Why Conversations about Racial Beliefs are Not Enough

Clarissa Rile Hayward, Washington University in St. Louis

"In Missouri, Race Complicates a Transfer to Better Schools" – that's how the headline read on a July 31, 2013 *New York Times* article about a law, recently upheld by the state Supreme Court, that allows students in districts closed for poor performance to attend schools in neighboring districts. The recently disaccredited schools are overwhelmingly African-American, and their students are trying to transfer to schools in white majority districts. News stories have featured comments from angry or anxious parents, white and black. Racial tensions are in play, the stories suggest, because of what people believe, think, and say about race.

Are white suburbanites, many of whom moved to their communities because of high-performing majority-white schools, racists determined to exclude African-Americans? Are black parents giving in to racial stereotypes when they worry their children could face hostility in transfer schools? Even in a city with a decades-long history of neighborhood segregation and racially unequal institutions, the supposition seems to be that misguided beliefs and ideas are the problem.

Calls for cross-racial dialogues are typical in situations like this – just as many called for a new "national conversation about race" in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal in the trial over the killing of Trayvon Martin. If only we Americans could get our beliefs and conversations about race on the right track, the notion seems to be, racial justice will follow. But it is not that easy, as I have learned in my work on how Americans experience racial identities. New beliefs alone cannot overcome practices that are deeply embedded in the institutions and the physical spaces in which people live their daily lives.

Revised Ideas May Not Lead to Changed Practices

To be sure, calls for a national conversation about race have intuitive appeal. As social scientists often remind us, racial identities are constructs. Biological facts dictate nothing; instead, people fashion beliefs about which differences matter, and how. If race is something we create and recreate, doesn't it follow that challenging racial injustice is a simple matter of modifying what we believe and say?

It is not. To see why, it is instructive to look back at the middle decades of the twentieth century, when dominant beliefs about race were altered. In the 1940s, scientists in the United States and elsewhere dismantled the nineteenth-century understanding of race as biological difference. During that same period, racial hierarchy became morally repugnant to many white Americans because of its strong association with Nazism.

But changed beliefs did not suddenly alter core social practices and institutions, because, when people use ideas and language to construct identities, they don't stop there. Over time, they build institutions – laws, rules, and policies, for example – around the constructed identities, lending those identities inertial force.

Racial Identities, Housing Policies, and Segregated Neighborhoods

Think of the U.S. Federal Housing Administration, established in the mid-1930s to make government-backed mortgages available to American homebuyers. Federal Housing Administration underwriting standards, which purported to identify prospective home-buyers and properties that were good investments, institutionalized then-dominant racial beliefs by defining racial segregation as a characteristic of a financially stable neighborhood.

Now imagine a white homebuyer who, by the 1960s, is persuaded by moral and scientific critiques of old racial ideas. He may not believe that racial segregation is desirable, but he still needs to act as if he does. He needs to buy a house in a racially segregated neighborhood if he wants to qualify for a federally-insured mortgage.

People do not only build identities into institutions. They also build them into material forms, which they

experience viscerally. Examples include the "black ghettoes" created in the early decades of the twentieth century and the overwhelmingly white suburban enclaves that spread after World War II.

Think of the sense of being "out of place" you might experience when you inhabit the "wrong" racialized space. When you feel out of place, you learn and re-learn your racial identity, but not through ideas, and not through words. You learn with your body. Change your beliefs, and you still can feel the lessons that are taught by racialized space.

What Change Requires

Do Americans need a more thoughtful discourse about race? We do. But true change requires more than new words and more than new beliefs. It requires new institutions and new material forms. For example, in St. Louis the local jurisdictions at the center of the current school controversy have a tremendous power to shape racial patterns. They do at least as much work in maintaining racial hierarchy as do explicitly racist ideas and attitudes.

That's why many policy experts and activists recommend centralizing political power to the metropolitan, or even to the regional level. A national conversation among residents of central cities, inner-ring suburbs, and other local communities that have relatively weak tax bases could focus on overlapping interests in centralizing important aspects of governance, including the governance of public schools. Such conversations, even if not "about race," could significantly change the ways we live and practice racial identities.

So could conversations that prompt us to change the physical spaces of our cities and suburbs, perhaps by helping architects and planners design projects differently than they otherwise would, or by encouraging the construction of affordable housing alongside market-rate units. Changing institutions and physical spaces is crucially important.

No conversation, by itself, changes racial injustice.

Read more in Clarissa Rile Hayward, *How Americans Make Race* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Read more in Clarissa Rile Hayward, *How Americans Make Race* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).