



Beneath the **SURFACE**

**Why Engaging in a Systems
Analysis Matters for Narrative
Power Builders (And Everyone Else)**

Acknowledgments

Authors

Sughey Ramirez
Jomaira Salas Pujols, PhD.
Nikko Viquiera
Terrence Keleher
jaboa lake, PhD.
Race Forward's Weaver's Lab

Editors

Iris M. Crawford
Cheryl Cato Blakemore
Josh Wright

Designers

Gabriela Quist

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Introduction

Organizers, community leaders, racial justice advocates, and narrative strategists continue to lead the fight against rising authoritarianism and attacks on democracy and racial justice. These attacks started as critiques of critical race theory in schools and the dismantling of key policies like Affirmative Action. They have now escalated to the level of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents violently, and in many cases, illegally seizing immigrants and their allies.

In the midst of chaos, many of us are quick to jump to solutions to address the violence unfolding in front of us and to protect those who are most hurt and impacted. And rightly so. We need to prioritize reducing harm and providing support to those most vulnerable.

However, we also know from our movement's history that racist violence is often the tip of a much larger iceberg. Underneath its surface are structural roots that extend across institutions throughout time. History has also shown that if we do not address these roots we are bound to experience the same violence and crises again and again.

And so it's important for all of us working towards racial justice to understand and address both the violence in front of us and the structural roots that undergird that violence.

With this **toolkit** we aim to:

- 1** **Reveal the importance of engaging in root cause analysis** in addressing racial inequities and rising authoritarianism;
- 2** **Emphasize the need for systems analysis in narrative powerbuilding;**
- 3** **Introduce the Iceberg Activity, a systems analysis tool to identify root causes** and long-term, systemic solutions;
- 4** **Share major takeaways from a Race Forward Weavers Lab systems analysis discussion** led by Weaver's Lab participants

This tool harvests learnings from Race Forward's narrative power building work to support the work of other narrative practitioners in the field. However, we believe this tool will also benefit folks working to **advance racial justice** from across other bodies of work and issue areas. You will find a blank version of the Iceberg Activity tool to use when applying to other issues you are working on at the end of this toolkit. Our hope is that it will help all of us sharpen our analysis to come up with long-term sustainable strategies for building a racially just society.

Background

On January 28, 2026, as part of the Weaver's Lab for Narrative Solidarity's monthly training, cohort members engaged in a systems analysis of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) occupation in Minneapolis, MN.

The Weavers Lab for Solidarity Narratives cohort is a year-long collaborative program for organizations committed to advancing racial justice through powerful narrative strategies and interventions. Members of the cohort receive expert training and coaching as they design, implement, and test narrative projects that challenge harmful narratives and build solidarity across communities.

Race Forward engages in systems analysis because we believe that it prompts us to analyze problems holistically, allows us to identify root causes and contributing factors, and supports the creation of solutions and strategic interventions aimed at fundamental and lasting change.

We believe that **building narrative power** is a systemic intervention designed to address the structural roots of inequities and injustice in the world.



Different Levels of Racism

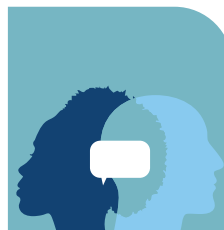
Before we dig into systems analysis and its relationship to building narrative power, it's important to first be familiar with Race Forward's core approach to understanding racism and the different interventions available to us.

Race Forward identifies **four levels of racism**:



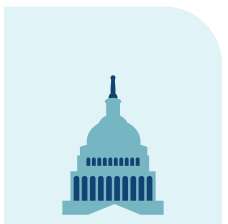
INTERNALIZED

Internalized racism that lies within individuals. This type of racism comprises our private beliefs and biases about race and racism, influenced by our culture.



INTERPERSONAL

Interpersonal racism (personally mediated), which occurs between individuals. This is the bias that occurs when individuals interact with others and their personal racial beliefs affect their public interactions.



STRUCTURAL

Structural racism or racial bias among institutions and across society. This involves the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of societal factors, including the history, culture, ideology and interactions of institutions and policies that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.



INSTITUTIONAL

Institutional racism, which occurs within institutions and systems of power. This refers to the unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions (schools, workplaces, etc.) that routinely produce racially inequitable outcomes for people of color and advantages for white people.

There are many other ways to understand the different levels or manifestations of racism in our world but, for our particular analysis, we will use these definitions. It's also helpful to understand that, in the real world, racism is not as clear cut and compartmentalized and that these various levels tend to overlap and reinforce each other.

Most of our organizations, popular media, and mainstream conversations tend to focus on addressing internalized and interpersonal racism because they are most visible to us and can more immediately be addressed. It is also largely by design that our institutions seldom talk about structural racism and harm. Structural racism is where the roots of disparate outcomes for people of color lie. When the roots of structural racism are not addressed, the issue continues to sustain itself. And so our work as racial justice practitioners is to pay just as much attention, if not more, to structural racism. Only then can we come up with interventions to address these roots.

What is Systems Analysis and why is it important?

Racial justice work calls us to address and dismantle structural racism—racial inequities across institutions, policies, social structures, history, and culture. We have to address its systemic roots—those deep-seated institutional, cultural, ideological, and historical causes of racial inequities—through interventions and strategies.

Engaging in a systems analysis is a critical discipline to cultivate when creating the content and strategies for narrative power-building. It's worth spending the time to do a thorough analysis to help uncover and understand the deep narratives (or underlying values and worldviews) that impact your particular issues and communities.

There are **many benefits** to doing this. Engaging in a systems analysis:

- ✓ Reveals the **roots causes** of immediate problems we are working to confront.
- ✓ Reveals **patterns** across time, places, issues, and communities that can help us arrive at new angles for framing issues.
- ✓ Reveals **ideas** for new strategies and actions to address the presence of ICE and the many underlying issues connected to it.
- ✓ Identifies **points** of intervention that are tangible.
- ✓ Helps make **new connections** to different communities impacted by the same roots causes with whom new ways of building collective power can be explored.

A systems analysis helps achieve and sustain equity, revealing the new rules and activities that need to be embedded and operationalized. **Just as racism operates structurally and systemically, so too must racial equity in order to perpetually supplant racism.**

“Systems analysis reveals strategies and solutions for proactive systems change, building on our values and vision to advance and create tangible and transformative changes in our lived realities. It moves us beyond strategies that focus on individual, superficial, and short-term changes to strategies that can produce lasting and structural transformation.”

A Systems Approach to Identifying Harms, Barriers, and Points of Intervention

Acknowledging how systemic and structural harms and barriers impact us allows a fuller picture of not only how individual people are situated within power structures, but how these power structures impact our everyday lives, relationships, and access to resources.

We know that systems are the root causes of many harms and barriers. These systems, structures and flow of resources, impact the way we see ourselves, how interconnected we view our lives across communities, and whether we build towards solidarity as a practice. When using a systems analysis approach to addressing harms and barriers, we can better identify points of intervention.

Even when the root causes of an issue are systemic, broad systemic change is a large, collective project. As we move towards transformed systems, we can identify points of intervention at the personal and group level. By engaging in movement practices like asset mapping and resource sharing, we can change our conditions in ways that are tangible and within our reach, and ultimately shift mindsets and practices.

As identified through the Iceberg Analysis in this brief, the harms and violence that communities are experiencing at the hands of ICE and other immigration enforcement agencies require systemic change. However, by sharing stories between neighbors, harms within communities and barriers between individuals in relationship building may be addressed. While we work towards the systemic changes needed, we can engage in these interventions between individuals and groups. In doing so, we build stronger movements of resistance and are better able to take care of each other in the face of violence and repression from the state.

As the late freedom fighter and political prisoner Assata Shakur said, **“In order to change this world, we are gonna have to change ourselves.”**

Building Narrative Power and Systems Analysis

“Transforming people’s worldviews and belief systems, and creating the sustainable cultural conditions for them to choose, behave and act differently is the deep and rigorous work of building narrative power for social justice.”

— Race Forward’s [Butterfly Lab](#)

Building narrative power means reshaping the stories, messages, and narratives that define our society—amplifying those rooted in equity, purpose, justice, and liberation until they rise above the harmful ones we've inherited. When we change the narrative, we change culture—transforming beliefs, values, and everyday practices to reflect the world we know is possible.

Making our movement’s narratives dominant is an important strategy in changing peoples’ worldviews and values at a scale that then leads to shifting policies and institutions.

We have to build narrative power that transforms inequitable social arrangements, agreements, and sets the foundation towards justice, liberation, and solidarity. Eventually dominant narrative power **changes the unjust status quo. In this way, building narrative power is a systemic intervention that aims to address, dismantle, and change the systemic roots of inequities.** For example, while it’s important to call out the harms of ICE. We also need to address the cultural, ideological, institutional, and historical roots that led to the institutionalization of ICE and its assault on immigrants and their allies. This is only possible if narrative strategists and practitioners are engaging in systems analysis that reveals the systemic root causes and narrative interventions needed to address them.



The Iceberg Activity as a Systems Analysis Tool

A systems analysis tool for understanding the roots of structural inequities. The Iceberg tool ask: “What are the cultural, historical, institutional, and ideological roots of the inequity we’re trying to address? What narrative power building interventions will dismantle these roots?”

CULTURE

Everyday normalization and replication of racism.

HISTORY

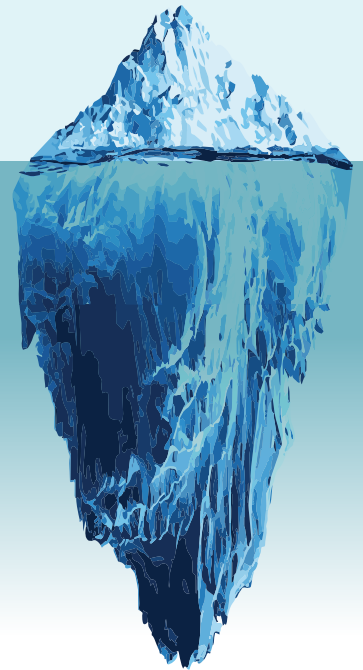
Roots and cumulative impacts of white domination in U.S compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism.

INTERCONNECTED INSTITUTIONS & POLICIES

Compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism.

RACIAL IDEOLOGY

Popular ideas and myths that perpetuate racial hierarchies.



The Iceberg Activity is one of the many tools for doing Systems Analysis. It is designed to support people and organizations in looking beyond the superficial causes of a problem to understand the deeper structures that shape, undergird and sustain it. It is based on the idea that what you see at the surface is only a part of the larger harmful systems and structures that helped create it. By attending to the interconnected systems and structures that shape contemporary manifestations of violence and chaos, we are better equipped to develop bolder and sustainable solutions so that our strategies do not only address what we can see, but also what lies beneath the surface.

The Iceberg activity can be a powerful tool for racial justice advocates, including narrative power builders, working to implement systemic interventions that address the roots of the issue.

To model what this practice could look like, the Weavers Lab applied a systems analysis using the Iceberg Activity on the issue of **ICE’s assault on Minneapolis**. The urgency of the moment invites all of us across our organizations and issue areas to address it. We believe that applying the Iceberg tool can help lab members identify long-term solutions.

During the exercise, we learned that while a surface-level analysis of ICE might lead us to develop important narrative interventions (calling for the dismantling of ICE and messaging such as “ICE OUT”), these strategies risk leaving untouched the racist structures that not only enable and empower ICE but also bolster other systems of racist oppression. Engaging in a systems analysis calls on us to recognize that in order to stop ICE’s terror, we must also work together to end its interconnected roots, such as xenophobia, fascism, and islamophobia, dismantle anti-Black racism, and acknowledge the harms of capitalist extraction.



Systems analysis is a key tool for revealing the root causes of systemic racism and intersecting systems of oppression. Engaging in a robust systems analysis reveals deep narratives—the values and worldviews that shape understandings of everyday problems and realities, and the solutions needed to address these issues.

Weaver's Lab Iceberg Analysis

ICE in Minneapolis

RACE FORWARD'S WEAVER'S LAB COHORT PRACTICED USING THE ICEBERG ANALYSIS TOOL. TOGETHER, WE IDENTIFIED THE STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF THE ICE ATTACKS IN MINNEAPOLIS.

The following visual represents a collective systems analysis by Race Forward's Weaver's Lab practitioners, positioning ICE raids in Minneapolis as the "tip of the iceberg," or the visible manifestation of a problem with deeper systemic roots. Participants utilized color-coded digital sticky notes to identify specific contributing factors that lie beneath the surface across four root cause categories: history, culture, interconnected institutions and policies and racial ideology. Together, these roots enable and sustain racist, classist, and unjust enforcement practices.

Culture

Normalization of replication of everyday racism.

Negative, dehumanizing representation of immigrants in media.

Lack of awareness and education about Native American and American Indian Movement (AIM) history.

Ideas about deserving vs undeserving immigrants, biases towards specific countries.

History

Roots and cumulative impacts of white domination in the U.S compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism.

U.S intervention and colonization in Latin America -- Economically, military, politically, etc.

The value of Immigrant labor while exploiting and devaluing them.

Having colonies in 2026. The colonies serve the U.S. for extraction and displacement of the native people.

Interconnected Institutions and Policies

Compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism.

Electoral system the federal gov't is punishing MN for being a "blue" state and is using street violence to get access to state voting records.

U.S. intervention and destabilization of other countries, leading to migration to the U.S., then criminalization of those who migrate here.

Assimilationist demands from non profit industrial complex and from politicians.

Racial Ideology

Popular ideas and myths that perpetuate racial hierarchies.

Idea that immigrants do not belong and are less than based on proximity to whiteness.

"If you have or show solidarity to groups that you are not a part of (Ex. migrants, black, latinx, etc.) YOU ARE PART THE PROBLEM."

The lie that this land is U.S. land. or that indigenous people are "foreigners."

Summary of Weaver's Lab Iceberg Analysis

What follows are the synthesis of specific root cause categories, a summary of how the root maintains the status quo, and the specific contributing factors identified during this activity. The summaries in bold at the beginning of each root are a synthesis of the specific examples surfaced by Weaver's Lab participants.

History encompasses the roots and cumulative impacts of white domination and the compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism

At its core, the violence in Minneapolis by ICE hinges on a long history of slavery, anti-Blackness, and settler colonialism that established a model for using force to dehumanize, police, and exploit Black and brown people. Thus, ICE's attacks on immigrant communities, and those who dare to stand up for them, are but a consequence of a long historical context that prioritizes some lives over others and deems certain groups disposable.

- A settler-colonial history, beginning with the genocide of Indigenous people, established a model for the use of government and military force in order to control land and "undesirable" populations.
- A history of slavery and anti-Blackness laid the groundwork for citizenship to be defined narrowly and justified the dehumanization, capitalist exploitation, and brutal policing of Black and brown people.
- U.S. foreign intervention and colonization destabilized governments and fueled economic and political crises that displaced people from their homes and forced them to migrate for survival.
- Racist movements like the Eugenics Movement of the late 1800s to early 1900s used pseudoscience to uphold racial hierarchies, creating a system where whiteness was framed as biologically superior and Black and brown people as subordinate and unintelligent.
- Past policies like the Bracero Program (1942) that brought millions of Mexican laborers to the U.S. to work in agriculture with temporary status benefited the U.S. economy but left them vulnerable to exploitation and tied their value to their labor. This reinforced a racial hierarchy where immigrants are seen as expendable.



Culture is the normalization and replication of everyday racism

ICE's assault on immigrant communities in Minneapolis is rooted in a racist culture that is shaped by popular media through messages, images, and stories that reinforce negative stereotypes of immigrants and reify systems of punishment and policing. By positioning immigrants and other marginalized groups as national threats, these systems rationalize the growing militarization of our communities and further normalize state violence.

- Media representation that introduces and reinforces racial hierarchies and racist imagery.
- An underfunded education system that leaves the public without the full knowledge of the racist history of the U.S.
- A culture that assumes that police and the military are inherently good and justifies their violence as essential for "public safety."
- Ideas about conditional deservingness that divide individuals and groups into those who deserve and have earned support, resources, citizenship, etc, and those who do not.

Interconnected Institutions and Policy are the compounding relationships and rules within and across institutions that have created the conditions for ICE to terrorize local communities

Policies such as the unchecked expansion of police and immigration enforcement funding, the codification of Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination into law, and the banning and criminalization of ethnic studies and racial equity work instill fear in communities and expose the legal and cultural frameworks that have always left Black and brown people vulnerable to state assaults.

- Branches of government use the power of the legislature and the courts to strip Black and brown people of their rights and humanity while sustaining the myth of white supremacy through policies such as ending Affirmative Action, criminalizing ethnic studies, and enabling unrestrained funding to policing while underfunding public services.
- Increased surveillance and racial profiling of Arab and Muslim people post 9/11.

- In 2020, as people took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd, National Guard troops were deployed to crush these protests. The deployment of these military-style tactics helped set the precedent for ICE's assaults on communities.
- Media institutions amplifying messages put forth by the state/government/police without fact-checking or providing context — even acknowledging at times they are unsubstantiated.

Ideology is the array of popular ideas, beliefs, and myths that shape worldviews and perpetuate racial hierarchies

In the U.S., ideologies such as white supremacy, individualism, and color-evasiveness (or the belief that ignoring race can help end discrimination) are dominant, creating a system that justifies the criminalization of Black and brown people by framing them as undeserving of dignity and humanity. This ideology goes back to the violent genocide and removal of Indigenous people from their land and the brutality of slavery. Today it manifests in popular language that rationalizes ICE's militaristic violence, places the blame on individuals and communities for not "following the law," and reifies racist myths.

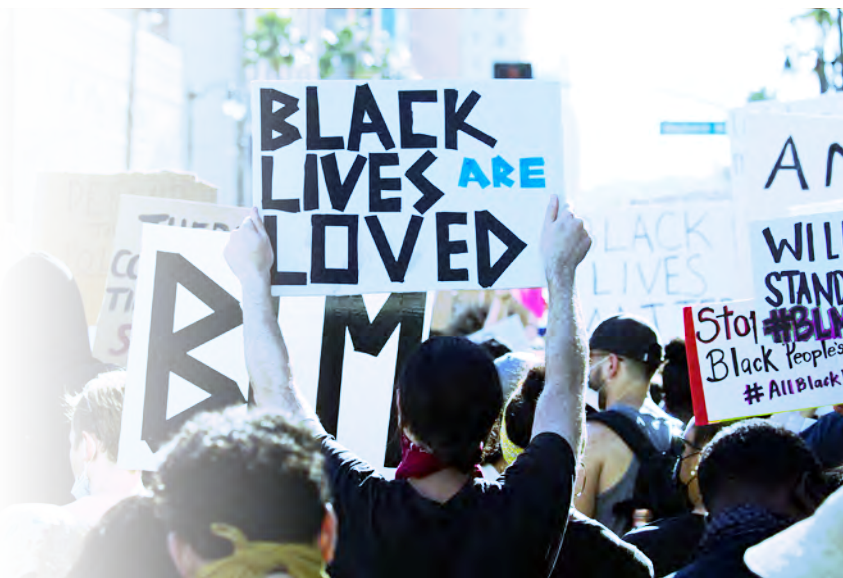
- Ideas about the purity and supremacy of whiteness alongside racist stereotypes that other Black and brown groups and justify their marginalization and exploitation.
- The reification of individualism and "bootstraps" mentality to suggest that individual hard work can overcome racist structures.
- The erasure of Indigenous folks in order to perpetuate the myth that this is U.S. land that must be protected.
- Ideologies of scarcity and competition made visible through messages like "immigrants are taking your jobs."



What does this all mean for Narrative Power Builders working towards racial justice?

Applying a **systems analysis** to the assault of ICE in Minneapolis reveals several important insights for those of us working on narrative and culture change.

Narrative interventions and narrative power building are critical for dismantling the status quo.



They allow us to address the multiple cultural and ideological roots of the issues we face. We need new narratives and stories that will change cultural norms and popular thinking that reify false hierarchies based on race or citizenship and diminish the dignity of immigrants and Black and brown folks. A systems analysis helps us understand the deep ideologies and values that undergird the violence we are witnessing against immigrants such as **conditional deservingness**, or who deserves respect, care, or even citizenship based on made up

hierarchy or criteria. We need narrative interventions that will replace these values and worldviews that buttress violence and harmful policies. Weaver's Lab members discussed **Black Lives Matter** as a case study of a successful systems-based narrative. The movement aims to correct historic and contemporary injustices, assert the humanity of Black people, call for the transformation of policies and structures, and invite us to take part in an affirmative vision for all. We need more of these affirmative narratives rooted in a deep understanding of the systems we are seeking to dismantle and those we want to build. A systems analysis tells us that narrative power building is about aligning all of our stories, messages, and narratives in ways that assert everyone's humanity and dignity, through new policies and rules that promote our collective values of belonging, equity, and freedom.

Systems analysis reveals the interconnectedness of the different roots of the problem we're trying to address.

It helps us identify the recurring patterns of harm and discrimination and how these are wielded against our communities. **Rather than examining and addressing these policies, histories, and dominant cultures and ideologies in isolation, a systems analysis prompts us to recognize how these roots reinforce one another.** Without a systems analysis, it might be tempting to simply react to the most visceral and visible aspects of the problem of law enforcement's abuse of power in the streets of Minneapolis. How do you stop ICE's immediate violence in the streets? This might lead to narrative and messaging work that call for limitations on the use of force, better training, use of body cameras, the impeachment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) leadership, and a reduction in the size and funding of the DHS forces. While important, we also need to ask what we can do to identify and address the fundamental causes of the violence long-term? With a robust systems analysis, we can explore deeper questions such as: Why is DHS in Minnesota in the first place? Why are immigrants being targeted? How is race being used to advance fascism? How is this connected to financial or corporate entities? How is this connected to health equity and economic mobility?

There's real hope. A thorough systems analysis reveals opportunity and reminds us that we must work together—it takes *all of us*.

The deep connection between systemic roots tells us that we need strategic coordination and collaboration across *sectors, issue areas, and organizations*. In this way, we are addressing interconnected roots of structural racism with interconnected interventions that are impactful and sustainable. There is not one organization or institution that can address the interconnected roots of structural racism. We need all of us.

A systems analysis asks the questions:

Who do we need to tap in?

What do we still need to know and who can help us get there?

Narrative practitioners need to be working with communities, organizers, government employees, researchers, and others across the ecosystem to ensure that all of our interventions are not only aligned but capable of driving us towards justice, liberation, and solidarity. The Iceberg Activity analysis above wasn't produced by a single person. Our Weavers Lab is composed of social justice leaders engaging in narrative strategy across a wide range of issue areas and expertise, which allowed us to delve deeper and more holistically into systemic roots. This is hopeful because it means that one person doesn't need to have all the answers *and* that there's an entrypoint for *all* of us.

Lastly, solidarity is the way and the destination.

Engaging in systems analysis makes clear that we *need* solidarity as a dominant deep narrative and that our work is stronger and more effective when done in solidarity with one another. The iceberg tool tells us that individualism, scarcity, deservingness, and false racial hierarchies are at the roots of ICE's assault on immigrants and allies. These ideologies permeate the American imagination because of harmful narratives designed to divide and isolate us from each other, which then breeds a culture of policing and punishment of Black and brown immigrants and allies. Division and isolation makes us more vulnerable to systemic oppression by making us feel overwhelmed and helpless against racial violence and harm. Individualist and divisive narratives make us believe that we can be free even when others are not, which further perpetuates the "as long as it's not me" narrative.

And so, amidst rising authoritarianism, we need narratives that will activate solidarity mindsets as antidotes to individualism, scarcity, and deservingness. We need to scale narratives that tell us that our collective liberation is intertwined. Narratives that prompt us to engage in solidarity actions, to take care of one another, and to recognize that "nobody is free until everybody is free." **The road to these narratives is dependent on our willingness to practice solidarity as we work together to shift narrative and build power. It hinges on our ability to make visible the interconnections within our movement.** This is why engaging in a systems analysis such as the Iceberg Activity is so important. When we make visible the interconnections between the systems and structures that we are up against and when we collaborate with one another across issues, sectors, and roles, we engage in the practice of solidarity and we make clear that solidarity is the only way. We become collective architects and agents for building a just society and world.

"NOBODY'S FREE UNTIL EVERYBODY'S FREE."

— Fannie Lou Hamer



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR NARRATIVE BUILDERS?

Practice Using a Systems Analysis

Use this **Iceberg Analysis table** to identify the contributing factors across four root cause categories (History, Culture, Interconnected Institutions and Policies, and Racial Ideology) that create, enable, and sustain the issue you're trying to analyze.

Description of the Issue:			
CULTURE (The normalization and replication of everyday racism).	HISTORY (The roots and cumulative impacts of white domination and the compounding relationships and rules that reinforce racism).	INTERCONNECTED INSTITUTIONS AND POLICY (The compounding relationships and rules within and across institutions).	IDEOLOGY (The array of popular ideas, beliefs, and myths that shape worldviews and perpetuate racial hierarchies).

Additional Resources

General Resources

Racial Equity Assessment
tool - Race Forward

System Analysis
Consultation - Race Forward

Narrative Resources for Immigrant Justice:

Drop the I-Word
Race Forward ▶

Building Community Power
Guide - United We Dream ▶

Immigrants Belong Toolkit -
Define American ▶

Black Immigrants in
California Report - BAJI ▶

"Immigration Detention
Expansion in Trump's
Second Term" Report -
American
Immigration Council ▶

"How metaphors
catalyze and crystallize
anti-immigrant sentiment
and policy"
- Frameworks Institute ▶

"From Them to Ours:
Framing Strategies for
Talking About
Immigrant Youth" -
Frameworks Institute ▶

Narrative Guide for
Immigrant Futures (2025)
- Narrative Initiative ▶

The Butterfly Lab
- Race Forward ▶

Resources on Narrative Strategy:

Narrative Strategy
Primer - Race Forward ▶

Guide to Messaging Our
Freedoms - We Make
the Future ▶

Four Baskets Field
Guide for Narrative
Change Practice -
Narrative Initiative ▶

Messages to Grow and
Uproot: Narrative Strategy
Amid Attacks on Diversity,
Equity, Inclusion, and Racial
Justice | Race Forward ▶

Systems Thinking for
Journalists: Journalism
+ Design Lab, The
New School ▶