



PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

How do advocates for racial justice put forth a compelling case about the barriers to wealth people of color face? How do we establish a popular agenda for dismantling recognizing and reckoning with a legacy of and ongoing production of more race-based economic inequality?

To answer these questions, **Insight Center** partnered with ASO Communications. The language recommendations that follow emerge from analysis of over 1000 data points from current language. The data included consist of (1) advocacy (2) media coverage (3) opposition (4) popular culture and (5) interviews with advocates, gathered over multiple projects.

METHODOLOGY

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, we set forth to examine how people reason, formulate judgements and come to conclusions about environmental concerns.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging the commonplace non-literal phrases in all speech. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity. Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as “true” about a concept. Priming people with varying metaphors has been

shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what “ought” to be done about a given topic. An effective metaphor amplifies what advocates wish the public got about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford showed that groups primed with a metaphor of CRIME AS DISEASE (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) more often came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the metaphor of CRIME AS OPPONENT (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) generally thought harsher punishments were the answer. If you’re working for prevention, it’s clear you should liken crime to DISEASE and avoid OPPONENT evocations. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

You know wording matters: altering the very label for the people you often address — African American or Black — has been shown to alter assumptions and policy preferences. Individual words, especially labels for people, matter immensely as researchers on voting behavior discovered.

In another study, investigators asked respondents whether they’d *vote* in an upcoming election and others whether they’d *be a voter*.

The difference is stunning. Where just over half of those asked about voting intended to do so, 87.5% of those asked about being a voter desired to get to the polls. Post-election, voting records

showed 96% of those surveyed about being a voter actually pulled the lever.

A simple word difference, from “will you vote” to “will you be a voter” is also a conceptual shift from action to identity, from what you do to who you are. The words we use shape what’s true for our audiences. This is as true in ideas about handling crime as it is for voting behavior. If theory holds, it should prove effective to unpack and then alter perceptions of injustice broadly, including barriers to wealth.

WHAT THIS WORK ISN'T

Applying the findings of this method of analysis to assess and, hopefully, shape advocacy discourse can ensure you’re saying what you actually think. It helps you say today what you’ll still believe and mean tomorrow.

However, this assumes a focus on the long-term: an attempt to shape how the public understands and comes to judgements about economic justice over time. This is not traditional political research designed to win the next election.

As such the analysis and recommendations here may challenge conventional wisdom about what the public is ready to hear. The premise here is to find the range of ways people *can*, if supported by our messaging, come to support our efforts -- in other words where they are capable of going and how to lead them there.

As with all communication, messenger, timing, context and repetition matter immensely.

## WINNING WORDS FOR CLOSING THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP

| Replace...   | Embrace...   | Because...   |
|--|--|--|
| Racial wealth gap, racial disparities  | Barriers to wealth/well-being, prosperity  | Gap provides no origin story for problems lending listener to assume individual culpability.           |
| Whites achieve/produce wealth  | Amass, hoard, get wealth   | Makes wealth sound deserved.   |
| Gap has widened, wages have fallen, gains are being lost, disparities occurred | Leaders have given wealth to some and kept it from others.<br>[X] chose to reverse gains by... | People do things, things don't just happen.  |
| Healthy economy, economy needs, economy struggles with...                      | Economy on the right track/wrong track, accelerate economy, steer economy                      | Personifying economy reinforces laissez faire. Economy as vehicle lends role for external supervision. |
| Good for the economy   | Good for the nation/Americans  | Making the economy deserving recipient reinforces opposition's paradigm.                               |
| Workers  | Working people, people who [e.g. serve our food, pave our road, etc.]                          | Move out of "worker" frame in order to activate human frame.   |
| Earn [X] wage  | Paid [X] wage  | Earn is value person produces; pay is portion given to them.   |
| Economic inequality  | Economy off-kilter/off-balance, too much wealth in too few hands                               | Inequality is an abstraction, not visceral or rooted in experience.                                    |
| The top, the bottom  | Richest/luckiest, poorest/most confined  | Good is up, bad is down. Reinforces toxic ideas of moral "worth."                                      |
| Conditions persist, AA experience, are being impacted                          | Lawmakers choose, employers deny   | People do things, things don't just happen.  |
| Campaign seeks to/works to/strives to/is dedicated to [X]                      | Campaign does/gets/obtains/wins [X]  | Unnecessary hedging dilutes your efficacy.   |
| Invest in children   | Do right by children, all children have rights   | Monetizing children reifies economy over human needs.  |
| Fight poverty, war on poverty  | Eliminate barriers, remove traps, provide access   | Personifies and makes poverty, not decisions made to cause it, enemy.                                  |
| AA and Latinos are more likely to...   | White employers/leaders are more likely to deny<br>Whites are more likely to give...           | Centers attention on cause of problem, fights tendency to assume inherent inferiority of POC.          |
| Net worth of AA/Latinos/whites, etc  | Net wealth   | Making worth synonymous with wealth reinforces bad assumptions.  |
| We need/would benefit from [name of policy]                                    | We owe it to Americans   | Policy isn't nice to have, it's imperative   |
| Black wealth, white wealth, etc.   | Wealth held by African Americans, assets owned by whites, etc.                                 | Implies a separate, somehow different, category of wealth.   |
| Low income, high need, underserved   | Struggling to make ends meet, striving for family  | Profile agency of POC, not just hardship or neediness.   |

