

# Finding the Frame:

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An Empirical Approach to Reframing Aging and Ageism

*A FrameWorks Research Report*

February 2017

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# Introduction: Why Aging Needs a Framing Strategy

America is having conversations about varying sources of inequality—we’re talking about how gender, race, economic status, or citizenship status can shape life trajectories and what the public response should be. And we are accustomed to hearing about “disruptions” or changes that create new opportunities, new challenges, and essentially, a new normal.

The topic of aging isn’t coming up in any of these conversations. Americans hear little about aging as a matter that requires a public response, and even less about ageism—discrimination based on age.

A public conversation is essential, as the aging of the population is one of the biggest demographic changes in recorded history. Whether this change will be a boon or bane depends on our nation’s policy response. If we make the appropriate adjustments, an aging population could yield an incredible “longevity dividend” as Americans gain an average of two extra decades of life in which to make social, civic, and economic contributions. If we fail to prepare, more years might not translate into healthy, productive time, which can complicate and exacerbate any number of existing social problems. The lack of political discourse on aging reveals a serious risk of policy inertia, or worse, rollbacks of existing supports. Unless the field of advocates who care about aging issues cultivates a more visible, more informed conversation on older people, it will remain difficult to advance the systemic changes needed to adjust to a society with increased and increasing longevity.

## *You may also be interested in:*

### ► [Framing Strategies to Advance Aging and Ageism as Policy Issues](#)

This Frame Brief summarizes select findings from the Reframing Aging project.

### ► [Gaining Momentum: A Communications Toolkit](#)

This collection of resources models how to apply framing recommendations to messaging.

### ► [FrameWorks Research Topic: Elder Abuse](#)

Resources on framing elder abuse are also available.

Understanding this, eight leading national aging organizations and nine forward-thinking funders\* set out to find a way to drive a productive narrative on aging issues. As the research partner for the Reframing Aging Initiative, the FrameWorks Institute conducted a Strategic Frame Analysis®—an investigation that combines theory and methods from different social science disciplines to arrive at reliable, research-based recommendations for reframing a social issue. (Figure 1 describes the base of research that underlies the recommendations.)

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\* Funding for the initiative has been provided by AARP, Archstone Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Endowment for Health, Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, The John A. Hartford Foundation, The Retirement Research Foundation, Rose Community Foundation, and The SCAN Foundation.

Our research shows that aging is misunderstood in America and that the misperceptions create obstacles to productive practices and policies. **To change this dynamic, the field of aging needs to advance a set of core ideas that creates the shifts in public understanding essential to building the political will to create a more age-integrated society.** This report outlines the major findings of the Strategic Frame Analysis and its implications for communications, advocacy, and outreach on aging. It offers a set of framing priorities, strategies, and frame elements (or themes) for the field that can then be used to inform the strategic communications efforts undertaken by the field's many organizations and coalitions.

The recommendations are intended for this broadly defined group of mission-driven advocates for better aging policy and practice—whether that advocacy happens through issue campaigning, field-building, nonprofit leadership, policymaking, philanthropy, research, or other forms of work in the public interest.

If you use communications to make the case for adapting society to the needs of an aging population, the evidence-based insights here will be useful to you. You won't find a catchy slogan here, but we hope you will find guidance that helps you work more intentionally toward messaging that advances the conversation every time you have a chance to communicate about the topic of aging.

This report unfolds in four parts:

- ❖ *Anticipating Public Thinking* outlines how Americans mentally model aging and related issues, and it pinpoints where these patterns of thinking are likely to challenge efforts to advance an informed public conversation.
- ❖ *Communication Traps* cautions advocates against reframing strategies that seem plausible but are likely to have unintended consequences.
- ❖ *Redirections* outlines a series of thoroughly tested communications tools and techniques for reframing aging and ageism.
- ❖ *Moving Forward* offers concluding thoughts and a call to action.

Figure 1: Research Base

## What communications research does a field need to reframe an issue?

### What does the research on aging say?

To distill expert consensus on aging, FrameWorks conducted interviews in August and September of 2014 with 11 leading aging researchers. This data was supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature and was refined during a series of feedback sessions with leaders in the field.

### How does the public think?

To document the cultural understandings that Americans draw upon to make sense of aging, FrameWorks conducted in-depth cognitive interviews with members of the public and analyzed the resulting transcripts to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structured public opinion. Twenty interviews were conducted in Charleston, South Carolina; San Jose, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Frederick, Maryland, in June and July 2014. In addition, during the same time period, FrameWorks conducted 28 brief “on-the-street” interviews with members of the public in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Jacksonville, Florida; Baltimore, Maryland; and Boston, Massachusetts.

### How is the field talking—and what is the public hearing?

To characterize the public discourse that shapes the cultural and policy climate around aging issues, FrameWorks analyzed both media coverage and communications from influential aging advocacy and aging organizations. Researchers coded 416 media pieces and 176 pieces of NGO communications to identify the existing framing techniques and pinpoint their likely effects on people’s understandings.

### What frames can shift thinking?

To systematically identify effective ways of talking about aging, FrameWorks researchers developed a set of candidate messages and tested them with ordinary Americans. Three primary methods were used to explore, winnow, and refine possible reframes:

- On-the-street interviews involve rapid, face-to-face testing of frame elements for their ability to prompt productive and robust understandings and discussions of a topic. Two sets of interviews—a total of 90—were conducted in 2015 and 2016.
- A series of experimental surveys, involving a nationally representative sample of 10,300 respondents, was conducted to test the effectiveness of a variety of frames on public understanding, attitudes, and support for programs and policies.
- A series of qualitative tests was conducted to explore how the most effective frames worked in conversational settings. Persistence trials investigated the frames’ effectiveness with ordinary Americans; six sets of these trials—with a total of 42 people—were held. Usability trials probed how researchers and policymakers used the recommendations, and to what effect, on a nonexpert audience. Four sets of these qualitative tests were held with a total of 26 people.

All told, more than 10,400 people from across the United States were included in this research.

# Anticipating Public Thinking

Before designing communications on a complex social issue, it is helpful to anticipate how and why those communications might go awry. When people don't know much about how an issue works, advocates need framing strategies that can build conceptual understanding quickly and accurately. When strong understandings exist but are at odds with research and evidence, advocates need to reach for strategies that can shift perspectives and allow people to consider and incorporate new ways of thinking. A systematic assessment of where and how public thinking differs from expert consensus is, therefore, a valuable resource in setting communications priorities, designing a strategy to meet those priorities, and selecting framing tactics. In this section, FrameWorks offers its analysis of the most important differences between target messages on aging and public understanding for advocates to anticipate as well as their implications for an overarching reframing strategy. (For more detail on the gaps and overlaps in public and expert perspectives on aging, see *Gauging Aging: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understanding of Aging in America*.)

## How should we approach aging? Embrace vs. battle.

Experts and the public view aging from starkly different perspectives. Experts assume that aging is normal, lifelong, and cumulative—a ubiquitous, continuous process of human development that extends across the life span. They note that older age brings new opportunities for growth, contribution, and self-expression. This observation also speaks to the expert view that aging is *not* synonymous with decline, disease, or disability. Experts emphasize that with the right contextual and social supports, older adults can remain healthy and maintain high levels of independence and functioning—even while experiencing some of the natural changes in vision, hearing, mobility, and muscle strength associated with aging.

The American public, by contrast, views aging as almost wholly negative, tantamount to a decline that ends in dependency. From this foundational assumption, people reason that the aging process is something to be resisted or battled. The negative association with aging also supports a tendency—even among older adults—to identify *against* older age, to “stay young.” This *Us vs. Them* perspective positions older people as a separate social group, distinctly set off from “the rest of us.”

To advance a more productive conversation on aging, advocates need strategies for breaking the binaries and boundaries that the public uses as mental shortcuts, disrupting the deep, durable negative assumptions about aging and the corresponding modeling of older adults as a group set apart. Reframing efforts must help people see aging as a continuous process and to recognize that older age, like any other time in life, involves both opportunities and challenges.

## **What determines outcomes and who is responsible? Environments vs. individuals.**

Experts point to a wide range of social factors that have a profound influence over outcomes in later years, such as education and health care, and the way that access to these systemic supports is constrained by racial, class, and gender inequalities.

On this point, public thinking diverged sharply from that of experts. When thinking about older people's outcomes, Americans consistently assumed that personal decisions are the primary causes of health, wealth, and wellbeing in older age. Making "smart choices" is seen as the key to health and wealth later in life, and, by the same token, poor health or financial difficulty later in life is assumed to be the result of poor choices. In the public's mind, self-discipline, not social structures, determines whether people save adequately for retirement, eat wisely, and get enough exercise; therefore, willpower is the ultimate determinant of wellbeing at any age.

To elevate aging as a matter of societal concern—not just a personal matter—advocates must find ways to expand public thinking beyond *Individualism*. This is no easy task, as *Individualism* is arguably the deepest, most pervasive, and most well-established cultural model that Americans hold, shaping thinking about a vast array of social issues, not just aging. Reframing efforts must avoid reinforcing a narrow focus on individual choice and willpower and must advance a frame that allows the public to attend to the full spectrum of factors and supports that shape people's lives. An effective frame must also communicate that the consequences of positive or negative aging outcomes are shared across society and not limited to the individuals or families experiencing them.

## **How big of a concern is ageism? Important concern vs. absent from thinking.**

Experts emphasize that older people are consistently marginalized across many domains of social life, from employment and civic life to recreation and housing. They point to institutional ageism as a major barrier to older adults' full participation in society and noted that, in turn, ageism limits society's ability to reap a "longevity dividend." That is, older Americans represent an enormous source of civic and economic contribution, but ageist assumptions about their abilities impede the realization of these contributions. Expert thinking also reveals an implicit assumption that ageism constrains aging policy, pointing to things like apathy, invisibility, and low expectations for older adults as obstacles to policy momentum and reform.

For the public, ageism is not recognized as a problem; in fact, the concept is not even part of its thinking. FrameWorks researchers found that while members of the public have plenty to say about aging and older people, unless prompted, Americans did not bring up discrimination against older people.

A lack of public recognition perpetuates ageism and makes efforts to reduce ageism even more difficult to pursue. Without a social pressure pushing people to reconsider their beliefs or actions, widespread misconceptions and outdated ways of thinking remain in place. People fail to see their thinking as discriminatory—and may even find it charming or funny (*you know old people—wink wink, nudge nudge.*)

In this way, the public's lack of awareness of or concern about ageism serves as license to engage freely in ageism. When it comes to elevating ageism as a policy issue, the lack of public concern is a serious obstacle. When the public lacks understanding of an issue, it is ill-equipped to evaluate proposed solutions to a problem, much less support them. And when an issue isn't even recognized as an issue, it is unlikely to gain visibility on the public agenda.

To build support for the kind of comprehensive reform that is needed to redesign society for increased longevity, advocates need strategies to elevate awareness that ageism exists and, crucially, that it is built into policies and practices that can be identified and changed.

## **What can be done to ensure wellbeing in older age? Plenty vs. nothing much.**

Experts assert that wellbeing in older age is not only theoretically possible, but that it exists. They observe that many older adults experience the normal, biological process of aging as a period of good health and personal growth. Yet, they acknowledge that older people are a heterogeneous group—positive aging outcomes are neither random nor guaranteed. Because experts recognize a variety of social determinants of wellbeing in older age, they can also identify a variety of policy changes that could improve aging outcomes at a population level and for groups at increased risk for poor outcomes. They point to an important historical precedent for effective aging policy—Social Security—that dramatically improved aging outcomes and, they emphasize, remains stable and solid today.

In contrast, the American public tends toward fatalistic attitudes about the aging process, reasoning that it is inevitable, immutable, and likely to be pretty bad. “You can’t stop time,” people observe—and conflate the passage of time with a march toward *Deterioration* and *Dependency*, the public’s dominant models of what it means to “get old.” Moreover, a cultural model holding that *Modern Life is Hard* leads Americans to conclude that typical contemporary social structures make matters worse for older people, setting them up for isolation and financial struggle. People note that geographic dispersion of families leaves older people without relatives nearby to lend a helping hand. They suggest that a less stable and predictable economy makes it harder for people to save or invest, and thus unable to count on a secure retirement. They assume that Social Security is doomed and won’t be part of the social safety net for long. Importantly, the public thinks of these changes as permanent and irreversible.

This constellation of depressing “facts” can be considered the public’s *Real* model of aging. At the same time, because human cognition is complex, the public simultaneously holds a set of ideal models, or more aspirational ways of thinking about aging. The *Ideal* model of aging involves thinking of later life as a period of earned leisure, self-sufficiency, and accumulated wisdom. When reasoning from the *Ideal* model, Americans admire older people’s achievement of self-control and self-awareness, tell stories of their elders’ capacity to offer sage advice, and visualize retired couples traveling to exotic destinations. The presence of this recessive model means that the public has the ability to think of aging in more positive terms. Yet, the fact that it is recessive and consistently juxtaposed with the fatalistic view of what it “actually” means to age shows that advocates must recognize that when the public is reminded of *Ideal* models of aging, the fatalistic *Real* model will be quickly called to mind through the process of association.



***Ideal vs. Real*** modeling is one of the major obstacles on the path toward a conversation about aging as an issue that demands a public response. The *either-or* nature of the model lacks a process by which the “good” or “bad” version of aging might be achieved, so people assume that the responsibility lies entirely with individuals. The *Ideal vs. Real* contrast also obscures thinking about aging as a period of life like any other, with its upsides and downsides. Among other things, the fear of decline and dependency makes it less likely for people to identify themselves as part of “the aging population.” Finally, the stark binary gets in the way of the public considering older people as active and equal participants in the nation’s social, civic, and economic life: It is all too easy to assume that older adults are *either* on a cruise with their grandkids *or* dealing with crushing health issues and major financial struggles.

To navigate the *Ideal vs. Real* obstacle, a reframing strategy must disrupt determinism. It must include ways to build understanding that everyone’s aging process includes positive and negative aspects; that wellbeing in later life is influenced by a range of social policies and social structures; and, crucially, that these aspects of society can themselves be changed and influenced.

## **What is the role of public policy? Central vs. limited role.**

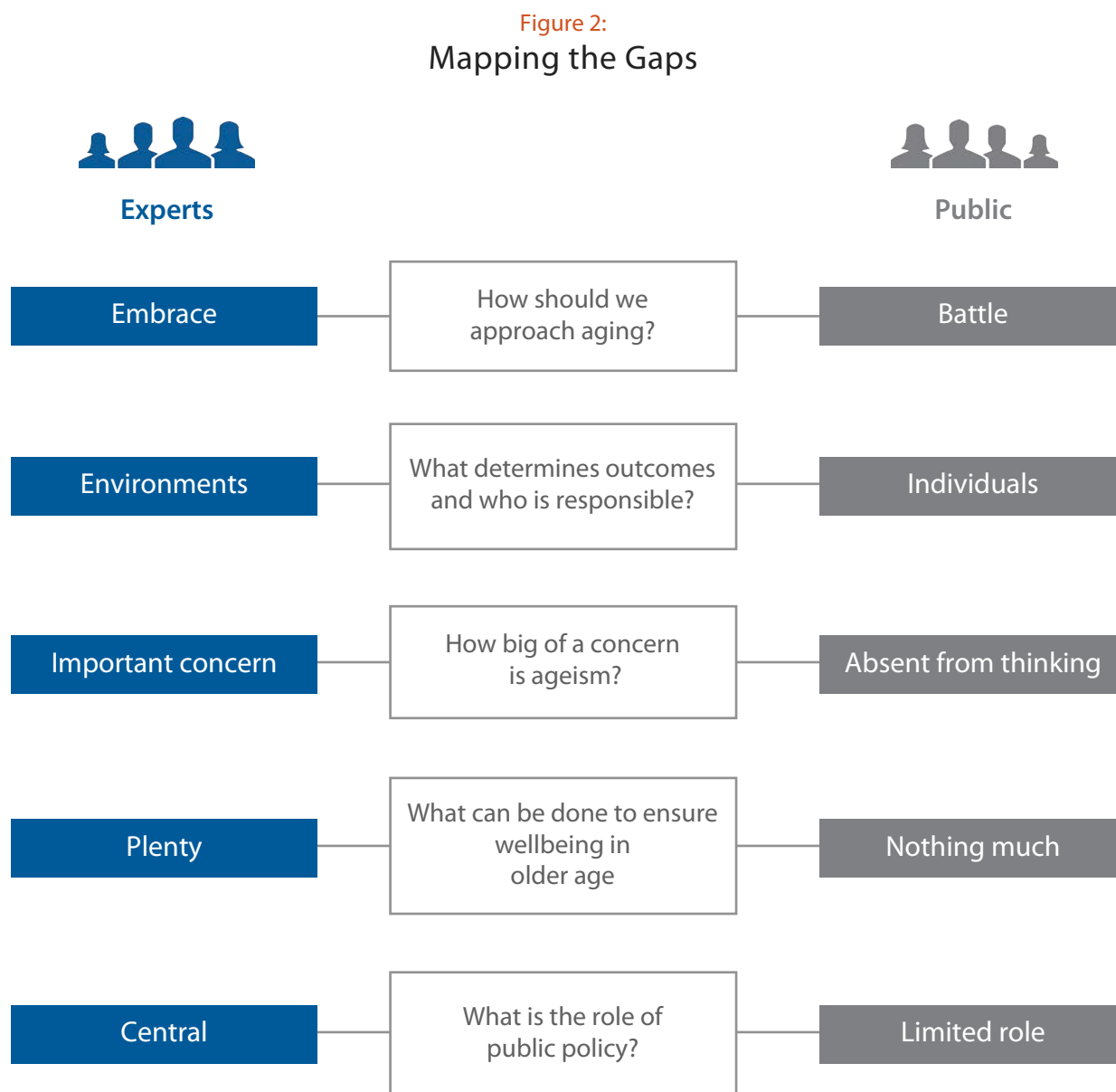
Experts emphasize that our increased longevity has implications for all sectors of society and, as such, successful adaptation to an aging society will require adjustments not only in employment and health care but also in transportation, urban planning, housing, and community development. There are workforce preparation and labor policy considerations that we should be making now: increasing our capacity for geriatric care, establishing policies that support those in elder caregiving positions, and more. They emphasize that if we make the right policy changes now, adapt our institutions for our aging population, and build the infrastructure we need to support them, our aging population can be a boon. One example of a demographic change that calls for a policy response is that older adults are increasingly working past the traditional age of retirement—some because they have to for economic survival, others because they want to stay engaged in their careers. If society adjusted to this trend by restructuring workplace and retirement policies to allow people to work longer with a greater degree of flexibility, a range of social and economic benefits could accrue to individuals, employers, and the civic body alike.

The public is working with very different mental models of the problem and its possible solutions. FrameWorks researchers found that the public is as likely to think that the US population is getting younger as they are to think it is getting older. Absent a clear grasp of the demographic trend, the public has little reason to consider aging as an issue that requires widespread attention. Moreover, even if the public did understand the demographic facts, other cultural models would likely obscure the role for a public policy response. *Individualism* leads Americans to expect that problems are best resolved privately and personally, by the people experiencing them. In addition, the public draws on a cultural model of *Inefficient Government* to evaluate the role of collective responses to social issues and often concludes that involving government would slow progress or make matters worse and not better.

To generate a productive public conversation about how to best address significant changes in the nation’s social, economic, and demographic structure, advocates need a framing strategy that can mute the public’s tendency to dismiss the role of government and maximize the sense that collective action is necessary,

appropriate, and holds the promise of making a positive difference. Reframing efforts must foster a shared understanding of the problems, build awareness of how proposed policies would work, and shift attention from selective benefits to collective benefits.

Figure 2 summarizes these gaps between public and expert thinking about aging.



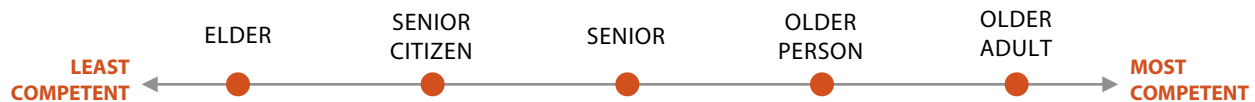
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## Word Choice Matters

To advance a more productive conversation on aging, advocates need strategies for disrupting the public's mental modeling of older adults as a group set apart. Reframing efforts must enable people to see aging as a continuous and normal process. Small, subtle changes in word choice can make a big difference toward achieving this goal. Careful attention to language that talks about older people as *others*, as if they were a separate group and not part of *our* society, is one such shift. Pay attention to pronouns: find ways to replace *they* or *them* with *we* and *us*. Instead of using phrasing that implies that aging happens to someone else (what older people need), look for more inclusive wording (*what we need when we're older*). Whether the speaker is 20, 40, or 80 years old, this language suggests that all of us, now and later, are part of a community of people who are aging.

Another subtle cue that can make a difference is the label given to people in later life. FrameWorks researchers ran an online experiment that studied people's associations with a variety of terms currently in use by experts in aging-focused fields (e.g., gerontology, geriatrics) as well as in health and human services.

In one stage of the experiment, participants were given one of the following terms and asked to offer words to describe that type of person. Responses were compiled and coded on a five-point scale of competence. Responses like *can't use computers* or *frail* were coded as low competence. Words like *independent* or *wise* were coded as high competence. The resulting analysis reveals a clear continuum of competence associated with different labels:



Another part of the experiment gave people one of these labels and asked them to indicate how old they thought the person was. Responses from all participants were averaged—and the mean ages were as follows:



While *older adults* is the current preferred term among leading progressive voices in the aging field, this study suggests that this term calls to mind someone in their mid-fifties. As many of the field's desired policies and reforms focus on people quite a bit older than that, this isn't optimal.

The resulting recommendation: Advocates should consistently use the term *older people*. This term evokes, in the public mind, people aged 60 or older, and at the same time, brings with it the most positive, least paternalistic views of the age group described.

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# Traps

Some ways of framing an issue can ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. Strategic Frame Analysis identifies such communication traps, focusing on ones that are habits of a given field or common media practices and, as such, can be difficult to notice and even harder to avoid. These traps are popular techniques precisely because they are eminently plausible ways of framing an issue and responding logically to challenges that communications professionals have observed from experience. However, in light of framing research, it becomes clear that they fail to achieve the desired effect or even turn out to do more harm than good. FrameWorks research on how the public thinks about aging suggests that advocates need to be wary of the following traps as they engage the public. (For more details on the research behind this analysis, see *Aging, Agency, and Attribution of Responsibility: Shifting Public Discourse about Older Adults*.)

## **The *Because Demography* Trap.**

FrameWorks' analysis of aging advocates' public engagement materials revealed that the field tends to frame future demographic change as an impending social, political, and economic crisis. Warnings to the public about the "graying" of populations in industrialized nations are common,<sup>1</sup> as are metaphors like "silver tsunami," "the demographic cliff," "the gray wave," and other imagery evoking a picture of uncontrollable numbers of older adults who will require extensive and expensive social supports. This line of argument is a trap. FrameWorks' prior research and other research in the social sciences shows that fear-based messages may garner short-term attention but discourage public engagement over more extended periods of time.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to aging in particular, focusing on the sheer size of the population is likely to fuel public anxieties about the costs associated with caring for an aging population. To steer clear of this trap, use values rather than data to open the case for why aging issues are a matter of public concern. Position information about the increased number of older adults with cues that communicate that adapting to the new reality is feasible: *As more Americans live longer and healthier lives, we need to adjust our public systems to ensure access for older people.*

## **The *Other Ism* Trap.**

Experts and scholars identify ageism as an important driver of negative outcomes for older adults. To bring awareness to this problem, some advocates have used messaging that compares ageism to other forms of identity-based discrimination, like racism or sexism. FrameWorks research suggests that a simple analogy to "other isms" isn't the most effective tactic. For one thing, public understandings of racism and sexism are often unproductive: Americans rarely think about discrimination in systemic terms. They're much more likely to rely on little-picture explanations that reduce the problem to the everyday interactions of a few outlier individuals with ill-will in their hearts. Thus, comparing ageism to other "isms" will do little to help people understand ageism as a structural issue with systemic and institutional remedies. Our researchers also found that comparing a little-known form of discrimination (ageism) to its higher-profile kin led the public to question the impact or scale of ageism, concluding that

it couldn't possibly be as serious or as widespread as racism or sexism. Finally, there's a principled argument against the comparison. People live with multiple and intersecting identities that are not experienced as discrete forms of discrimination or oppression. An argument that, even implicitly, tries to equate ageism to other forms of discrimination misses something important about the complex nature of social inequality.

To avoid the *Other Ism* trap, advocates should *explain* the systemic causes of and solutions to ageism rather than position ageism as a competing form of discrimination. In so doing, they provide the public with cognitive tools to understand how inequality works, which helps to undermine the many interacting systems of inequality that include age discrimination.

### **The *Living Proof* Trap.**

To promote more positive images of aging, advocates and the media have profiled individuals who are doing extraordinary things in older age: jumping out of airplanes, competing in body-building tournaments, or maintaining high-profile fashion careers well into their eighties. After all, providing counterexamples seems like a logical way to dispel a stereotype. As it turns out, this way of countering misperceptions is a trap, for two reasons. The first is that any “super senior” narrative is likely to call up the public's *Ideal vs. Real* model of aging. This model involves a sense of bifurcation and contrast, not a more nuanced or balanced notion that some things about older age are good and others, less so. Rather than proof that aging need not equal decline, portraits of extraordinary older people are understood as the exceptions that prove the rule. Second, the storytelling techniques found in many *Living Proof* profiles can reinforce *Individualism*. For instance, probing the subject of the profile for his or her “secrets” to achieving robust health and wellbeing in late life relies on, and spreads, the idea that it all comes down to personal choices. By leaving out the social determinants of health and wellbeing, *Living Proof* portraits leave the public comfortable in their default belief that aging outcomes are a matter of private, not public, concern.

There is still a need for storytelling that promotes positive images of aging. To avoid the *Living Proof* trap when telling them, find ways to use stories of individuals as evidence not that healthy aging is possible but that social contexts and environments matter to wellbeing as we age. In this type of story, the setting is the main character, not the individual.

### **The *Sympathetic Senior* Trap.**

As advocates bring public attention to serious problems, such as age discrimination and elder abuse, the field will certainly be tempted to use stories that exert a strong tug on the public's heartstrings. This is a temptation that should be avoided, for the following reasons. First, evoking the public's sympathy is not necessarily the same as evoking their systems-level thinking; in fact, FrameWorks studies have regularly found that compassion-based appeals depress rather than increase policy support. Second, sympathy stories run the risk of framing all older people as a vulnerable population to be guarded—a frame that is likely to evoke paternalistic thinking, contribute to the “othering” of older people, and depress the public's

sense that older Americans deserve full inclusion in society. Thus, painting the portraits of older adults in dire circumstances doesn't necessarily help to address those circumstances. To avoid this trap, aging advocates should focus less on *describing* serious problems and more on *explaining* them, specifying the mechanisms or processes that cause or contribute to the problem. Storytelling skills can be repurposed to elaborate on concrete and inventive solutions that address the issues facing older people. (For more guidance on communicating about older people in poor health, see Appendix A, *Framing Frailty*. For more guidance on talking about issues related to elder abuse and neglect, see *Stories that Stick* and *Talking Elder Abuse*.)

# Redirections

To elevate aging issues, advocates need framing strategies that can be counted on to dislodge unproductive cultural models and open new, more productive ways of thinking. Given the challenges posed by public understandings of aging, ageism, and the role of policy in aging issues, reframing these issues will require multiple *frame elements*, or different communications cues that can be deployed for specific purposes.

And, to enhance and amplify the effects of discrete frame elements, they should be organized into a sequence that takes advantage of the power of narrative. An effective social change narrative doesn't select the beginning, middle, and end on a whim, or merely for a pleasing literary effect. Rather, it fills in the chapters strategically, anticipating where and why the story will be difficult to tell. It builds on knowledge of where people get stuck when they attempt to follow experts' logic, where they are likely to dismiss or misinterpret evidence, where they are missing key concepts that allow them to develop informed positions on the issue. FrameWorks refers to this type of an overarching meta-narrative as a *core story*. A core story anticipates and answers the questions that the public asks about social issues: *Why does this issue matter to us all? What are the mechanisms at play here—and what's going wrong? What should we do to move forward?* By filling in these blanks systematically and scientifically, choosing among plausible alternatives by looking to evidence about the effects of frames, and using this outline consistently to shape a variety of communications efforts, a field can significantly advance public understanding of an issue.

To arrive at a set of tools and tactics that advocates can use with confidence, FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments that tested the effects of different frame elements and narratives.

## **Which frame *works*? That's an empirical question.**

A frame works when it leads to the desired communications outcome. To determine the effects of different frame elements, researchers tested alternative frames head to head to see which messages made the most difference on several clusters of attitudes, knowledge, and policy preferences, using questions like the ones illustrated below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:**  
Desired Communications Outcomes: Improved Knowledge,  
Attitudes, and Policy Preferences.

Scales	Sample Questions
Positive Attitude Toward Aging	Getting older is a process of growth. ( <i>Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree</i> )
Negative Attitude Toward Aging	Getting older is inevitably a process of decline. ( <i>Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree</i> )
Collective Efficacy Toward Aging	How large of an effect can public policy have on how we do as we age? ( <i>No effect, small effect, moderate effect, large effect, very large effect</i> )
<i>Us vs. Them</i> Thinking	In your opinion, how similar are older and younger people? ( <i>Not at all similar, slightly similar, somewhat similar, moderately similar, highly similar</i> )
Older People's Contributions	Compared to younger people, how well do older people perform in the workplace? ( <i>Much worse, somewhat worse, about the same, somewhat better, much better</i> )
Support for Aging Policies that Expand Opportunities	We should increase public funding for programs that allow older people to contribute to their communities, such as volunteering and mentoring programs. ( <i>Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree</i> )
Support for Policies that Provide Support for Older Adults	We should put policies in place that require employers to allow people to take time away from their jobs to provide care for older relatives. ( <i>Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree</i> )
Knowledge of Systemic Aging Supports	There are lots of factors that determine how successfully people age. Which of the following do you think is true about the role of public policy? a. Public policy plays a big role—it shapes the options and opportunities we have as we get older. b. Public policy plays a small role—it is much less important than things like individual choice. c. Public policy plays no role—other things shape how well we do as we get older.
Prevalence and Scope of Impact of Ageism	How significant of a problem is ageism in the United States? ( <i>not at all significant, slightly significant, somewhat significant, moderately significant, highly significant</i> )
Collective Efficacy Toward Preventing Ageism	How realistic is it for us to prevent ageism in our society? ( <i>Not at all realistic, slightly realistic, somewhat realistic, moderately realistic, highly realistic</i> )

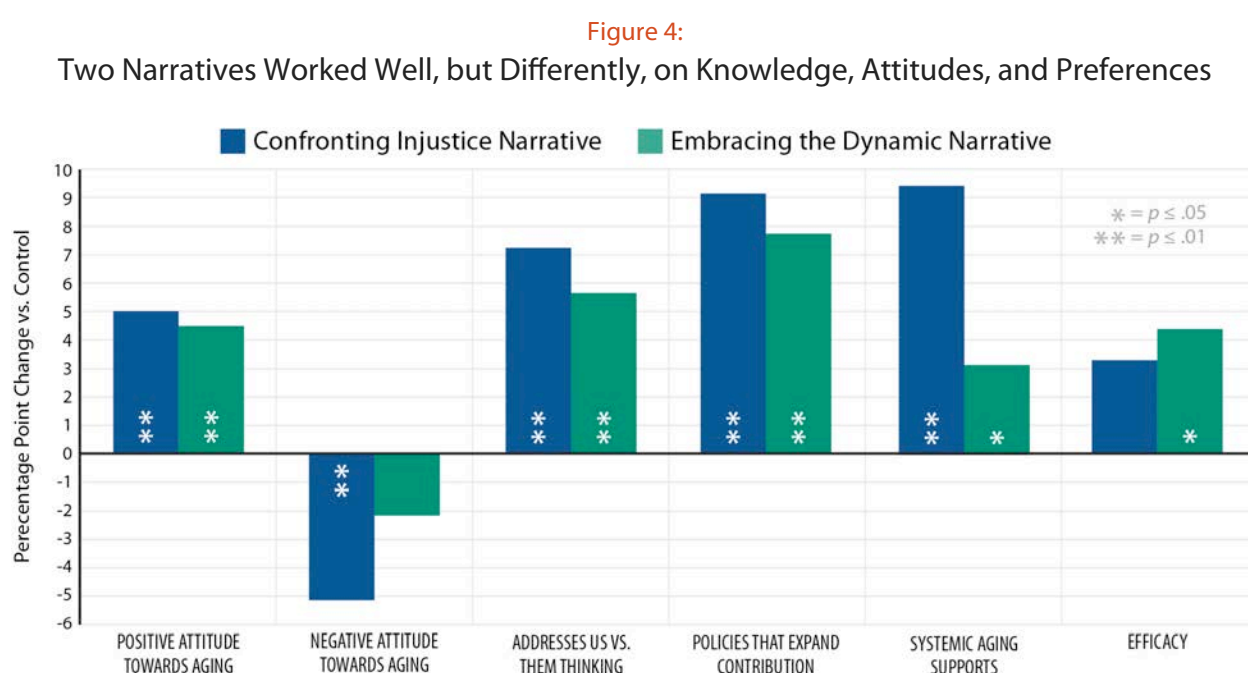
The results associated with each frame were compared with each other and with the responses of a control group that received no messages but answered the same survey questions. This design allows researchers to pinpoint how exposure to different frames affects people's understanding of and attitudes toward aging and their support for relevant policies. In addition, researchers controlled for a wide range of demographic variables (including age, race, class, and gender of respondents) by conducting a multiple-regression statistical analysis to ensure that the effects observed were being driven by the frames rather than by demographic variations in the sample.



The result is a recommendation for the field to coalesce around two narratives, each of which explains and elevates different aspects of the field’s perspective and responds to different challenges in public thinking:

- ➔ The *Confronting Injustice* narrative advances a candid conversation about ageism.
- ➔ The *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative activates an innovative and pragmatic perspective about aging and casts an aging population as an opportunity for society.

The components and contours of these narratives will be explained more fully in just a moment. Before diving into the details of each, it’s worth explaining why the recommendation involves two narratives. The reason is that while both narratives are highly effective, they work in slightly different ways—as shown in Figure 4.



As illustrated in the graph in Figure 4, the *Confronting Injustice* narrative had strong effects on public attitudes, increasing positive attitudes by 5 percentage points over the control group, decreasing negative attitudes by 5 percent, and generating 9 percent+ increases in support for important policy directions. These are strong results for this type of study. Yet, researchers noted that the *Confronting Injustice* narrative failed to boost the public’s sense of efficacy about the possibility of improving aging outcomes—whereas the *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative succeeded. Because the public’s sense of fatalism about aging is so strong and constitutes such a significant obstacle to people engaging in policy reform, FrameWorks’ analysis is that it is important to take every opportunity to build the public’s sense that policy and collective action can influence aging outcomes for the better. In addition, the *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative includes a frame element that had truly remarkable effects on people’s attitudes and implicit biases toward older people—a finding that will be elaborated on more fully below. For these

reasons, FrameWorks recommends that communicators build both narratives into their framing repertoires, deploying them strategically for specific purposes.

Figure 5 summarizes the elements of the recommended narratives. The sections that follow provide more detail on each element and the evidence behind their recommendations.

Figure 5:

## Two Narrative Blueprints for Reframing Aging

### ❖ *Confronting Injustice Narrative*

**Lead with *Justice*:** Right now, our society is not treating older people as equals; in fact, we are marginalizing their participation and minimizing their contributions. To live up to our ideals, we must confront the injustice of ageism.

**Name and Define Ageism:** Ageism is discrimination based on prejudices about age. When ageism is directed at older people, it often involves the assumptions that older people are less competent than younger people. Ageism has a huge negative impact on older people, throughout all areas of life.

**Offer Examples:** Ageism’s effects are built into the institutions and systems that shape Americans’ lives. One example is common workplace policies and practices that discriminate against older people. Because people hold negative and inaccurate stereotypes about older workers, this limits older people’s ability to find employment. Due to ageism, capable people who could contribute are left out of the workforce.

**Explain Implicit Bias:** Prejudice is often implicit—people aren’t even aware of their own prejudices. We are all exposed to negative messages about older people, so our brains are wired to form judgments about people based on their age. For example, because of years of exposure to the news and common movie characters, many people subconsciously assume that older people are forgetful, grouchy, or frail. These stereotypes lead to discrimination against older people in many areas of life, from health care to the workplace.

**Offer Example of Solutions:** Once we know about these unintentional, implicit biases, we become less likely to act on “snap judgments” and more likely to treat people fairly, regardless of age. We must oppose age bias and take steps to reduce ageism in our society. We can also create policies that prevent and reduce opportunities to form premature judgments based solely on age; for instance, changing application forms that require people to disclose the year they graduated from high school.

Figure 5 continued:

### ❖ ***Embracing the Dynamic Narrative***

**Lead with *Ingenuity*:** Americans are problem-solvers. When we see an opportunity, we figure out how to seize it. And when we see that something isn't working, we rethink our approach. Replacing outdated practices with new, smarter ways of doing things is the key to our nation's ingenuity.

**Compare Aging to *Forward Momentum*:** As we get older, we build momentum, with the force of built-up experience and wisdom pushing us forward. Experience and insight add energy and possibility, the ability to contribute to our society's vitality. With more Americans living longer, this force could power up our society to move ahead in new ways.

**Explain the Problem:** But right now, we're losing out on this incredible dynamism. Although we all age, and although people on average are living longer and healthier lives, our society hasn't yet figured out how to make the most of this change. Our current employment practices, public transportation systems, and housing policies are not well-suited to today's reality—in fact, they make it hard for us to stay involved and contribute when we get older.

**Offer Examples of Inventive Solutions:** There are many things we can do to harness the energy of older people's ability to contribute to their communities. One example is to introduce programs that bring together older people and preschool children in community centers. By providing opportunities for older people to participate in and contribute to their communities, intergenerational community centers provide benefits for older people and strengthen the whole community.

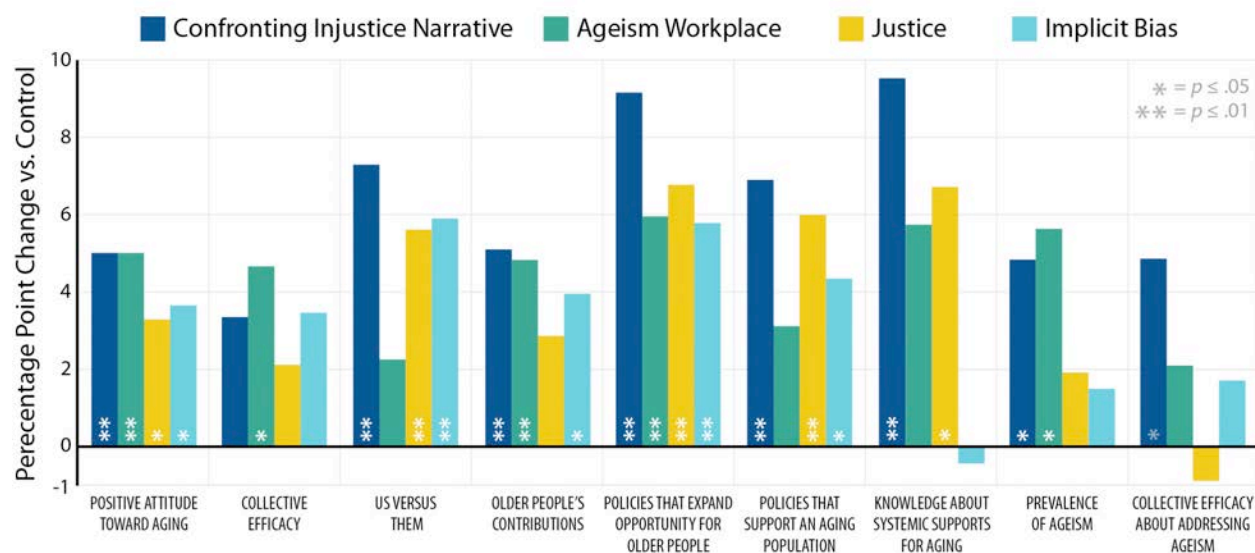
## ***Narrative 1: Confronting Injustice***

The results of FrameWorks studies lead to a clear primary recommendation: advocates should adopt a narrative strategy that defines ageism, explains how it works, explicitly states why it is a problem that impacts all of American society, and points to concrete solutions to address it. Moreover, the results indicate that advancing ageism as a social justice issue is likely to be a highly effective strategy for significantly shifting how the public thinks about aging and about how we, as a society, should treat and address older people in our actions and institutions.

At its most effective, this is a story about *Confronting Injustice*—a story that orients people toward social justice as a goal, diagnoses and explains the injustices caused by our society's deep ageism, explains the roots of ageism in pervasive bias, and offers solutions to address these injustices.

Qualitative and quantitative research found that the elements of this narrative are independently effective and together constitute a powerful means of shifting public thinking about aging and older people. Figure 6 presents results of a survey experiment testing three elements of the narrative as well as the effects of the complete narrative.

**Figure 6:**  
Effects of Three Frame Elements (*Justice*, *Implicit Bias*, and *Workplace Discrimination*) and a Narrative Integrating These Elements



Three frame elements—the value of *Justice*, an example of ageism as *Workplace Discrimination*, and an explanation of how people form *Implicit Bias* against older adults—were each effective on their own, leading to statistically significant gains across multiple *Attitude*, *Knowledge*, and *Policy Support* batteries. A combination message that integrated these elements into the *Confronting Justice* narrative was the most effective, leading to significant gains in eight of the nine outcome batteries.

Below, we discuss each element of this narrative and what it contributes.

### What is at stake? Use the value of *Justice* to promote recognition of older people as equals.

Values are enduring and cherished cultural ideals that guide individuals' attitudes and behaviors. People draw on values to evaluate social issues and reach decisions.<sup>3</sup> As framing devices, values help people understand why an issue matters. In controlled testing, the value of *Justice* was particularly effective at orienting public thinking about aging toward a systemic perspective. As Figure 6 above illustrates, it elevated support for policies that expand opportunities for older people as well as batteries that focused on changes to systems to add supports for healthy aging.

As used in this narrative, the value of *Justice* appeals to the American principle that “all people are created equal” and makes the claim that older people are being unjustly excluded from full participation and membership in society. Framing aging as a social justice issue means asserting the fundamental equality of older adults and insisting that, as equal members of society, older adults have a rightful claim to be full participants in all spheres of life: social, cultural, economical, and legal. The essence of this frame element is as follows:

***Justice:*** Justice requires recognizing that all members of society are equal. Right now, our society is not treating older people as equals. In fact, we are marginalizing their participation and minimizing their contributions. To live up to our ideals, we must confront the injustice of ageism and work to reshape society so that older people are fully included in our communities.

By emphasizing participation, contributions, and inclusion, the *Justice* value represents an important shift from a moral claim that focuses on “doing right” by older adults. This latter type of framing may generate an acknowledgment of harm, but it does little to disrupt the *Us vs. Them* binary that separates the old from the young in the public mind and, thereby, permits a paternalistic stance toward older people (we must do a better job of taking care of *them*). Within this frame, it is only too easy to associate older people with vulnerability—and, therefore, it is much more difficult to imagine a society in which older adults are full and equal participants.

The *Justice* frame is likewise distinct from a *Civil Rights* frame—and it is important to note that FrameWorks research suggests that the latter frame is likely to backfire on the issue of aging. In qualitative research with small groups of ordinary Americans, FrameWorks found that describing ageism as a “civil rights issue” instantly provoked comparisons between ageism and other forms of institutionalized oppression that are better known, such as gender and racial discrimination. People made the connection but expressed hesitation to group age discrimination alongside these long-established civil rights issues. Conversations invariably turned to searching for comparison points between racism, sexism, and ageism, and people concluded that ageism couldn’t possibly be as serious as these prototypes of extreme injustice. At times, they searched for ways to justify this conclusion. For instance, they suggested that perhaps there was some truth to the claim that older workers cannot perform their jobs as well as younger workers due to physical limitations; thus, adverse actions weren’t really discrimination based on identity.

In addition to the risk of provoking unproductive comparisons and attracting unintended consequences, a *Civil Rights* frame also has its limits as a public education strategy. By focusing attention on the legal process—the pursuit of civil remedies in specific court cases—the *Civil Rights* frame narrows discourse about ageism to the kinds of discrimination that can be litigated. This makes it more difficult to advance the idea that ageism is as much a cultural and structural issue as it is a legal one. A *Civil Rights* frame can also foster fatalism and doubt about the possibility of addressing ageism, as people worry about the difficulty involved with “prosecuting and enforcing” civil rights violations through a cumbersome legal system. Communicators should, therefore, avoid framing ageism as a civil rights issue; they can make an equally powerful case, with fewer negative side effects, by using the recommended *Justice* value.

## What is this about? Name ageism, define it, and make it concrete with an example.

The American public lacks ways to think about ageism and how to address it. Communicators cannot take for granted that people have even heard the term before.

When working to fill in this “cognitive hole,” an essential first step is to explicitly name and define the problem. Naming a problem is a powerful step toward identifying it as a problem that requires attention. It legitimizes the issue and begins a new conversation about what should be done about it. Providing a clear, concise, and consistent definition of the term is also critical, as failing to define it explicitly leaves the public to define it for itself, with the risk that they will fill in the blanks in incomplete, inaccurate, or unproductive ways.

A sample definition of ageism follows. Other definitions exist, and more likely will be created, refined, and debated as this issue evolves. Note, however, that this definition does not locate ageism in the hearts and minds of individuals. Instead, it uses phrasing that allows for both interpersonal and structural forms of ageism:

**Ageism** is discrimination based on prejudices about age. When ageism is directed at older people, it often involves the assumptions that older people are less competent, less attractive, and less vigorous than younger people. Ageism has a huge negative impact on older people, throughout all areas of life.

Once the communication has introduced ageism and defined it, it should make the concept concrete through specific examples. Helping people to understand what ageism is and how it works requires talking about it in contexts. In our experimental survey research, we tested brief explanations of ageism in the workplace and ageism in health care, and we found that both explanations were effective in shifting attitudes toward aging and helping people see the need for policy changes. Follow-up qualitative research found that the example of workplace discrimination was particularly effective in helping people grasp ageism. The example that people were given was similar to this:

In our country, ageism—discrimination based on negative assumptions about age—has a huge impact on older people, throughout all areas of life. For example, it has effects on people’s ability to find employment. When managers evaluate job seekers, it’s common for employers to make assumptions based on age when they read a resume, even though older people receive especially high scores in leadership, detail-oriented tasks, writing skills, and problem solving. Employers are, for example, much less likely to interview job candidates whose high school graduation dates indicate that they’re more than 50 years old, because the employer assumes older people are less capable. This has cascading effects, because when older people are unemployed, they’re much more likely to remain unemployed long term. Because of ageism, capable older people who could contribute to the workforce are left out.

FrameWorks researchers concluded that this example worked well because various sorts of workplace discrimination are already familiar to many Americans—they’ve experienced it, or they know someone who has. It’s already a salient issue and a topic of concern, which made it a particularly useful avenue for introducing ageism. Therefore, the recommendation is that this become a primary and often-used example for the field. By connecting ageism to a topic that is already established in public thinking, advocates can leverage existing understandings of discrimination and prompt an immediate grasp of the issue.

This isn’t to say that it is the only example of ageism that can work or that others shouldn’t be used. In fact, the framing research suggests that any example of ageism is likely to boost understanding, if only because the topic is so little understood. When using examples, however, it’s important not to rely solely on comparison or association but to take an explanatory approach that offers concrete examples that illustrate and illuminate how age discrimination works. Without this sort of elaboration, it’s too easy for the public to discount the problem, dismiss the implication that age discrimination is comparable to other forms of prejudice, or simply fail to imagine what it looks like in practice.

### How does it work? Explain *Implicit Bias* to deepen understanding of the problem.

To help people recognize the depth of the problem, advocates should explain how ageism results from implicit bias. Explaining implicit bias is key to helping the public see ageism as a serious problem that touches all of us (both people who are biased and those who are hurt by bias). Without this explanation, there is a danger that people will see ageism as something that arises in egregious, isolated instances involving personal animus rather than as a widespread and pervasive set of norms reflected in society’s structures, policies, and material culture.

Ageism in our society has deep roots. Because of the messages our brains receive from childhood on, we automatically form judgments about people based on their age. For example, because of news coverage or common movie characters, many people subconsciously assume that older people are forgetful, grouchy, or sick. As a result, we often make negative judgments about older people based on age alone. This leads to ageism, which has a huge impact on older people, throughout all areas of life. Once we know about these unintentional biases, we become less likely to act on these “snap judgments” and more likely to treat people fairly, regardless of age.

As Figure 6 above illustrates, explaining implicit bias is effective in shifting thinking about aging across different outcomes measures, and qualitative research found that providing people with the vocabulary of implicit bias enables them to explain the problem in a new, useful way. Once given this vocabulary, they could readily recognize that people do make snap judgments about older people without realizing it. As one person said, “I’ll be honest with you—[I see] ageism is a problem, but it’s so engrained in society that I see myself being prejudiced. Just being honest.”



## What can we do? Provide examples of how the injustice of ageism can be addressed systemically.

While it is vital to help people understand the depth of the problem, it is equally important to help people recognize that the injustice of ageism can be effectively addressed. It is crucial for advocates to provide examples of solutions to ageism similar to the following example:

There are steps we can take to limit ageism in the workplace. For example, bias-prevention workshops can make managers and employees more aware of how bias affects their behavior in the workplace. These trainings can inform the way that organizations screen resumes, interview, onboard new employees, mentor existing employees, and promote staff. Organizations can also adjust hiring practices to avoid age discrimination. For example, businesses may remove age-identifying information, such as high school or college graduation dates, from resumes. They may also evaluate resumes by assigning points for earned accomplishments, rather than focusing on more subjective criteria. In addition, federal and state government need to enforce laws that prohibit age discrimination and work with employers to stop ageism in the workplace. Taking these steps would not only directly decrease ageism in the workplace but also undermine ageist attitudes more generally by expressing that we, as a society, reject ageism.

Qualitative research found that when the problem is presented without concrete examples of solutions, people sometimes struggle to identify the solutions, which can generate a sense of fatalism. For example, discussions of workplace discrimination prompted immediate concern, but people struggled to identify possible solutions and to understand how they could be implemented. Absent an explanation of policy solutions, people tend to default to individual-level solutions, such as removing graduation dates from one's own resume or staying current with technology.

Communicators need to provide examples of systemic solutions to enable the public to understand how the problem can be effectively addressed through social and political institutions. For example, talking about policy initiatives aimed at addressing patterns of workplace discrimination by establishing better workplace rules and systems, trainings to combat implicit bias, and ways to report problems can help the public understand that there are things that we can do to curb the problem and create a more just society.

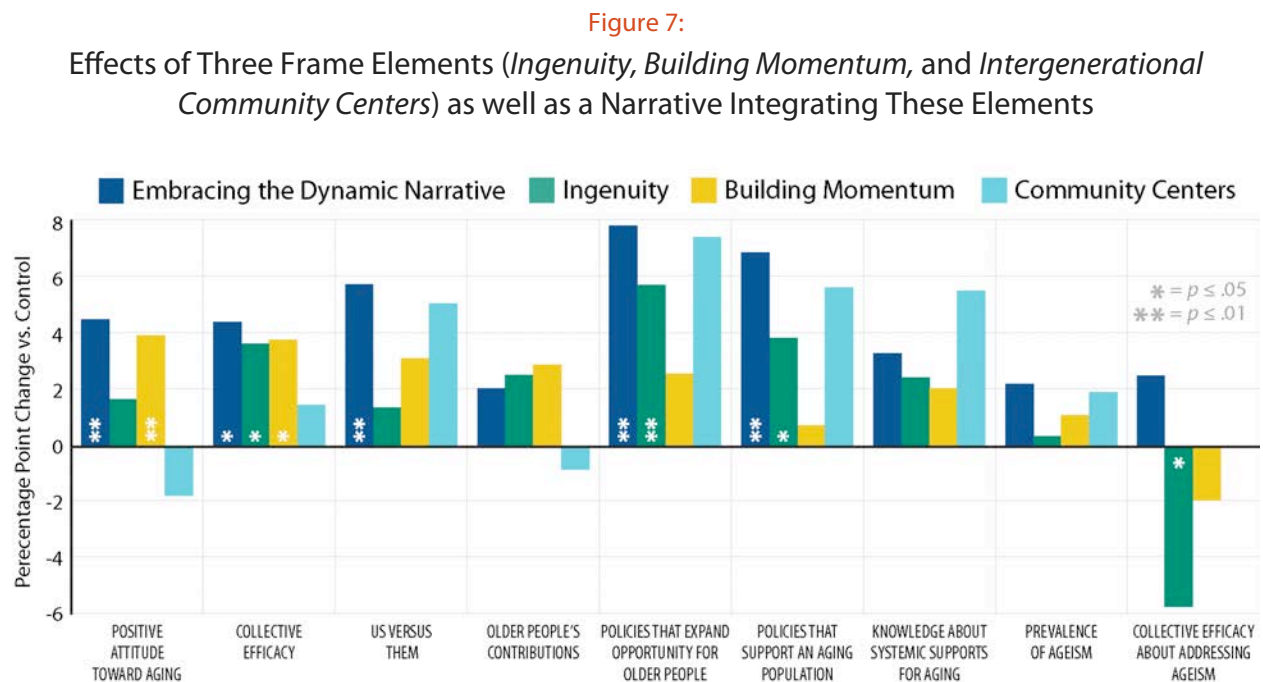
The component parts of these narratives are carefully constructed to work together. For instance, in *Confronting Injustice*, the concrete example of workplace discrimination doesn't serve to narrow ageism to employment issues, but it raises a specific type of discrimination as an illustration of a broader problem—deep and pervasive bias against older adults throughout our society. The narrative has multiple ways to present the nature of the problem but also includes values and solutions elements to establish the possibility and promise of resolving it.



## Narrative 2: *Embracing the Dynamic*

As a complement to the *Confronting Injustice* narrative, advocates should employ an *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative to provide a positive vision that forefronts the dynamic potential of an aging society. This narrative addresses one of the major challenges documented in the cultural models research: the deep, durable negative assumptions about aging. To reorient this sort of thinking, the *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative recasts our aging population as an untapped resource.

This forward-looking narrative consists of the value of *Ingenuity*; the metaphor of *Building Momentum*; and an inventive solution of *Intergenerational Community Centers*, which offer a way to better include and embrace the capabilities of older adults. Figure 7 provides the results of controlled survey experiments, testing the whole narrative and its component parts.



The full narrative led to significant increases on five batteries representing important communications outcomes: *Positive Attitudes*, *Collective Efficacy*, *Us vs. Them*, and the two Policy batteries. It is worth highlighting that while this narrative is less effective overall than the *Confronting Injustice* narrative, it is effective in boosting people's sense of collective efficacy—the sense that we, as a society, can improve the lives of older people and that public policy solutions can help. This speaks to the strength of the narrative and its key use for advocates: helping people recognize that our society can take steps to fully incorporate and support older people by helping them envision alternatives.

## What is at stake? Use the value of *Ingenuity* to challenge fatalism and expand openness to systemic change.

The value of *Ingenuity* challenges people's complacency and asks them to envision taking new steps to meaningfully change how we organize our society. FrameWorks has found that the value of *Ingenuity* is often helpful on issues where fatalism is a major problem,<sup>4</sup> and that proved to be the case here. As Figure 7 above illustrates, the value fosters a sense of collective efficacy and boosts policy support. By orienting people toward the need for genuinely new solutions, the value disrupts fatalism and complacency and jolts people into thinking bigger.

Americans are problem-solvers. When we see an opportunity, we figure out how to seize it—and when we see that something isn't working, we rethink our approach. Replacing outdated practices with new, smarter ways of doing things is the key to our nation's ingenuity.

## How does it work? Use the metaphor of *Building Momentum* to counter negative models of aging and expand thinking about the possibilities that accompany aging.

As noted previously, Americans' default model of the aging process is *Deterioration*, with later life conceptualized as a period when skills, energy, loved ones, independence, and other important things are lost. A common metaphor used to express this sense of decline is “going downhill.” What if this implicit analogy could be repurposed to instead describe a process that involves gain? FrameWorks researchers investigated whether it was possible to foreground a different set of associations—an incline, rather than a decline—through an explanatory metaphor. Explanatory metaphors are linguistic devices that help people think about and talk about a complex concept in new ways. By comparing an abstract or unfamiliar idea to something concrete and familiar, explanatory metaphors can make information easier to understand—and have a particular power to change the way a topic is understood.

The following *Building Momentum* metaphor was designed to tap into one of the public's few positive associations with later life—namely, the model of older age as a time of accumulated wisdom.

Getting older is a dynamic process that involves constant and continuous change. When we're younger, we need a boost as we get moving, but as we age, we gather momentum through the build-up of experiences and insights. This momentum can add power and force to moving our communities forward—and so, as a society, we should do all we can to support it and make the most of it.

As illustrated in Figure 7, controlled survey experiments revealed that this metaphor was effective in building more positive attitudes toward aging and in boosting the public's sense that collective efforts could make a widespread, positive difference in aging outcomes. Qualitative, group-based research found that the *Building Momentum* metaphor provided people with new language for talking about aging—

something quite different from the currently available cultural idioms (e.g., “fighting” or “battling” aging, the importance of “staying young”). This, in turn, opened a different way of thinking, channeling public attention to positive aspects of aging. This metaphor was remarkably *sticky*, meaning, people were quick to pick up the language of the metaphor and use it. FrameWorks research and experience has shown that stickiness is an important element of an effective frame element, as it predicts the likelihood of social radiation and diffusion of a metaphor once advocates start introducing it into the public square. In addition, in a separate experiment, FrameWorks found evidence that this metaphor reduced implicit bias against older people. (For more on this finding, see the pullout *Can Frames Make People Less Ageist?*)

While the evidence showed that *Building Momentum* didn’t do “everything”—its effects were limited in scope—the analysis also indicates that the metaphor did do important things and did them very well. Primarily, it evoked a sense of possibility: the possibility of older age being a positive period of life and the possibility that, at a societal level, changes were both feasible and likely to improve the situation. Thus, talking about the progression of the life course as a process of gaining momentum is a vital piece of the overall reframing strategy.

An important feature of this metaphor is that it emphasizes the continuity of human development: the passage of time, aging, and life all happen continuously, just as momentum is built continuously. This does important conceptual work in undoing the public’s binary between *old* and *young*. Communicators should take care to stay within this life-as-continuum frame when using *Building Momentum*. This means, for instance, avoid talking about differences between generations or talking about older people as a discrete group with unique contributions to make. These kinds of examples will only reinvigorate *Us vs. Them* thinking. Instead, advocates should take advantage of the context that the metaphor creates, using it to focus attention on the shared benefits of a society that includes all age groups and illustrating the possibilities of an environment that takes a more dynamic approach to aging.

**What should we do? Use the *Intergenerational Community Centers* solution to help people think about how to more fully incorporate older people.**

To help people envision what our society can do to more fully incorporate older people into our communities and to build momentum as a society by taking advantage of people’s contributions throughout life, experts need to provide concrete examples of programs and policies that change opportunity structures for older people. Our research tested several examples of such programs, and *Intergenerational Community Centers* worked best (see Appendix B). We suspect this example was the most effective of the three because it leveraged the idea of the integration of age groups to help people understand life as a continuum and effectively break down *Us vs. Them* thinking.

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## Can Frames Make People Less Ageist?

Implicit attitudes are thoughts and feelings about social categories that fall outside of conscious awareness. Social psychologists have long believed that these unconscious beliefs shape human cognition and behavior, and they have pursued different ways of uncovering them. This is tricky: if people aren't even aware of their own biases, how can researchers find out what they are? The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is a type of psychological test that solves this dilemma. It is a brief, computerized task that measures how strongly individuals associate different concepts. The task reveals the strength of associations between social groups (older adults and younger adults) and evaluations (good/bad) or stereotypes (frail/strong). Researchers would say that there is an implicit bias against older adults if an individual more strongly associates older adults with bad evaluative words than with good evaluative words.

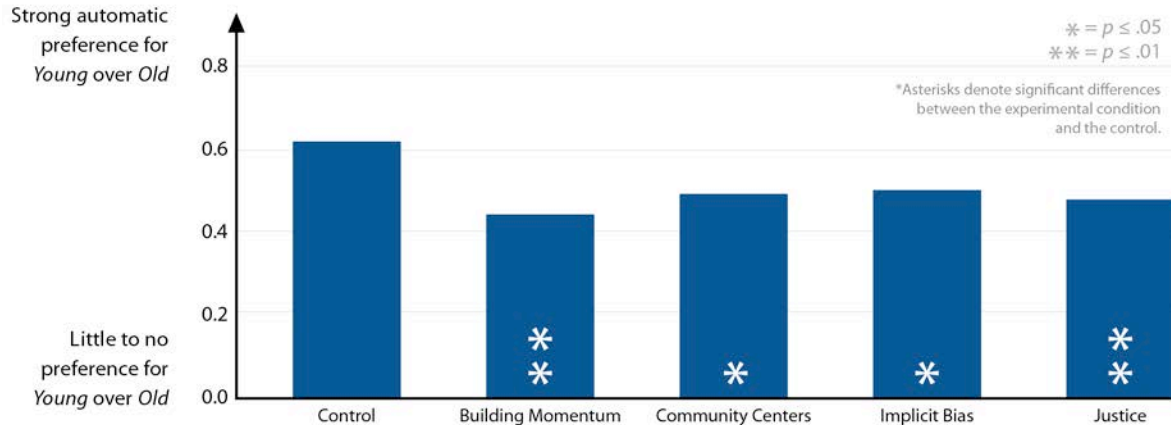
When completing an IAT, participants are asked to quickly sort words or images. For example, they might be asked to move pictures of older adults and good evaluations to the left-hand side of a computer screen and pictures of younger adults and bad evaluations to the right. The time it takes to associate a stigmatized group with positive evaluations reveals the strength of an implicit bias. The time is a tell-tale sign because it reveals that conscious effort was needed to overcome the automatic, implicit bias.

This method has been used by other researchers to demonstrate that implicit bias exists and that it works differently from explicit preferences or dislikes that people know they hold. FrameWorks researchers wondered: Is it possible for frames to reduce implicit bias about older adults?

Psychologists on our staff designed a first-of-its-kind experiment to find out. Nine hundred participants were randomly assigned to read one of four reframes: *Building Momentum*, *Intergenerational Community Centers*, *Implicit Bias* explanation, and the *Justice* value. After being primed with one of these frames, participants completed an aging IAT. Researchers then looked to see whether there were statistically significant differences in implicit bias between the treatment groups and a control group (in which participants read a paragraph on an unrelated topic). We can think of the mean of the control group as representing the "average" level of implicit bias in the population.

The results were striking. Analysis indicated that the reframes had strong effects on people's implicit attitudes toward older adults, reducing the strength of their negative associations (Figure 8). Results showed statistically significant differences for all four treatments compared to the control. This difference was most notable for *Building Momentum*. In fact, it reduced implicit bias by 30 percent.

Figure 8:  
Effects of Frame Elements on Negative, Implicit Associations  
with Aging vs. Control



Taken together with the evidence from the national survey experiment showing that *Building Momentum* affects people's explicitly expressed attitudes, the IAT finding backs FrameWorks' recommendation to use this frame element to emphasize the positive aspects of aging. This experiment also represents a new, exciting way to think about the power of frames to create social change—by disrupting deep and durable stereotypes about stigmatized social groups.

# Putting it Together

Frames can be applied in many different ways, as organizations work on their specific missions and develop communications for particular purposes and audiences. Here are two examples of how the framing recommendations could be applied to a “stump speech” about aging issues.

## ► From Frame to Message:

### *An example of how to draw on the **Confronting Injustice** narrative*

In the United States of America, we believe in justice for all. With hands on their hearts, our schoolchildren pledge to uphold this ideal every day, and our lawmakers do the same when they open new legislative sessions. Yet, as a society, we don’t consistently make good on this promise. In the United States, older people are considered less worthy and less able than young people—even though most of us will be old ourselves one day. To create a more just society—to make good on our national promise—we must change how we treat older people, and we must do it on a societal level. Our employment practices, our public transportation systems, and our housing policies make it difficult for older people to contribute to our society. To create a more just country, we must adjust these systems so that all people—regardless of age—have meaningful opportunities to participate in and contribute to society.

One of the first steps we can take is to acknowledge the existence of ageism. In our country, ageism prevents older people from finding work, supporting themselves and their families, and advancing in the workplace. Studies show that older people are especially skilled in such areas as leadership, attention to detail, writing, and problem-solving abilities. Yet many employers discriminate against older people. Employers, for example, are much less likely to interview job candidates whose high school graduation dates indicate that they’re over 50 years old. As a result, people who lose their jobs mid-life are much more likely to remain unemployed for the long term.

Ageism takes root in early childhood and grows throughout our lifetimes. From infancy on, we start to be exposed to negative messages about older people. The advertising and entertainment industries, for example, portray older people as forgetful, grouchy, or ill, and news coverage describes them as frail and infirm. As our brains develop, these images and messages solidify into beliefs and judgements and eventually congeal into ageism.

We *can* fight ageism, however, and we can do it with knowledge. When we are aware of our unintentional biases, we are less likely to make snap judgments about older people and more likely to treat them fairly. In the workplace, for example, bias-prevention workshops teach managers and employees how bias affects behavior. These trainings change how organizations screen resumes, interview and onboard new employees, and mentor and promote staff. We can take other steps to reduce unintentional bias. Employers can improve hiring practices by removing graduation dates or other age-identifying information from resumes and by prioritizing workplace accomplishments over

other, more subjective, criteria. Federal and state governments, meanwhile, must also enforce existing anti-discrimination laws and enact new laws to reduce ageism in the workplace. Together, these steps will send a message that we, as a society, reject ageism and will fight it—and that we, as a society, believe in and are committed to justice for all.

► **From Frame to Message:**

*An example of how to tell the **Embracing the Dynamic** narrative.*

In our country, innovation drives success. We are home to the world's most respected universities, and we claim more patents and Nobel prizes than any other country. We need to apply our tradition of innovation to an important social problem: a culture that prevents older people from living full, productive lives. Our current employment practices, public transportation systems, and housing policies make it hard for us to stay involved and contribute to society as we age. We can solve this problem, however, with innovation. We can use our collective ingenuity to improve older people's lives, which will benefit each one of us as we age—and society.

Aging is a dynamic process. As we age, we accumulate experiences, insights, and wisdom. This process sparks new ideas, propels us toward new goals, and advances our communities. To fully capture the massive energy of our ever-aging population, we need to think differently—and innovatively. The good news is, we already are. One program, to cite one example, brings older people and preschool children together in local community centers. In these intergenerational programs, older people build relationships with peers of similar ages and with young children, which enhances their wellbeing. In some cases, these programs enable older people to assume new roles in their communities. Some take classes on early childhood development and eventually gain accreditation in the field, which improves their caregiving skills and their ability to provide care. The children also benefit. Interactions with older people have been shown to improve a child's social and emotional skills. Innovative programs benefit the old and young alike—and they prove that we can use our tradition of innovation to tackle new challenges.

## Moving Forward

In summary, multiple frame elements can be recruited to expand Americans' conceptual repertoire for thinking about ageism and promote a positive understanding of aging. When these recommendations are assembled into coherent narratives, advocates have a powerful way to help the public get smarter about the possibilities of effective aging policies.

The need for this public conversation is pressing, as the costs and consequences of ageism are untenable, and its prevalence is out of step with both our national needs and our national values. Spending cuts to vital social services that support older people become politically tenable when they are represented as economic burdens and unworthy recipients of social assistance. Workplace discrimination persists when employers wrongly assume that people lack necessary skills or abilities because of their age. The prevalence of elder abuse—a topic which is explored in depth in another set of FrameWorks studies—can only happen in a society that systematically undervalues and isolates its older people.

This MessageMemo offers evidence-based narratives that can help change the status quo. They equip advocates to raise awareness of ageism in a way that will attract an ever-widening circle of supporters, rather than alienate bystander publics. Moreover, with these frames, the aging field is in a position to benefit other efforts to build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive America. By building the public's concept of how discrimination happens, how it is instantiated in policies and institutions, and how it can be undone, the aging advocacy sector can advance “other” conversations about inequality while making significant progress on its own central concern.

Because a Strategic Frame Analysis begins with a careful distillation of the field's perspective, draws insights from strategies that advocates have already developed, and works consistently to build and find techniques that translate insider views to outsiders, the narratives recommended here do not depart drastically from the communication practices that aging advocates and experts are already using. In fact, most of the differences are subtle. But subtle shifts bring with them a particular difficulty—one that requires heightened awareness of detail and nuance. For example, the field will need to develop the ability to make a crisp distinction between the recommended *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative and the already-existing *Vibrant Senior* narrative that highlights shining examples of health, wealth, and wellbeing in later life. (Hint: One difference is in the attribution of responsibility: Is “successful” aging due to good personal choices and lucky genes or does the framing direct the public to see a role for policy and social context?) In addition to developing the ability to spot, and replace, unproductive framing habits, execution of this framing strategy will also require creativity and strategic thinking to craft specific messages that are, at once, aligned with the larger frame and tailored to a specific communication context. Given both the strength of the research and the strengths of the field, FrameWorks firmly believes that the payoff will be worth the effort. The history of social movements strongly suggests that harnessing the unifying power of shared narratives is part of addressing this deeply problematic trend in American society. Sharing and telling a common story are part of what it takes to enact long-term social change.<sup>5</sup> We offer this work as an important asset in the forward movement toward a more equal, more inclusive society.



## Appendix A: Framing Frailty

Older Americans can experience unique challenges to their wellbeing, including threats to their physical and mental health, economic security, and independence. Given that many of the communications strategies recommended here are designed to emphasize that the aging process is normal and includes many positive aspects, how can advocates focused on the genuinely frail participate in this reframing effort? The evidence-based framing tools identified by FrameWorks researchers offer at least three ways to improve advocacy for older Americans experiencing significant challenges:

➔ **Use the *Embracing the Dynamic* narrative to make the case for policies and programs that can prevent or reduce late-life frailty.**

This involves explaining that if we adapt and adjust social policies now, we will be in a better position to capture the momentum that builds as people age. As an example, this strategy might be useful for advocating for increasing the number of health care providers who are attuned to geriatric needs. “As a nation of problem-solvers, we need to tap into our ingenuity to figure out better ways to ensure that our health care workforce is ready to support Americans’ continued wellbeing throughout later life. By equipping doctors, nurses, and others to use effective approaches to extend the health span people enjoy, we can also equip our society to reap the benefits of the momentum of experience and wisdom that we accumulate as we age.”

➔ **Use the *Confronting Injustice* narrative to make the case for addressing specific threats facing the frail.**

The field will often need to build understanding and support for policies that address the unique needs of older people who are no longer fully capable of caring for themselves. In these instances, the *Confronting Injustice* narrative can remind the public that a just society takes responsibility for equal protection of all Americans, and it can make the point that neglecting the needs of frail Americans is an instance of structural ageism.

➔ **Apply frame elements that are effective on similar issues—specifically, elder abuse and human services—to the topic of frailty.**

When communicating about direct service programs that support those experiencing frailty, frame elements from other bodies of FrameWorks research might be a better fit than those recommended here. A metaphor developed for the human services sector, *Building Well-Being*, compares human services to the process of building a sturdy structure and boosts public understanding of policies and programs designed to support vulnerable populations. *Support Structures*, a metaphor designed to explain issues related to elder abuse, also draws on the domain of construction. Both comparisons help to foreground the role that social services and social context play in shaping individual outcomes.

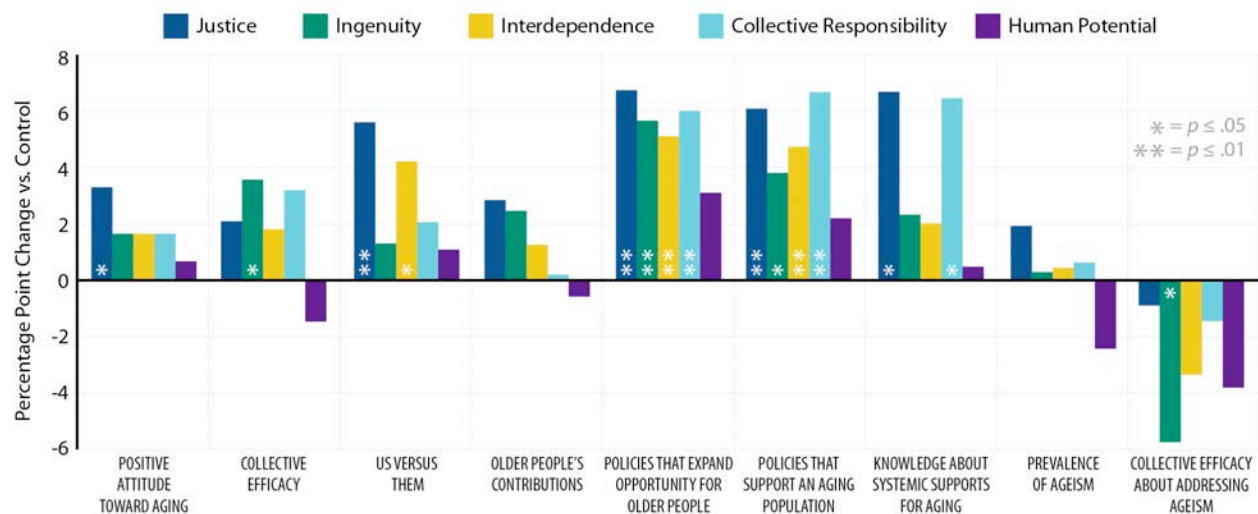
## Appendix B: Experimental survey results for individual frame elements

In this appendix, FrameWorks provides greater detail about the results from an experimental survey related to individual frame elements, including values, explanatory examples, and metaphors.

### Values

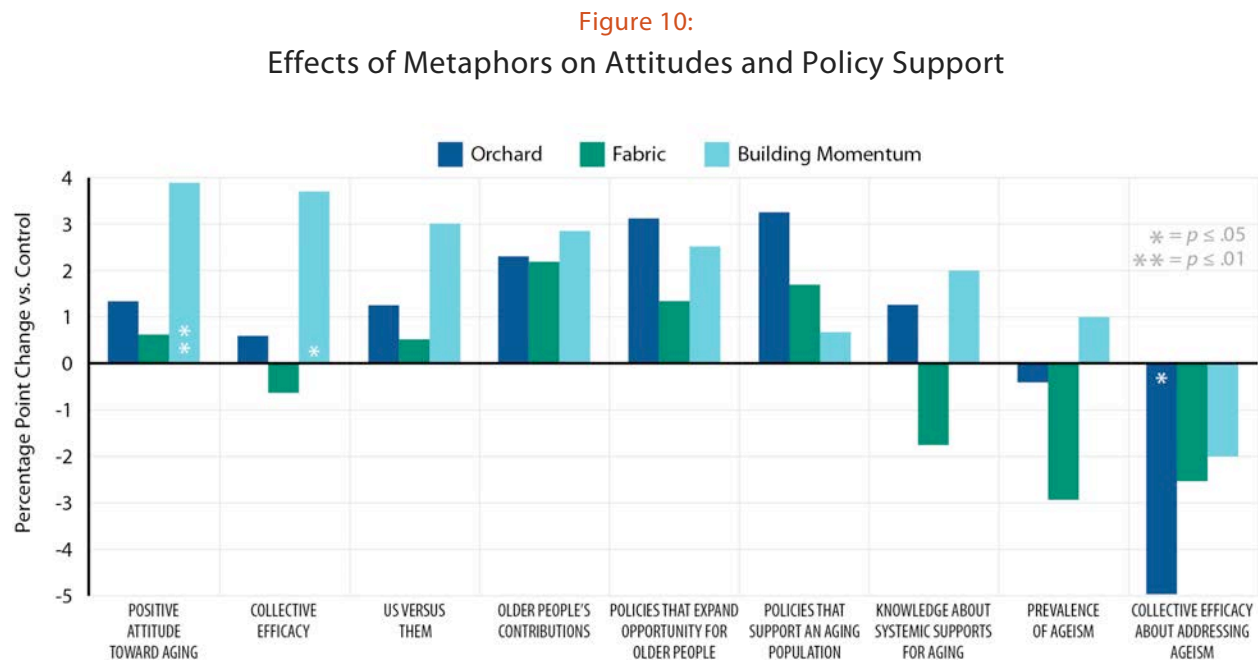
Figure 9 illustrates the impact of values on public attitudes about aging, knowledge about aging issues, and policy support. The *Justice* value led to significant increases in five batteries: *Positive Attitudes*, *Us vs. Them*, the two *Policy* batteries, and *Systemic Aging Supports*. The *Ingenuity* value increased support on three batteries, including *Collective Efficacy* and the two *Policy* batteries. It is important to note that the *Ingenuity* value had a negative impact on people's sense of collective agency around ageism. This is likely because the value tested in isolation does not include a concrete solutions statement.

Figure 9:  
Effects of Values on Attitudes and Policy Support



## Metaphors

Figure 10 shows various explanatory metaphors FrameWorks tested, including *Building Momentum*, *Orchard*, and *Fabric*. The *Building Momentum* metaphor produced statistically significant increases across the following batteries: *Positive Attitudes Toward Aging*, *Collective Efficacy*, and *Us and Them* thinking.



## Explanatory Examples

Figure 11 compares two examples of ageism: *Workplace Discrimination* and *Ageism in Health Care*. While both examples were effective on four batteries, the *Workplace Discrimination* example increased public understanding of the prevalence of ageism, whereas the results for the *Ageism in Health Care* example were not statistically different from the control. Qualitative research revealed that the public is generally not aware of or familiar with issues related to ageism; therefore, building better understanding of its prevalence is a critical communications task. For this reason, FrameWorks researchers recommend that communications professionals consistently use *Workplace Discrimination* as a concrete example of ageism.

Figure 11:  
Effects of Examples on Attitudes and Policy Support

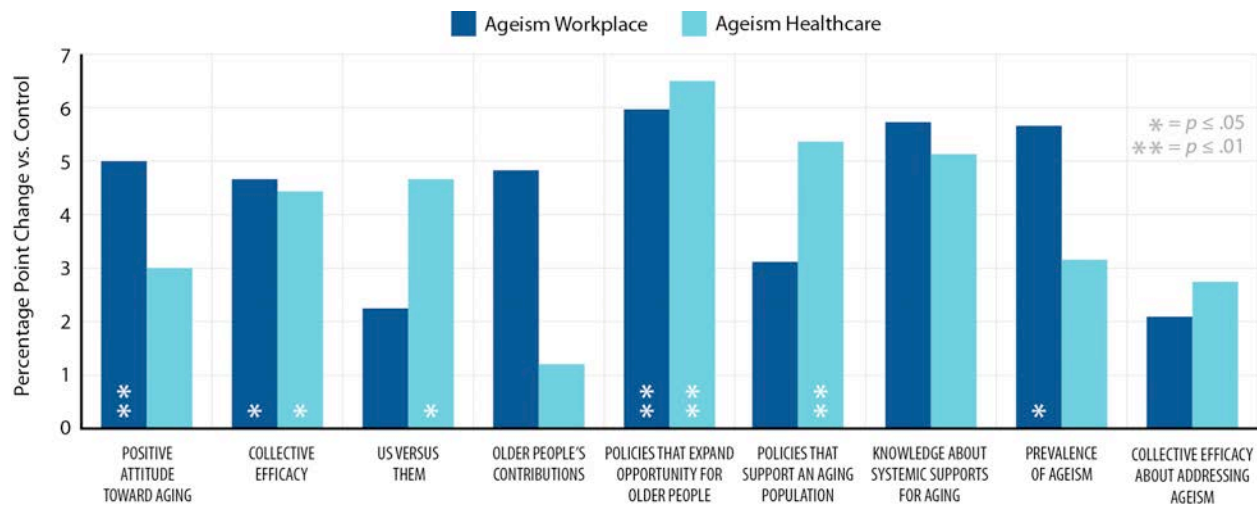
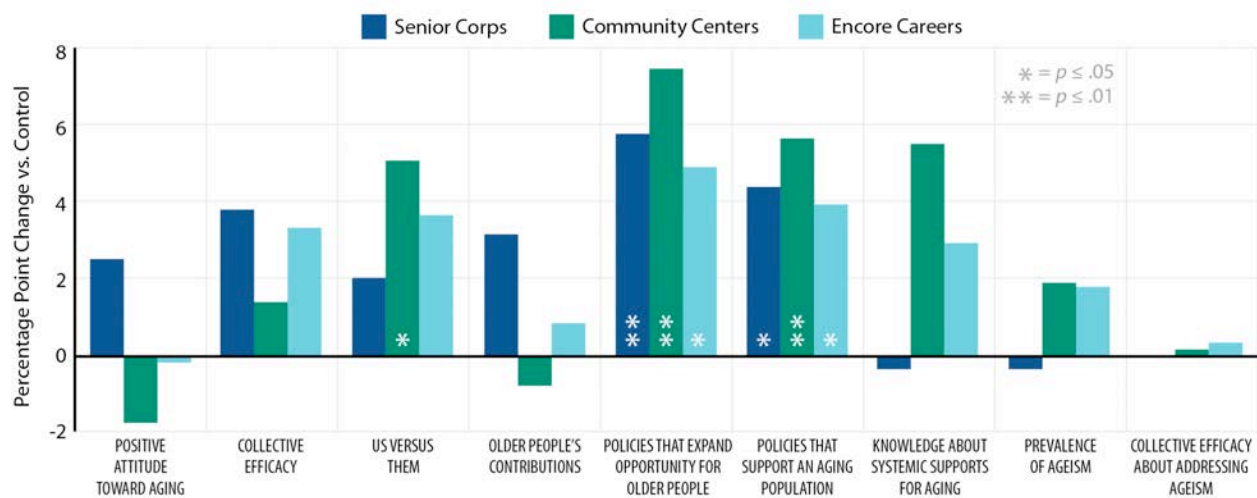
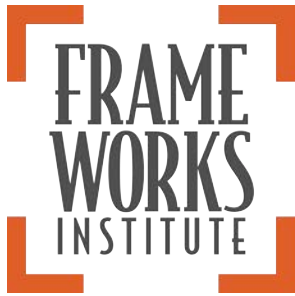


Figure 12:  
Effects of Examples on Attitudes and Policy Support



FrameWorks researchers tested the three examples that were designed to show how specific programs and activities can result in greater community involvement and participation among older people: *Senior Corps*, *Intergenerational Community Centers*, and *Encore Careers*. All examples were effective in boosting support across both *Policy* batteries. The *Community Centers* example had the largest average effects and helped people see older adults as fundamentally the same as and equal to, rather than separate and distinct from, the rest of society (the *Us vs. Them* battery).



## About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children's issues, and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth—ranging from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks®, and in-depth FrameLab study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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Sweetland, J., Volmert, A., & O'Neil, M. (2017). *Finding the frame: An empirical approach to reframing aging and ageism*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> O’Neil, M. & Haydon, A. (2015). Aging, agency, and attribution of responsibility: Shifting public discourse about older adults. *A FrameWorks Media Content and Field Frame Analysis*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Witte, K. & Allen, M. (2000). ‘A Meta-Analysis of Fear Appeals: Implications for Effective Public Health Campaigns.’ *Health Education & Behavior* 27(5), 591–615.

<sup>3</sup> Rokeach, M. (1973). *The Nature of Human Values*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

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<sup>5</sup> Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* (26), 611–639.