Evidence-Based Messaging on Birth Equity

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FrameWorks is on a mission...

to advance the nonprofit sector's capacity
to frame the public discourse on social and scientific issues
Frames are sets of choices about how information is presented:

What to emphasize, how to explain it, and what to leave unsaid.

Changes in framing can shift thinking, reshape the public conversation, and affect the policy climate.
Guiding Question

Given dominant American assumptions, how can communications help the public better understand the full scope of approaches to maternal and infant health that are needed now, to eliminate disparities?

To answer this question, FrameWorks reanalyzed…

In-depth individual interviews on public thinking about:
  a) health, b) race and racial disparities, and c) fetal alcohol syndrome

Results of previously-conducted frame testing on issues like:
  social determinants of health; environmental health; oral health equity;
  food and fitness; housing disparities; educational disparities

Thank you, March of Dimes for supporting this work!
You Say…They Think

AAA

B B B B

Advocates

Public
Advocates

In the U.S., too many women are suffering from pregnancy complications that lead to serious injury and death.

Public

Oh, that doesn’t sound good - but it’s their own fault. People really should take better care of themselves and listen to their doctors.
Advocates

African American infants are three times more likely than white infants to die from complications related to low birth weight.

Public

Those mothers should be ashamed of themselves. They obviously didn’t put their babies’ health first.
The crisis story doesn’t work

...and if you don’t recycle, Suzie, the earth will heat up, the oceans will explode and boiling rain will scald all the baby animals... any questions?
Providing more and more data doesn’t work

Numerical Data → Charts, Graphs, Tables, More Data → More Evidence → Epiphany
Guesswork doesn’t work

Selected results from a FrameWorks study sponsored by the ACLU

Should fees and fines be part of sentencing in the justice system?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Percentage point change versus control group</th>
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<td>Debtor’s Prison</td>
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A process for getting big ideas to “stick” with the public

Adapted from Chip Heath and Dan Heath, Made to Stick. New York: Random House. 2007

1. Distill your core ideas.

2. Figure out what is counter-intuitive about those ideas. Why aren’t people taking them up naturally?

3. Communicate in a way that short-circuits, and rewires, the public’s “guessing machines.”
1. Distill your core ideas.
“Birth equity” is an umbrella label for a series of related premises

1. Problems at birth can influence health and other aspects of wellbeing for both children and mothers.
2. We can measure various things that give us an objective view of how mothers and babies are faring. These are called birth outcomes - a set of indicators of health and wellbeing.
3. Poor birth outcomes are not equally distributed across US society. Racial and ethnic disparities are especially stark.
4. Differences in individual behavior are not sufficient to explain racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes.
5. Racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes can be explained by structural racism - a system wherein public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work to perpetuate inequality.
6. In addition, social inequalities get “under the skin” and shape human biology.
7. We can do something about this, but only if we define the problem as an equity issue, and commit to pursuing solutions designed to eliminate inequities.
8. We should do something about this. It’s a moral imperative, and it will yield benefits.
Birth equity involves a commitment to assuring that the conditions needed for optimal births are available to all – which requires targeting and sustaining efforts to address racial and social disparities.

_Healthy births for all (and all means all)_
What is counter-intuitive about the idea of society’s responsibility to assure birth equity?

Why isn’t this idea (“healthy births for all”) already “common sense?”
You Say...They Think

Advocates

CULTURE

Public
The guessing machines in action on “health”

**Individualism**
Assumption that the causes of health/illness - and their benefits/consequences - happen entirely at the individual level.

**Diet + Exercise = Health**
Assumption that personal lifestyle - and mostly choices about food and physical activity - are the main drivers of health outcomes.

**Solution = Awareness**
Assumption that the best way to influence health outcomes is to provide individuals with information to guide personal choices.
Woman as Gatekeeper: Assumption that a pregnant woman is solely responsible for guarding the womb, inviting healthful things in and keeping harmful things out.

Woman as Vessel: Assumption that, once pregnant, a woman should become unconcerned with her own needs and desires, and focus solely on the needs of the baby.
The guessing machines in action on “racial disparities”

**Historical Progress**
Assumption that the overturn of legal segregation ended the structural oppression of Black Americans.

**Cultural Pathology**
Assumption that racial disparities today are due to cultural failings such as misguided values and poor choices.

**Fatalism**
Assumption that inequities are inevitable, and that racial disparities in particular are intractable.

**Separate Fates**
Assumption that the circumstances, experiences, and trajectories of various racial groups are distinct and disconnected.
How can communicators short-circuit, and rewire, the public’s “guessing machines” so that the birth equity issue gains a broader constituency, and meaningful changes take place?
Tell an aspirational, solutions-oriented story.

Pack in more explanation. Spell out what affects what.

Use tested metaphors to make the biology of adversity accessible to the public.
Tell an aspirational, solutions-oriented story.
For social change to occur, “the social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to be seen as unjust and mutable.”

-Frances Fox Piven

*Poor People’s Movements, 1977*
To ward off separate fates thinking and fatalism, lead with shared values and point to solutions

Values are a broad category of cherished cultural ideals: enduring beliefs that orient people's attitudes.

Solutions can illustrate either effective practices or promising approaches - things that will make a difference.

Together, these frame elements evoke the emotions that work for policy thinking: **curiosity, concern, and can-do**.
“Every child is full of potential: think of the talents, skills and energy that they will bring to our communities. To maximize the human potential that is our most precious resource, we must ensure that every baby

Strategically navigates away from:

- *Individualism*
- *Separate Fates*
- *Fatalism*

More effective than:

- “Crisis/Stark Statistics” framing
- “Vulnerable Child” framing
- “Vulnerable Community” framing
In 2015, the preterm birth rate in the US was 9% overall, but 13% among non-Hispanic Blacks. This is a significant issue for the African American community.

We have a shared responsibility to foster the human potential that lies within our nation’s children, which begins with ensuring that all babies get off to a healthy start. Given that the preterm birth rate in the US is 9% overall, but 13% among non-Hispanic Blacks, we must restore and repair the health environments that are harming African American communities.
Pragmatism

“Our goal is easy to understand: families and communities should be able to count on healthy moms and strong babies after a birth. But this isn’t always the case. We need to take a methodical approach to expanding the practical solutions that are out there. It simply doesn’t make

Strategically navigates away from:

- Fatalism
- Solution = Education & Awareness

More effective than:

- “Crisis/Stark Statistics” framing
- “Problems Are Permanent” framing
- “Pocket of Excellence” framing
Make the dream seem achievable

Hamilton County, Ohio has some of the highest rates of infant mortality in the nation - and Black babies are dying at three times the rates of white infants. Our vision is to ensure that every child born in Hamilton County lives to see their first birthday, that the cycle of intergenerational poverty is broken, and that systemic racism has no place in our health care system.

vs.

In Hamilton County, Ohio, we’re practical, down-to-earth people. If we know we have a problem, we roll up our sleeves, plan the work, and then work the plan. We saw that we had a serious problem with birth outcomes - too many babies and moms were dying from pregnancy-related complications. A commonsense approach to improvement has been the hallmark of the Cradle Cincinnati program. The method works: for example, we’ve been able to reduce the rate of extremely premature births by 92%.
Solutions framing can fit into even the shortest messages

Photo of a billboard in Genesee County, Michigan
Source: Mia Robillos, MN Department of Health
Pack in more explanation. Spell out what affects what.
The Power of How

- Explanation is an important communications goal

- Communications real estate is valuable—we need higher standards for what we use to fill it

- If we focus on explaining how things work, we help people become more powerful advocates for change

"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."
Explanatory chains help the public connect underlying factors to visible symptoms to larger consequences.

**WHAT**

**AFFECTS WHAT**

**TO WHAT END**

Explanation has much stronger effects on thinking than description.
Nationally, the rate of preterm birth among African American women is about 50% higher than that experienced by white women. Even in the affluent Bay Area, African American women were almost twice as likely to give birth to preterm babies as women of other races, and nearly three times as likely to give birth to low birth weight babies - infants born weighing less than 5.5 pounds - than are white women. Babies born this small are approximately 20 times more likely to die than heavier babies.

(from a major metropolitan newspaper)
To prevent pregnancy-related deaths and sustainably improve maternal health, we must make transformative investments in the health and well-being of Black women and girls throughout the life course, including in the areas of housing, nutrition, transportation, violence, environmental health, and economic justice.

The environment around us influences health more than most of us realize - and environments differ in important ways. As just one example, Black communities are more likely to be located in areas with higher levels of dangerous contaminants. Overall, the health environment is causing an unacceptable rate of pregnancy-related deaths in Black communities. This isn’t fair. We must devote more resources to ensuring good health environments, improving housing, nutrition, transportation, and more.
Use tested metaphors to make the biology of adversity accessible to the public.
The Core Idea: Social inequalities get “under the skin” and shape human biology.

—**Allostatic load:**
Social and psychological stressors, if not mitigated, can have biological effects. In the absence of positive, supportive relationships, stressors can cause the body’s stress system to go on permanent high alert, flooding the body with hormones that can harm the heart, lungs, and other organs. It has been linked to preterm birth.

—**Epigenetics:**
Environmental exposures can affect gene expression. This is a new understanding of the casual pathway that disease can take - one that traces neither to the environment or genes alone but to their intersection. Epigenetic effects have been offered as an explanation for why babies born prematurely are at higher risk for metabolic and cardiovascular diseases later in life.
Tested metaphors can help explain how an issue works.

Apt comparisons channel attention to certain features of a topic. This can help people grasp the systemic, structural, or contextual factors involved in a complex social problem.

Metaphors also have a **stickiness factor** that’s hard to beat.
Toxic Stress
A metaphor for allostatic load

Chronic, severe stressors can cause a response that is toxic to the brain and other vital organs, which can have serious and long-term effects on health.

Supportive relationships can serve as a buffer against a toxic stress response.

Strategic way to redirect public perceptions away from:
- Stress is just an unpleasant emotion
- What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger
- Good health comes from good choices
- “Black Box”/Mystery process thinking

Move thinking toward:
- Severe stress is a serious health concern
- Stressors are the cause, not personalities
- Environments affect health
- Solution = change the conditions
Framed with *Invisible Process*

America can no longer turn a blind eye to the urgent and ignored public health issue of Black maternal mortality. Fully addressing the issue lies within the very systems and institutions that affect various aspects of black life. Solutions require the acknowledgment that racism is the driving force behind these deaths, so that policymakers can come up with concrete solutions that save black women’s lives.

Reframed with *Toxic Stress*

America must address the public health consequences of our unequal society. Our systems and institutions - education, housing, policing, tax systems, and more - channel more stressful situations into Black communities. Chronic and severe adversity floods the body with dangerous levels of stress hormones, a condition known as toxic stress. This is a driving factor behind the higher rates of Black maternal mortality. To save lives, we need to acknowledge that racism gets “under the skin” and create solutions that address this underlying issue. We can build buffers between toxic stressors and Black women’s bodies.
Signature Effect
A metaphor for epigenetics

The influence of the environment on genes can be likened to a signature authorizing a set of instructions to be carried out.

Strategic way to redirect public perceptions away from:

- Genes are set in stone
- What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger
- What happened in the past, stays in the past

Move thinking toward:

- Change is possible - for good or bad
- Environments matter
- Experiences get carried forward
Individuals born as lower birth weight babies have higher rates of metabolic and cardiovascular disease as adults. This has led to new ideas about the impact of the prenatal environment—and the social, economic and nutritional factors that impact pregnant women—on adult health. These studies are revealing a new type of causal factor in disease—one that traces neither to the environment or DNA alone but to their intersection, manifesting as environmentally-triggered developmental plasticity in the structure and function of biological tissues, organs and systems.

Reframed with Signature Effect
With a new understanding of how genes work, scientists are discovering exactly how social factors can cause health disparities across groups. Genes are like packages of instructions for the body - but they require an authorizing sign-off from the environment to be carried out. This “signature effect” begins at the earliest stages of life. For example, when a woman is exposed to high levels of stress during her pregnancy, this signs off on genes that affect the baby’s metabolism. The signature effect may explain why complications in pregnancy are associated with higher rates of metabolic and heart disease in adults.
“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”

–Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
*Letter from Birmingham Jail*
They Think...So You Say

Public

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They Think...So You Say

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They Think…So You Say

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Framers
“Our preferences are about framed problems, and our moral intuitions are about descriptions, not about substance.”

-Daniel Kahneman
Thank you!
Let’s continue the conversation.

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