion also forced participants to confront the different ways these issues were experienced. Nelson, for instance, asked participants how many of them went to schools with teachers of their own race. When most of the white participants raised their hands, but few of the black participants did, Julie Wagner, vice president for

community affairs at CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, had an “aha!” moment. But, as she explained in a WRAG blog post,¹¹ she also recognized this was an “of course” moment for many of the African-American participants, who had long been aware of racial disparities in education. Here was the sort of twinned enlightenment that the series hoped to provoke: both to racial inequity itself and to the ways in which it is experienced differently by various members of the community.

The fourth session¹² was led by James Bell, the founder and director of the W. Haywood Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice, Fairness and Equity. Bell delved into a case study which demonstrated how the issues the series had targeted – structural racism, implicit bias and white privilege – converged to produce the shocking racial disparities surrounding mass incarceration. Bell provided some of the damning statistics: between 1988 and 2008, the costs of incarceration have increased by 313%; there are now 9 million individuals under supervision, more than 2 million of whom are “behind bars,” the highest incarceration rate in the world, as well as the highest juvenile detention rate; and while as recently as the mid-1980s, more than 70% of the juvenile population in detention was white, now the demographics have flipped, and 72% are youth of color. For white men, the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment is 1 in 17; for Latino men, that figure is 1 in 6; and for black men, it is 1 in 3.

These trends, Bell explained, are the results of recent policy decisions to promote “the seductive but hollow phrase, law and order.” But they also reflect a deep-seated

¹¹ Julie Wagner, “Putting Racism on the Table: How I was Affected,” *The Daily WRAG*, June 13, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/06/13/putting-racism-on-the-table-how-i-was-affected/>

¹² Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-mass-incarceration-james-bell-video>

carceral impulse in the nation that has found release in a 300-year-old model of custodial control and violent suppression. The model is also fed by racism and bias, sustaining itself not on evidence or empirically-based research but on stories and unconscious impulses. He pointed out, for instance, the fact that black boys are viewed by police as less childlike than white boys of the same age; the officer who shot Tamir Rice claimed he thought he was 20, when he was, in fact, 12. Nor have these policies resulted in a safer society: they have produced a national recidivism rate of near 60% (which rises to 77% three years out).

Bell concluded by outlining some of the steps that foundations could take to address mass incarceration. He stressed the decentralized nature of the criminal justice system, which meant that efforts could best be directed at the local and county levels—and suggested the need for funders to resist the impulse to push relentlessly for “scale.” He also underscored the importance of strategically selecting a place on which to focus, where funders or grantees could develop relationships and a degree of accountability (by, for instance, carefully tracking recidivism statistics). Finally, he highlighted the benefits of funding research and scholarship that could produce better data to inform criminal justice policy. Ultimately, the aim of such reform was not merely to support more enlightened policies, but to radically change the way the nation thinks about public safety, challenging a belief system that has become entrenched over decades, and even centuries.

Although much of the focus of the series had been directed toward anti-black racism, the organizers of “Putting Racism on the Table” wanted to complicate the

traditional black-white binary in which issues of racial equity are often engaged. To do so, they asked Manuel Pastor, professor of sociology, American Studies and Ethnicity at USC, to led the fifth session on the changing “racial mosaic” of America.¹³ Pastor did so expertly, mixing anecdote and data, levity and profundity.

He charted the explosive growth rate in the populations of African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans over the last decades, as well as the profound racial anxiety the growth has provoked. In the 2000s, nationally the black population increased by 11%, and the Latino population and the Asian/Pacific Islander both by 43%. The greater Washington metro area witnessed significant demographic change as well, with the Latino population increasing by 79%, the Asian/Pacific Islander population increasing by 57%, the black population increasing by 12% and the white population by 2%. The figures from the city of Washington, DC look a bit different—there, the Latino population experienced 22% growth, while the black population declined by 11%, and the white population increased by 32%. In fact, one of Pastor’s key themes was the need to look beyond the national numbers and to understand demographic shifts regionally, as well as in terms of urban, suburban, and rural areas. He pointed out that it is the suburbs that are now experiencing the most rapid changes in diversity (and the most significant concentrations of poverty), a fact that many foundations have not fully grasped. The philanthropic imagination still regards the city as the main locus of poverty, but Pastor urged foundations to direct their attention to suburbs, with their limited civic and social service infrastructures.

¹³ Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-racial-mosaic-america-video>

Pastor reminded the audience that by the year 2043-2044, the United States will become a fully majority-minority country. The demographic trends he outlined explain some of the political developments of recent years, the dark nostalgia and compulsion to “make America great again” that has fueled much right-wing populism. Demographic change has also fed generational politics as well; for instance, he pointed out (using data from 2008-2012) that nearly a generation separates the median age for whites in the US (43) from that of Latinos (28). He ended by urging the attendees to incorporate these new demographic complexities into their thinking when taking on the issue of racism. They must understand that demographic change can be uncomfortable, but that it must be met with compassion for all those experiencing it.

The final session¹⁴ was led by Gail Christopher, vice president for Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Christopher chronicled her own career path as a way to illustrate how philanthropy has engaged over the last decade with the issues of structural racism, gradually making it a more central focus. She charted the development of her experiences in the field—moving from work surrounding diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion, to efforts to combat racism, to an attempt to promote racial equity and reconciliation—and demonstrated how it paralleled the Kellogg Foundation’s own grappling with the issues over the last three decades.

She stressed, while talking about her work at Kellogg, the compatibility of attempts to upend structural racism and to promote racial healing, and how she encouraged the Kellogg Foundation to embrace both. The foundation funded a program

¹⁴ Video available at <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/resources/putting-racism-table-role-philanthropy-addressing-racism-video>

in racial equity with \$100 million (a quarter of which was directed to Brazil), which sought to change the narrative away from a belief in the nation’s “post-racial” status and to support community-based efforts in improving race relations, action-oriented research, and the nation’s major civil right organizations. Its emphasis remained on “our collective humanity,” she noted, casting a wide net to include all ethnicities and races “who have felt the pain of our country’s refusal to jettison” the belief in a hierarchical racial taxonomy that has governed social relations in the nation for centuries.

This emphasis defined the foundation’s recently established Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation enterprise, now in its design phase. In one of its more innovative approaches, based on a belief in the “power of story,” Kellogg is seeking to transform the racial narrative of this nation; it has brought together men and women from across the country, for instance, to share stories about when their humanity was *affirmed*.

Christopher ended her talk at a similar point as several of the other speakers, urging philanthropy to shift the underlying narrative that undergirds structural racism. Only by changing belief could foundations address the problem of structural racism “upstream,” she insisted, and thereby shape behaviors; only in this way could philanthropy achieve a true and lasting *transformation*.

VI.

Christopher spoke about the challenge of designing metrics to evaluate a program of racial healing. The same challenge, on a smaller scale, applied to WRAG’s “Putting

Racism on the Table.” How should we assess these sessions? This is not the place for a formal program evaluation, but some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. In my unscientific survey of participants, nearly all reported that they found the sessions to be a rewarding experience. The speakers were uniformly praised as thoughtful, articulate, and provocative. Amanda Andere, the CEO of Funders Together to End Homelessness, gave a representative appraisal when she praised the lecturers for engaging both the head and the heart; they took “an academic approach,” she noted, “but also brought in real world experiences.” Andere thought the combination of lecture and group discussion was an important model to reflect upon; funders can be so focused on data and research, she noted, that they can forget the importance of stories and lived experience. “Putting Racism on the Table,” she believed, highlighted both. “That’s been a great gift that WRAG has given to the community—not just the content of the work but the structure.”

Some participants felt that the sessions occasionally tipped too far in one direction or the other—became too academic or too anecdotal. There was a particularly wide range of views presented on the discussions that followed the presentations. In my observations, they were respectful, often earnest, but rarely raw. The interlocutors clearly took the questions posed and the issues presented seriously, and gave evidence of struggling to come to terms with nuanced, deliberate answers. But decorum seemed to have a tight rein on what was said—few viewpoints were challenged, and the perspectives only occasionally strayed from the bounds of polite, progressive orthodoxy, as with a brief discussion of reparations.

What can we say about the series’ overall impact? This is a difficult question to answer for any program, especially without the benefit of the passage of time. Perhaps

the best we can do is to approach the question in ways that mirror the framework of the series itself. On an individual level, several participants gave testimonies to having perspectives expanded and viewpoints broadened. A number mentioned that they had not truly understood the concept of structural racism or how it might intersect with philanthropy until they had completed the series; others commented that they could no longer look at movie posters, advertisements, or other cultural products without thinking through how they embodied and perpetuated structural racism. “What was really compelling to me,” noted Amanda Andere, “was to see at the end of those sessions, we weren’t having the discussion of ‘if’ [there was racism], but how do we move forward. And that’s a very different conversation than would have happened if they hadn’t been through the process.”

Nicky Goren, president of the Meyer Foundation, observed this transformation firsthand in her own board members, several of whom participated in the series. When she had first approached the subject of racism with her board, she recalls that several were reluctant or uncomfortable with the language and what it would mean for Meyer’s work. But she has witnessed an evolution in their thinking, as the foundation’s strategic planning process blended into the WRAG series. After every session, when Goren spoke with the board members who attended, she noted a growing comfort level in speaking publicly about racism. “A year ago,” she notes, “my board had never talked about racism at the board level. Fast forward a year later, and we are in a totally different place.” The education they received from the “Putting Racism on the Table” series, Goren says, “was crucial.”

Others reported being deeply moved by the presentations as a validation of their own experience. One participant, Terri Copeland, a senior vice president at PNC Bank, compared the learning series¹⁵ to reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' cri-de-coeur, *Between the World and Me*, in its tapping of a stream of raw, pent-up emotion. Silvia Salazar, a trustee of the Consumer Health Foundation, composed a WRAG blog post¹⁶ in which she explained how the series helped her understand how her own mother, a Hispanic-American, had internalized the dictates of structural racism and how it had distorted her mother's sense of self-worth.

Yet others did not experience such dramatic reactions; one could even detect a note of disappointment in some of their appraisals. Daniel Solomon, a trustee of the Naomi and Nehemiah Cohen Foundation, felt that the series could have asked more from the participants. "I think they didn't make us feel uncomfortable enough," he remarked, suggesting that there might have been too much time spent and emphasis placed on the lectures and not enough on encouraging and provoking small-group discussions.

Hill-Snowdon's Nat Williams had a similar reaction. But he acknowledges that, as an African-American man, he likely was much more intimately familiar with the ravages of structural racism than many of the white participants, for whom some of the presentations might have proved more revelatory. "The central fact of having a whole session on white privilege is really important," he commented. "I'm OK that I didn't get that much out of it."

¹⁵ Terri Copeland, "Putting Racism on the Table: How I Was Affected," *The Daily WRAG*, June 13, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/06/13/putting-racism-on-the-table-how-i-was-affected/>

¹⁶ Silvia Salazar, "Creating Meaningful Impact/Creando un impacto significativo," *The Daily WRAG*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.washingtongrantmakers.org/news/creating-meaningful-impactcreando-un-impacto-significativo>

In fact, when offering assessments, several of the participants also took note of the difficulty of calibrating the precise level of the challenges posed by the material, given the diversity of viewpoints and experiences represented by those attending. “I remember leaving a couple sessions thinking, ‘I would have been comfortable being more uncomfortable,’” Nicky Goren remarked, “but I’m not sure everyone was.” And so Goren thought it was wise not to push much further. Silvia Salazar offered a similar judgment. She appreciated that others came to the series with different experiences that shaped what they could be expected to get out of it. It became clear “that some folks were just starting on their journey while others were further along.” She realized that although she approached the series as an individual (a person of color acutely aware of the experience of racism) and as a representative of a foundation (one that has taken a particularly aggressive stand in addressing racial equity), she did so as well as a member of the broader Washington philanthropic community. WRAG might have tailored the program to those like her, who were further along on that journey, but doing so would have meant leaving those just starting behind. “If the goal is to be inclusive and to reach a collective understanding, and to take action collectively,” she said, “then I think it’s important to take the time and to provide support.”

Salazar’s comments underscore a central fact about the series that was at times lost in a focus on individual reaction and response: it was fundamentally an exercise in consensus-building, an opportunity for the Washington region’s philanthropic leaders to arrive at a shared understanding of racism and racial equity. This is what Patricia Mathews, the President and CEO of the Northern Virginia Health Foundation, referenced

when she praised the series presenters for not aggressively “proselytizing” a particular viewpoint; they allowed a consensus to emerge from the discussions themselves.

VII.

These responses suggest a broader tension in the series between the poles of individual experiences and structural determinants, which in turn shaped the relationship between understanding and action on which “Putting Racism on the Table” was premised.

The powerful individual responses provoked by many of the sessions reflect the extent to which the series required participants to turn their analytic lens inward—even as the lecturers maintained a broader, society-wide perspective. This internal focus could be individual or it could be institutional—as in the home foundation of those attending. But it required a personalization of the material.

In fact, this was a common theme of reflections on the series—the need for participants to get their own house in order before turning outward. The model presented was centrifugal, with enthusiasm and commitment radiating outward. As Dara Johnson, the lead staffer at the Horning Family Fund, argued in a WRAG blog post,¹⁷ “if we seek to address the issues in others while denying the work that needs to happen within each of us, we will continue to perpetuate the same pattern of behavior that hinders our progress.”

This dedication to one’s own house left open the possibility of some deeply uncomfortable revelations about its untidiness. The Consumer Health Foundation’s Silvia Salazar, for instance, reported that even during the discussion sessions themselves she

¹⁷Dara Johnson, “Reflections on Implicit Bias,” *The Daily WRAG*, March 24, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/03/24/reflections-on-implicit-bias/>

experienced bias, as colleagues expressed surprise on learning that she was a trustee (although she concedes her relative youth might have had something to do with the surprise as well). She received comments on how “well-spoken” she was, and questions about how she ended up a trustee, inquiries that she assumes were not directed at white attendees. In those moments, she did not feel comfortable pointing out to her peers that they had just exhibited precisely those behaviors that the series was meant to combat. But the experience, disappointing as it was, highlighted for Salazar that there was still much work to be done in addressing how nonprofit professionals within the Washington region see and treat each other.

In fact, although there was considerable lip service paid to the need to turn inward, and there were seemingly heartfelt expressions of the need to address the inequities within foundations themselves, there seemed to be a boundary beyond which these entreaties rarely ventured, perhaps because of their largely individualist orientation. This dynamic was embodied in another WRAG blog post¹⁸ by a participant, in which she related her discomfort at walking into a store and noting that although several African-American workers were attending to various tasks, the worker behind the cash register was white. This scene was offered as an illustration of how the series had increased the writer’s sensitivities to the racial disparities around her. And yet it also presented a (likely unintentional) metaphor for the philanthropic sector itself, which can claim a base of minority staff members, but whose boards and funders, who control the “cash register,” are still disproportionately white. What sort of broader structural transformations would be required to remedy that disparity? How radically would philanthropy, as it has been

¹⁸Missy Young, “Reflections on Implicit Bias,” *The Daily WRAG*, March 24, 2016, <https://dailywrag.com/2016/03/24/reflections-on-implicit-bias/>

understood and practiced in the United States for the last century, have to be transformed in order to reflect the nation in all its diversity? These questions lurked at the margins of the discussions, but were not fully engaged.

There was some concern among participants that although larger structural issues were the initial focus of the series, the attention of the participants was often diverted to more individualistic concerns. White privilege and implicit bias were often approached through personal anecdote and experience—and powerfully so. But in doing so, as Hill-Snowdon’s Nat Williams points out, the question of *power* and how it is embedded in larger systems and institutions was often lost.

VIII.

The focus on the individual could be felt in the profound sensitivity among the participants to registering changes of hearts and minds—both their own and their peers. This was likely the case because such individual “conversions” were an intelligible outcome of the work done in the series and there was a powerful need to see the material encountered translated into some immediate good end. The series’ organizers had anticipated the way that understanding and action would activate each other, and yet the power and volatility of that relationship was still striking. In fact, nearly all the participants I surveyed registered this impulse and noted the way it was both stoked, and sometimes disappointed, by the series. Some participants, for example, were especially fired up by the case study on mass incarceration, because, as PNC’s Michael Harreld pointed out, it represented an “actionable” issue, one about which they could imagine rolling up their sleeves and making a measurable difference. Others, however, reported

some mild frustrations that there were not enough of these signposts to impact. As one participant, a trustee of a family foundation, explained, “I thought we got a lot of data but didn’t do a whole lot on what to do with that information...and how we as philanthropists may be able to positively affect the situation. I don’t think we avoided it, I just don’t think we got to it. I kept waiting and waiting.”

Some participants, though, did not wait to take some initial, modest steps toward institutional reform. A board member from the Weissberg Family Foundation, Nina Weissberg, was inspired by the series to push fellow board members when hiring a new executive director to ask how candidates would engage the national dialogue on racism. It also helped her begin a conversation at the foundation about how they should “put racism on the table” in its own grant making. “The WRAG series gave us the tools to begin this exploration,” says Weissberg. And at the Horning Family Fund, participation in the series has led trustees to include in grantee applications a question about whether the organization participates in racial equity training. (The full board is also being shown videos of the first three sessions). “WRAG’s leadership and training helped launch this important dialogue at our foundation,” notes Missy Young, the foundation’s board chair.

There is also some evidence that WRAG’s series has inspired other regional associations and funders’ networks to explore the possibility of sponsoring a similar program. Funders Together to End Homelessness, an affinity group represented in the sessions by CEO Amanda Andere, is considering replicating a version of the learning series for its own network of funders; WRAG’s Copeland has already spoken to the group. The Black Social Change Funders Network has also expressed an interest in

developing a model of the series. Numerous other associations have contacted Copeland as well to learn more about the series.

This development was part of the plan. Although the series was designed as a learning experience for participants, the organizers also hoped it could find a broader audience among other foundations, businesses, governmental offices, and schools. WRAG recorded the presentations at each of the six sessions, created viewing guides around them, and made the videos available to the public; as of September, those videos had been viewed more than 10,000 times. There was also a strong sense of needing to reach out to those who were *not* at the table—both those in the nonprofit community to whom philanthropic programs are directed, and those in the region’s foundation sector who did not attend the series. “Not everyone participated in this work and we have to be mindful of that and bring them along,” cautions Patricia Mathews. “It’s not just what do *we* do; it’s who is the ‘we’ in that conversation.”

IX.

In general, then, series’ organizers appreciated the power of what Tamara Copeland calls the “‘what can we do?’ sentiment” among the participants. This drive sparked the initiation of an adjunct to the learning series: the “Putting Racism on the Table Training Series.” In June, WRAG began to host a number of workshops that would guide participants (both foundation CEOs, board members and, this time, staff) in answering that question. These would include a three-part series in how to do grant-making with a racial equity lens; a workshop for African-Americans funders on how to

respond to comments that are implicitly biased; and, for white funders, a workshop on how to communicate with white family, friends, and colleagues about race and racism.

In September, the WRAG leadership called yet another meeting for the funding community around the subject of addressing racism. “This might feel like a culmination,” noted Tamara Copeland at its start. “But it’s not.” This time, those convened met to discuss the next steps they could take in the journey begun with the “Putting Racism on the Table” series.

Nat Williams began the session by asking the participants to imagine what a racially equitable region would look like (Gene Wilder had just passed away, and in tribute, Williams urged those in the room to access “a world of pure imagination,” a reference to the famous song from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*). Where would people live in such a world? Where would they go to school? What would they learn? Where and how would they work? How would they engage with their elected officials?

There was a heady outpouring of responses, as if there was something liberating in the exercise; after having spent months together considering the legacy of structural racism, participants could now, if only briefly, direct their focus to a world in which that legacy had been extirpated. Education spending would be directed to the whole child. Neighborhoods would be diverse, multiethnic and multiracial. Policing would be based on nonviolent principles. People would be able to choose where they lived and where they worked, without race intruding as a predictive, constraining factor.

After loosening its collective imagination, the group began to think through some practical steps that WRAG might take. There was strong support for the continuance of a

racial equity working group within WRAG that would pursue at least two avenues of work: commissioning a scan of systems that impact people of color in the region, focusing on how racial residential segregation has shaped housing inequities, that could be used to direct future philanthropic projects; and collaborating with grantees to identify opportunities for political advocacy around issues of racial equity. These possibilities had initially emerged out of a survey of series participants that had been distributed after the final session.

Beyond any specific recommendation, perhaps the most important finding of the survey was that three-quarters of respondents reported that their organizations were likely or very likely to engage in future racial equity activities supported by WRAG. In other words, they appreciated that if the “Putting Racism on the Table” series represented a community milestone, it was just one stop along a longer, difficult journey.

“Just like Americans nationwide would not have been engaging in conversations about racial equity and criminal justice and police brutality if it had not been for the Black Lives Matter Movement,” says Nat Williams, “the philanthropic community in the Washington, DC region would not have been having these discussions about racial equity if WRAG had not provided the opportunity.” The WRAG leadership and the participants in the series deserve a measure of commendation for sparking those conversations. But how much exactly will depend on where those conversations lead the community. “It’s OK to pat yourself on the back,” Williams quips, “as long as part of that pat is pushing you forward to do the next thing.”

About the Author:

Benjamin Soskis is a fellow at the Center for Nonprofit Management, Philanthropy and Policy at George Mason University and the co-editor of the HistPhil.org blog. His writing on philanthropy and the nonprofit sector has appeared in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, the *Guardian*, and the *Foundation Review*. Soskis is also a consultant for the history of philanthropy program of the Open Philanthropy Project, jointly funded by Good Ventures and GiveWell. He has taught at George Washington University and the University of California Washington Center, and received his PhD from Columbia University in American history.