

Who Gets to Live Where, and Why? The Answer May Be Settled By Our Narratives

Tiffany Manuel · January 30, 2018

A couple weeks ago, social media ignited in outrage over a sign posted outside a small café in Denver. On one side, the sign simply read “*Happily Gentrifying the Neighborhood Since 2014*”. On the other side, it read: “*Nothing says gentrification like being able to order a cortado.*”



The response was swift. Many of the community’s long-time residents and community groups began organizing protests in front of the café, angry words began to fly (both in print and verbally with the café owners) and public officials began to be called to account for the displacement being experienced by the city’s long-time low-income residents.

Gentrification is a very complicated issue to unpack but what is clear - heralding your part in displacing longtime residents from a community, is not a wise strategy. The owners of this cafe mentioned at the top of this article clearly did not intend to create the firestorm that they have started but we cannot continue to ignore the tensions that are now

boiling up in many cities and towns across the country about who gets to live where and why.

Let’s face it – it is not the insensitivity of the café owners that is troubling us. That this is not an outlier against a backdrop of more thoughtful public deliberation about the plight of low-income people in this country and in our communities, is really what stings. That is, the larger, more problematic issue here is that ***the economic plight of low-income***

Americans is worsening and we do not have the public support we need to scale policies that would improve their well-being and the racially/ethnically segregated neighborhoods in which they live, without displacing them.

While we know that many Americans feel personally empathetic towards those who are struggling, as recent polling suggests, our public policies wreak of a growing antipathy toward the poor that is difficult to dislodge. Many of the same people who say in our polls that they are in favor of better housing solutions for residents, fail to support affordable housing developments when they are proposed in nearby neighborhoods; fail to support local or national legislation that would make it possible to build, create or preserve existing affordable housing; and fail to support the organizations trying to help low-income people.

Community tensions about gentrification get at the heart of this problem. Millions of the country's most vulnerable residents are being displaced because their incomes are not keeping pace with rising housing costs and yet, there seems to be very little sustained appetite to correct or address these issues through systems change.

Moreover, when we try to raise awareness, visibility and potential solutions that might ameliorate these issues, we often find ourselves having a conversation among ourselves. This incident in Denver is a prime example – the café owners who didn't understand the negative connotation in which the word "gentrification" is viewed in our circles and thought the use of this term in a public relations campaign would help business. One glance at the comments section of the [NYT article](#) that covered the story shows how ambivalent most people feel about this issue.

Chris Colorado • 1 day ago

Wow, these folks must not have any REAL problems if they have time to protest a coffee shop. Oh, and if Denver is too expensive -- move to the suburbs. Its what people do when cities get expensive. Jeez. No one is "entitled" to live where they want. I want a house in downtown Aspen... that would be nice.

 10 Recommend

In a report that I co-authored with a colleague last fall, [You Don't Have to Live Here](#), we examined why housing messaging is backfiring – lost on the very audiences for which they have been created. And we made some concrete recommendations based on empirical evidence about how we might begin to change course.

As we say in the report, although housing advocates are “lifting up policy and programmatic solutions, we are missing the opportunity to change the narrative about why housing matters; what “affordable housing” means; why housing is a shared public concern; and what needs to be done to fix this problem.”

WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST: WHAT'S BACKFIRING ON THE ISSUE OF GENTRIFICATION

The sentiment expressed by the café owners should come as no surprise, it is in perfect alignment with the dominant narratives operative on the issues of housing and community development across the country. Boiled down, that narrative simply says - people don't have a "right" to live in any particular place, nor do they have standing in a neighborhood

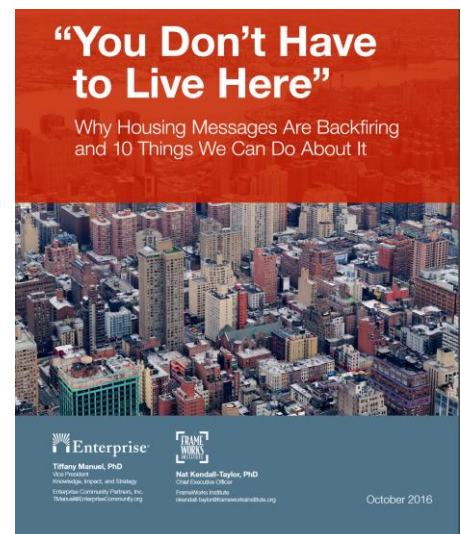
simply because they (in this case, African Americans) have always lived there. You only get to live in a place because your efforts (getting an education and job) afford you the right to be there. And if you get priced out, so the logic goes, it is your responsibility to move to a place more consistent with your budget and work ethic. There are plenty of places left in the United States where housing is still relatively cheap.

This logic reflects the three, very powerful narratives that dominate the public discourse on the place-based work that we do and is often responsible for the backfire we get when we try to advance housing policies and programs.

Each of these narratives by themselves represent a significant challenge when we push back against the trends that we see in our communities. And when they operate in tandem (as they often do on the issue of gentrification), it is a trifecta that leads to a predictable refrain - if you can't afford where you live:

- it is your own responsibility to solve that issue because decent housing is an outcome and reward for making good choices in your life (***The Narrative of Individual Responsibility***);
- move to a place that better reflects your budget and paycheck (***The Narrative of Mobility***) and
- any differences between groups in terms of access to affordable housing reflects differences in the work ethic and cultural values of those negatively affected groups rather than a structural, spatial and system problem (***The Narrative of Racial Difference***)

As a result, navigating the public conversation around gentrification so that it congeals around affordable housing solutions, is challenging.



As I have written before, the [public perception of affordable housing](#) often equates it to “public housing” which remains a very negative and highly racialized concept. A productive conversation is even tougher once we understand that the concept of “affordability” (when added to “housing”) is much more about how effective we are with our personal finances and budgeting versus, the issues of rising housing costs and lagged wages.

Perhaps most important, when we do not skillfully navigate around these dominant narratives and the way that our terminology of “affordable housing” is understood

by the public, our attempts to engage the public, however thoughtful, sincere and heartfelt, backfire miserably.

Ted Eureka • November 27, 2017

The urban progressive anti-gentrification movement is simply another manifestation of hipster racism directed at white people for being successful and buying affordable properties. I mean, really, who wants successful businesses turning an area into a nice neighborhood, amiright?

White people moving out of mixed race neighborhoods = racism.

White people moving into minority neighborhoods because they can afford to and owning a successful business = racism.

Heads I win, tails you lose. Quit bullying white people for being successful.

SURVIVING THE BACKFIRE

Surviving this backfire requires us to be strategic and skillful in how we navigate around these dominant narratives - especially when they are lodged against the backdrop of deeply charged issues like gentrification.

Unfortunately, our first inclination in the face of triggering events like the Denver café incident is often to launch “awareness” or “public education” campaigns – to which we dutifully bring all the data, facts and figures that we can amass to help us articulate just how bad things really are.

If this is your inclination, stop! **AWARENESS is NOT the challenge we face.** Most people know how bad the economic circumstances are for low-income families – hell, many of us in the [middle class are in the same circumstances](#) – just one paycheck away from financial disaster. And those who somehow missed the perilous calamity that other Americans are feeling, are unlikely to “see the light” because we have detailed the heart-breaking challenges that low-income families endure when they are displaced.

Instead this kind of “awareness raising” consistently backfires because it evokes a zero-sum, “what about me”, separate-fates response. An attitude that does not recognize the struggles of low-income families as unique but rather something we all are trying to stare down! Why focus more attention on the poor when all of us are feeling trapped by an increasingly fragmented social safety net, economic pressures to keep our families afloat, and a government that feels like it is in full-fledged free fall?

Larry Figdill Charlottesville • November 27, 2017

Comfortably well off people have to live somewhere too. Where should they go if they can't pick interesting developing city neighborhoods - should they be banished to the suburbs? Or required to live in more expensive cities? I understand the need to help people of lesser means, but keeping other people out doesn't seem to be an answer to anything.

👍 4 Recommend

To add insult to injury, every day our news cycle we are treated to a series of “crisis” stories (from foreign policy to taxes, Trump’s newest squabbles and more) and hearing about yet another one - a “housing crisis” that is framed in terms of how poor people are paying “too much” for something, does not get us very far.

Quite frankly, if awareness were the issue, it would be much easier to dislodge but, as many of us already know and what Christiano and Neimand argue in their March 2017 Stanford Social Innovation Review article, [Stop Building Awareness Already](#), “not only do campaigns fall short and waste resources when they focus solely on raising awareness, but sometimes they can actually end up doing more harm than good”.

MOVING THE NEEDLE REQUIRES A STRONG PUBLIC WILL BUILDING STRATEGY

To advance support for policies and programs that need scale, we must do a much better job of navigating the three dominant narratives (*individual responsibility, mobility and racial difference*) that complicate our ability to communicate why our solutions matter for everyone. Here, I highlight some specific considerations here to complement the broader range of recommendations in the report.

GENTRIFICATION BACKFIRE #1: *Stories about the displacement challenges that low-income residents face often backfire in the face of the narrative of individual responsibility. Our task is to make the story “big enough” to help others see the issue as a structural, spatial and systems issue that impacts every aspect of our communities.*

In response to triggering events like the Denver café story, our inclination is to try make people “aware” of the implications of gentrification, we try to tell compelling public stories about the horrors of displacement. **There is nothing wrong with providing a vehicle for people most directly affected to tell their stories and to be heard! In fact, this is the hallmark of true community development. Be mindful however that** it is VERY difficult to tell stories of displacement that do not backfire because, while people may be sympathetic to the circumstances of displaced residents, as we heard loudly and clearly in our focus groups – *“it still doesn’t change your responsibility to get yourself out of that situation”*. In other words, understand that our stories about displacement do not often trump the power of the narrative of individual responsibility.

To do the latter, we need to be strategic. First, be careful to anchor your response in optimism of your solutions not in the deep challenges many families face. The latter may have been what brought many of us to this work but it does not work well to engage people who are not already empathetic in this way. Here the evidence is clear, responding to something negative (in this case the café sign) with something equally negative (signs, outcries and other markers), does not help people to feel hopeful about the future. Instead, it makes the whole exercise feel negative, partisan and oppositional rather than strategic, forward-thinking and aspirational - the latter of which is [important if you are to get people engaged](#) over the long-term.

Instead [anchor your response in the optimism](#) of your solutions. Focus your response on what really matters over the long-term - building support FOR systems change and not AGAINST the café (or the idea of “gentrification” which has multiple and apparently competing meanings for people). Reinforce how providing a home for residents at all levels of the income spectrum is a structural, spatial and systems issue that is deeply connected to everything meaningful in our cities. Talk about the “pathways to opportunity” or the systems that need to be strengthened if low and moderate-income families are to thrive alongside their wealthier neighbors in our communities. Make the conversation one that is about improving those pathways (structure, systems, spaces, places). Anchoring your message there also gives you the added benefit of making it more difficult for people to

default back to the “bootstraps” of individual responsibility. If the issue is structural (i.e., fundamentally about the transit system, accessibility of jobs, technology infrastructure, etc.), it becomes harder to argue that these are problems that can be solved by people simply “working harder”.

Two other important caveats are important here. First, be sure to connect housing and the plight of low-income families with other positive attributes and outcomes for the region, from education and health to employment and public safety. Connecting housing and the plight of low-income families to these other attributes helps us to align the value proposition for solving these issues with other community stakeholders.

Second, resist the urge to use the protests as a wholesale attack on business, wealth creation, or economic growth. If acquiring wealth is seen in opposition to creating opportunities for long-time residents, you will lose this battle – every day of the week! Prosperity is a powerful motivation, value and aspiration for most Americans so avoid the inclination to play into a frame that pits low-income residents against the ability of small businesses to create wealth and thrive.

GENTRIFICATION BACKFIRE #2: *When we frame our communications in terms of “choice”, housing markets, and “moving to opportunity”, we inadvertently trip the wire that invokes “moving” as a powerful corrective for what ails our communities. Our task is not to remind people that gentrification forces people “to move” or to argue that poor people have few “choices” in our housing markets but rather, to remind them of what THEY lose when others are forced to move.*

I often talk about the need to tell the “story of us” or to widen the stories we tell to include those displaced alongside a wider range of community stakeholders. On gentrification in particular, the task is to help people see how they are implicated in, and affected by, displacement in ways that they do not always realize or acknowledge. So tell them why displacement should matter to them and why they have a stake in it.

Tell them what they lose if we do not act to build growth in a way that considers the impacts on low- and moderate-income families. What they lose when we continue to engage in policies that [exacerbate racial segregation](#) and [hoard opportunity away](#) from people most in need. What they lose when so many of our educators, child care workers and first responders live so far away from where they work, that it compromises their ability to deliver on the jobs for which we have hired them. What they lose when their [grown children can’t afford to live in](#) the once solidly working-class neighborhoods that have now become too pricey for “starter” families. Tell them about the [talent that we are “leaving on the table”](#) and the terrible consequences for our economy when only children from high-income neighborhoods get the benefit of an education that prepares them to be innovators while thousands of bright eyed low-income children cannot see their way to even finish high school. And then, and here is the most important part, tell them about the solutions that we have crafted to turn those losses into gains for everybody. In other words, make it clear that they have a stake in solving this problem!

GENTRIFICATION BACKFIRE #3: *Our attempts to raise the issue of racial equity backfires very quickly in the face of the powerful narrative of racial difference. Our task is not to shy away from the conversation about race but rather to be strategic in how we raise the issue so that it does not dissolve into cynicism and it gets the attention that it deserves in our work.*

Name the elephant in the room – race, class and cultural appropriation often undergird the tensions that boil over about gentrification. The only caveat here is to raise this issue strategically. So, often when race, class or cultural issues are the headline of our communications, the response dissolves into cynicism and derision rather than corrective action.

So, the challenge is to introduce racial equity into the conversation in a way that gives people a reason (in addition to social justice) to resolve decades long inequities across racial and ethnic groups. Once again, helping people to see their stake in solving the issues that plague our cities. Tell them how the future will be won by those regions, communities, and places where there is diverse talent, resources, restaurants, cultural activities, languages spoken, etc. This is in part because our economy, increasingly responding to the pressures of a globalized marketplace is changing in ways that put a high value on diverse environments. By extension, those communities that remain highly segregated along race and class lines will miss out on opportunities to remain competitive – threatening the livelihoods of all who live in those communities. Help people to see that racial equity is the smart thing to do to ensure that our cities prosper, in addition to it being the “right” thing to do.

A PUBLIC WILL BUILDING STRATEGY IS NOT A PANACEA BUT YOU WON'T GET VERY FAR WITHOUT A GOOD ONE

As housing pressures continue to rise in many cities across the country, we are likely to see more of these community clashes between existing residents feeling displaced and “newcomers”. Such incidents are bellwethers of the underlying tensions that are created when economic growth is pursued without a concomitant strategy around equity and inclusion. Our ability to help guide our communities to a pathway forward, requires us to navigate successfully around the three narratives that today operate against us.

The community conflicts that gentrification is raising are surely not simply about changing our narratives. Our work to bring capital, other community-led solutions and policy change are key to changing the dynamics on the ground and will not be solved simply by changing the language we use. Without a strategy to build public will however, we will not have the support we need to scale the programs we know would help.



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