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Towards a More Effective Message on Health Equity
Findings from Qualitative Message Testing

Cultural Logic LLC and Public Knowledge LLC
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Part 2. User's Guide

In this section of the report we offer communicators guidance in how to incorporate learning from the framing research into their own communications on topics related to health inequities and disparities.

A New Perspective on Communications

Effective reframing involves more than rewriting a few documents. It involves a shift to a new perspective, and means learning new habits of thought and communication – and usually unlearning some earlier habits. In this section, we review some general framing principles for communicators to keep in mind as they read the rest of the Guide.

How an issue is framed shapes public understanding. A Frame is a “central organizing idea...for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue.” (Gamson/Modigliani) The central organizing idea has consequences for how people define the problem and solution, and attribute responsibility for addressing the problem. In order for the new communications approach to be effective, *the new messages and language must be treated as central, organizing ideas*. While communicators are probably most comfortable leading with their usual messages, it is not enough to insert a new idea or perspective late in a text, after the more familiar ideas.

Emotional connections are not enough; people need to understand the issue. Many advocacy efforts are unsuccessful because they fail to help people understand an issue in a new way. Instead, they may assume successful communications requires simply heightening the emotional power of a message. Research clearly demonstrates that emotional engagement is often insufficient, and the wrong kind of emotional connection can even be counterproductive. To be effective, communications must often provide people with a *user-friendly explanation of how something works*. A new grasp of how a particular problem or solution works – not just new facts or information – is empowering, and helps people engage in a constructive way, as responsible citizens.

The most effective way to shift public understanding is not necessarily the most direct or obvious approach. Directly refuting a misperception is rarely effective in changing public understanding because people quickly revert to their previously held views. Instead, communicators need to change the terms of the debate to an entirely different perspective.

The objective is to create the public space that will allow policymakers to act. On many issues, a majority of the public supports action, but a vocal, persistent minority prevents policymakers from taking action (even when policymakers understand an issue well enough to know the right solutions). A fundamental objective for communicators is to create the environment that allows policymakers to do the right thing, which requires broad-based public acceptance of the proposed policy solutions.

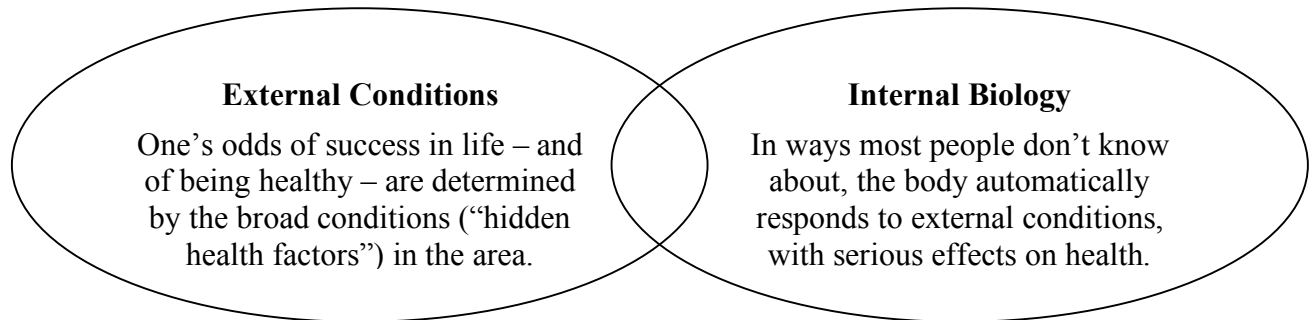
Communications should be adapted for different audiences, but not fundamentally changed. Creating a favorable public environment usually means establishing new *shared understandings about the issue*. Communicators’ first priority should be a common communications platform that works across target audiences. From there, communications will be strengthened by *adapting* elements to fit specialized audiences: supporting facts, examples, calls to action, terms, secondary values, stories and so on.

The Recommended Communications Platform

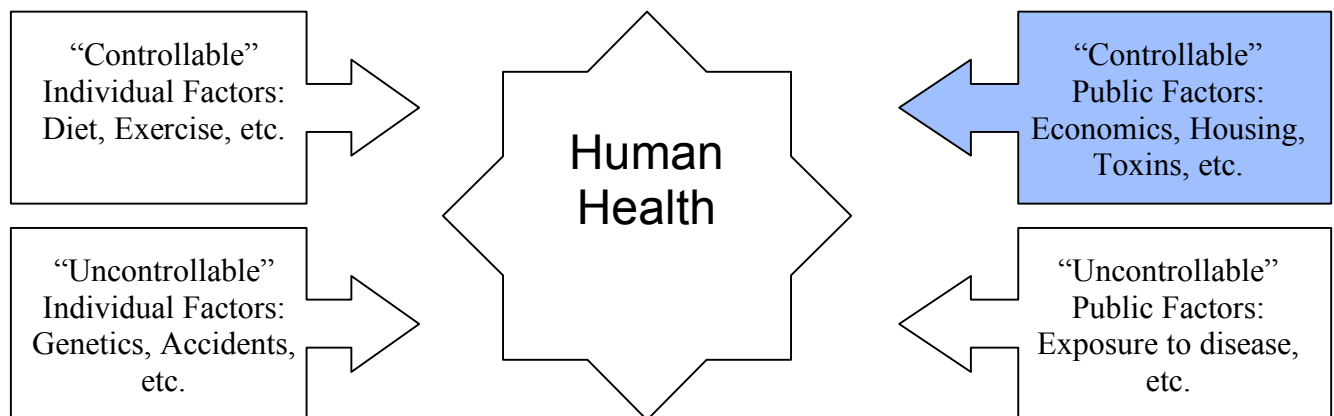
To take a more constructive perspective on health and health disparities, the public needs to embrace a new and fundamental idea:

External conditions trigger biological reactions that influence human health.

This new idea is based on two separate but related propositions:



This story fills an important *gap* in people's understanding of the role of public policy in influencing health. As they consider reasons for disparities, people quickly default to the *individual choices* they control, such as diet and exercise. Average people can also sometimes recognize a role for “*uncontrollable*” factors such as genetics, fate, disease and so on. This communications recommendation is designed to make visible a third and critical category: the *external and “controllable” conditions* that influence human health, and that can be addressed through public policy.



How to tell the story

To tell our story effectively, communicators need to embrace the following principles:

- Insert *causal mechanisms*, and explain as *concretely* as possible what is causing health differences among different people. This means both a *bodily mechanism* and specific mentions of the *concrete areas* (jobs, housing, etc.) that need fixing.
- Focus on *surprising* new information about factors that affect health.
- Put less focus on *who is affected*. Beginning with a discussion of individuals/groups too easily triggers the wrong kind of thinking. Frame the issue as a matter of concern for *everyone*, not *the poor* in particular. The issue should be treated as one that *connects* people rather than *separates* them into groups.
- Use *place* as a helpful way of conveying the role of external, concrete factors.
- Avoid discussing *choices* altogether. (It is counterproductive even to raise the subject by mentioning that “choices/behaviors aren’t the whole story” or “we need to create the conditions that help people make better choices.”)
- Avoid discussing *education*. It is counterproductive to the degree that it puts the emphasis on personal responsibility, and reinforces the idea of choices.

The next section provides a series of illustrations of how to express these ideas. These represent just a few examples to help advocates get started; their expertise on the issue will allow advocates to build on these examples to create a variety of effective tools.

Answering Questions

Communicators can often be thrown off message because of old and unhelpful instincts, or because they are asked “the wrong question.” The following illustrate ways of taking advantage of a question to insert the new perspective on the topic. ***Every question is an opportunity to convey new and constructive perspectives.*** Naturally, communicators who work in a particular community will be able to adapt the examples to include more specific and concrete local references (local problems, proposed local solutions, etc.).

(Note: Each “Less Effective” text was adapted from real explanations by advocates.)

<p>Q: What is the whole “health equity” issue about?</p>	
<p>Less Effective</p> <p>Over three years ago, the Centers for Disease Control reported the stark fact that overall in this country, African-Americans bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, death, and disability. That report, like others that have been published in recent years, points out that African-Americans suffer higher rates of diabetes compared to Whites, are more likely to die when diagnosed with cancer, and have shorter life-expectancies overall. The pattern is clear and uncontroversial, it is unjust, it is a matter literally of life and death – yet as a nation we seem prepared to live with it. Is this really the country we want to be?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasizes “who” is affected without describing “how.” ▪ Readers are likely to assume the disparity is due to African Americans making poorer health choices. ▪ No public solution is apparent.
<p>More Effective</p> <p>It is about surprising new information about what influences our health. Health experts now know that people’s health is influenced by what they call the Overall Life Odds of the place where we live, that the quality of jobs or schools or housing or other conditions are all hidden health factors that affect our health. It turns out that the Overall Life Odds, of a place create conditions that have lasting impacts on our health. So the best thing we can do to improve our nation’s health is to invest in communities. Allowing third world conditions in America is not only immoral, it explains why our nation’s health is not very good even though we spend more on health care than any other nation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This emphasizes “place” and “conditions” with a description of “how” that affects health. ▪ It features a public solution – investing in communities. ▪ It suggests that resources need to be redirected to be more effective.

<p>Q. What are some of the differences in how doctors treat white vs. minority patients?</p>	
<p>Less Effective</p> <p>To take one example, studies have shown that dentists whose practices see mostly black or lower-income patients are less likely to discuss preventive care with their patients, less likely to provide certain diagnostic and treatment services and less likely to talk about alternatives to extraction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This communicates that dentists are failing their patients, perhaps through negligence. ▪ With no other explanation, the obvious solution is to punish dentists.

<p>More Effective</p> <p>That question misses the bigger picture. Differences in health outcomes are really driven by the Overall Life Odds of the town or city where you live. There are a whole series of hidden health factors that we don't talk about, but that have an enormous impact on our life odds, on how our lives are likely to turn out. These hidden health factors include the availability of good jobs, good schools, safe housing and so on – things that cities and states can do something about. So if we really want to improve health in this country, we need to turn our attention to the things that negatively affect the Overall Life Odds of various places. That's the bigger picture we need to focus on.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This turns the focus away from individuals and toward broader conditions. ▪ It explains differences between groups of people without allowing the reader/listener to blame the victim (or the health care provider). ▪ It offers new and surprising information.
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<p>Q. How does race discrimination influence health?</p>	
<p>Less Effective</p> <p>According to UCLA researchers, the experience of race discrimination is actually a key factor explaining why African Americans have higher rates of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disorders. Responses to discrimination can cause enormous stress on a person's mental and physical health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People see discrimination as driven by interpersonal relationships, not structures or policies, so no policy solution is apparent. ▪ Since many white Americans believe discrimination is often imagined, this formulation can end up blaming the victim.
<p>More Effective</p> <p>We've learned something new and important about how our bodies respond to anxiety, and the effect that has on physical health. <i>Any conditions</i> that cause a person to live outside the mainstream of American life, including discrimination but also economic and other conditions, can trigger chemical reactions in our bodies that hurt our health. Scientists call this Exclusion Anxiety. People are "wired" to need a social group, and when a person exists outside the norm of middle-class American life, that experience results in worse health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This makes the conditions forefront, rather than interpersonal relationships. ▪ It describes the biological reaction to conditions, to explain how health is influenced. ▪ It offers new and surprising information.

Q. How do health disparities start?	
<p>Less Effective</p> <p>Measurable health disparities begin to show up in childhood. Many preventable diseases result from behaviors established during childhood and adolescence, such as physical inactivity, poor nutrition, tobacco use, sexual risk behaviors, and poor asthma management. In addition, socio-economic factors also correlate with health outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This response will trigger the Right Choices perspective, putting blame on parents for making poor choices for their children. ▪ Though it includes references to environmental factors, the early mention of personal behaviors will probably focus attention on choices rather than environmental factors.
<p>More Effective</p> <p>Differences in people’s health actually start before birth. When a person lives in conditions that lower Overall Life Odds – that lower the odds of having a good career and supportive family and so on – a biological reaction is triggered that has serious effects on our health. Of course that influences the health of pregnant women, young babies, young children and on through adolescence and adulthood. If we want to ensure lifelong health for the next generation, we need more than pre-natal vitamins; we need an inclusive society, good schools and a hopeful future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This response ties conditions to a biological reaction. ▪ It states that the influence of conditions is ongoing because the conditions are ongoing. ▪ It positions public policy and collective action as the solutions to the problem.

Speech Starters

The recommended communications approach can be used across audiences; it is a foundational message that provides helpful understanding of the issue no matter the background of the listener/reader. However, in any given situation, a communicator will adjust the message to more directly appeal to a specific audience’s interests and background.

In the following two sample speeches, one to people of faith and one to the business community, note that the core message remains constant but some elements have shifted slightly to provide more appropriate context for the audience.

Speech to People of Faith

I'm honored to be speaking to the members of XYZ church; your good works, your outreach to the community are widely known and respected. The work you've done has had an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of the broader community, but I'm here to talk with you today about the important work that is yet to be done.

In ways few of us have recognized before now, our health is intertwined with the conditions in the community around us. Only when we work to improve conditions across this community and across the city, will we truly make great gains in our overall health.

Health researchers from across the country and around the world have discovered something new and unexpected about why Americans are less healthy despite increased spending on health care. We now know that our health is strongly influenced by something we don't typically consider – the Overall Life Odds of the neighborhood, city or state where we live. Just being born and living in a particular place affects your odds of a healthy and wealthy life. Of course there are exceptions, but on average, if you grow up in a place with solid jobs, successful schools, good housing, beautiful parks and safe streets, the odds are you will be healthier over the course of your life than if you grow up in a place with high unemployment, failing schools, decrepit housing and dangerous streets. These are the hidden health factors that have an enormous influence throughout our lives.

How do these conditions influence physical health? There are actually chemical reactions in our bodies to the conditions around us. Here's an example: scientists have identified a reaction called Exclusion Anxiety. We are social beings and have a biological need to feel part of a larger group. When something causes us to live outside the mainstream of American life, such as extreme economic conditions or discrimination – anything that causes us to live day to day disconnected from the normal life of the group – a chemical reaction occurs that hurts our health.

We've known for a long time that when a child experiences chronic traumatic stress, his or her brain releases cortisol that then affects brain development. This new research takes us one step further. We now know that conditions around us can affect our health throughout our lives – that's why some groups are more likely to struggle with heart disease or diabetes or high blood pressure. It has a great deal to do with the conditions where they live.

This makes sense when you think about it. Recall a time when you were worried about something and couldn't sleep one night. Now imagine that you worried day after day about how to pay the bills and feed your children and you tossed and turned night after night. Your health would suffer. Think of a time when you

walked down a street at night and felt that adrenalin rush of fear. Now imagine that you lived in a neighborhood where you felt that fear every day. Your health would suffer. Think of a time when a person said something hostile to you and it stayed with you all day long. Now imagine that you faced discrimination on a regular basis. Your health would suffer.

If we really want to make a difference in improving health we can. We can make a difference by turning our energy toward addressing these hidden health factors and improving the communities where we live. Safe streets and beautiful parks for peace of mind, good schools that lead to good opportunities, and solid jobs that lead to economic security. This is the critical work we have yet to do to improve health and wellbeing across America.

Speech to Business Leaders

I'm honored to be speaking to the members of XYZ Chamber of Commerce; your leadership in the community is widely known and respected. Elected officials and businesspeople across the city look to your counsel and follow your lead.

You've asked me to talk about health trends and ways to address skyrocketing health costs. This topic has become a serious concern for all of us – businesspeople, elected officials and citizens. You've watched the cost of health coverage rise year after year and worried about the effect on your business. Most employers remain committed to providing health coverage to employees, but increasingly employers are forced to drop coverage or ask their employees to pick up more and more of the cost. In a desperate effort to keep down insurance costs, some employers are giving employees incentives to improve their health.

But I'm here to talk with you today about the biggest influence on health in our community, one that can only be addressed by working together.

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Health researchers from across the country and around the world have discovered something new and unexpected about why Americans are less healthy despite increased spending on health care. We now know that our health is strongly influenced by something we don't typically consider – the Overall Life Odds of the neighborhood, city or state where we live. Just being born and living in a particular place affects your odds of a healthy and wealthy life. Of course there are exceptions, but on average, if you grow up in a place with solid jobs, successful schools, good housing, beautiful parks and safe streets, the odds are you will be healthier over the course of your life than if you grow up in a place with high unemployment, failing schools, decrepit housing and dangerous streets.

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This makes sense when you think about it. Recall a time when you were worried about something and couldn't sleep one night. Now imagine that you worried day after day about how to pay the bills and feed your children and you tossed and turned night after night. Your health would suffer. Think of a time when you walked down a street at night and felt that adrenalin rush of fear. Now imagine that you lived in a neighborhood where you felt that fear every day. Your health would suffer. Think of a time when a person said something hostile to you and it stayed with you all day long. Now imagine that you faced discrimination on a regular basis. Your health would suffer.

If we really want to make a difference in improving health we can. We can make a difference by turning our energy toward addressing these hidden health factors and improving the communities where we live. Safe streets and beautiful parks for peace of mind, good schools that lead to good opportunities, and solid jobs that lead to economic security. This is the critical work we have yet to do to improve health and wellbeing across America. These are concrete, practical steps that will have measurable effects.

As businesspeople, you care about the communities in which you work and research now tells us that the communities in which we live and work affect our health and our employees' health. Strengthening communities improves health, which reduces insurance costs and increases productivity. And, prosperous communities also lead to more prosperous businesses. A win-win-win for everyone.

Sample Editorial

There will be times when communicators are trying to elevate specific policy solutions to address health inequities. The recommended communications approach provides a solid foundation of understanding people will need to support policy solutions, but is not enough on its own to lead to policy support. Communicators will need to tie the core message describing the problem to the recommended policy solutions.

The following sample editorial provides an example of bridging from the core message to a specific policy.

Housing and Health

The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market has taught us all a lot about how the economy works. Unfortunately, it is also about to teach us a lot about how community conditions affect physical health.

Not so long ago, most Americans probably believed that a rise in foreclosures was unfortunate, but the impact would be limited just to those who lost their homes. Some may even have felt that foreclosures are just desserts for those who can't manage their finances. But only in recent months have Americans seen the effect of foreclosures ripple throughout the economy and touch all Americans. We now understand why we all benefit from a stable housing market.

The next unfortunate consequence of the sub-prime mortgage crisis is likely to be a rise in illness.

It is a surprising fact that health is strongly influenced by hidden health factors such as the stability and quality of housing, employment and schools. These hidden health factors contribute to what experts call the *overall life odds* of a particular place. On average, if you grow up in a place with good housing, beautiful parks and safe streets, the odds are you will be healthier over the course of your life than if you grow up in a place with poor housing and dangerous streets. Health experts have found that there are actually chemical reactions in our bodies to the conditions around us. For instance, when some condition prevents us from participating in the mainstream of American life, a chemical reaction occurs that hurts our health.

So how does this all relate to sub-prime mortgages? As people face severe economic insecurity and lose their homes, as solid neighborhoods turn into struggling ones, many Americans will experience physical reactions resulting in poor health – increased heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and so on. For the children in these families, the health consequences may last a lifetime.

The American Dream of owning a home, sending one's children to college and having a secure retirement is not just a nice way to live, it increases the odds of good physical health and long life. If we really want to improve health in America, we will worry less about developing the next piece of medical technology, and concentrate more on rebuilding middle class communities.

Sound bites

The story we are trying to tell has multiple elements that are difficult to condense into a ten second quote. Communicators should assume they will only be able to express one part of the bigger idea through a sound bite, and choose which part of the idea is most important for that situation. Here are just a few ideas to get you started:

- If we want to create a healthier Louisville we know how: by working on the hidden health factors that we now know are critical to health, from economic opportunity to good housing and good schools throughout the city.
- Anything we do to improve people's odds of success in life - whether it's creating jobs or good schools in the neighborhood, reducing racial discrimination, or anything else – also ends up improving health.
- Exclusion Anxiety is one important way that economic and social conditions end up getting under our skin.
- The effects of the hidden health factors in our surroundings – from housing to schools to job opportunity – show up in kindergarten children, who may already show early signs of high blood pressure, difficulties processing sugar, and other health time bombs.
- Generally speaking, a person is only as healthy as the neighborhoods they and their parents grew up in.
- An average, middle-class Louisvillian dies years earlier than she would if our society had smaller gaps between rich, middle and poor. Policies that reduce those gaps make people live longer.
- If your neighborhood isn't healthy, you face longer odds of being healthy too.
- When a country like the United States has such a huge income spread, one of the surprising costs is that everyone except the people at the very top is less healthy.
- Without knowing it, every American lives somewhere on a health slope defined by the conditions they live in and their parents lived in. Only the most privileged are near the top of that slope.
- Health and community are intertwined; if the place where you live is struggling economically, is losing opportunities, and creates anxiety, your health is likely to suffer.
- As you travel from one side of town to the other, Life Odds steadily improve. But one's health shouldn't rely on geography or economic advantage – every American should have equal odds of a long life.
- Why does America spend so much on health, and have health statistics like those of a developing nation? Because we ignore one of the most important ways to stay healthy as a nation – by improving the hidden health factors in the places we live in, from housing to schools to job opportunity. (Or: by reducing the huge gaps between rich, middle and poor.)

Conclusion

The topic of health equity is a very stubborn one, where communicators are fighting against deep and limiting assumptions about how health outcomes happen, as well as about why my health matters to you.

On the other hand, the research tells us that there are promising avenues for opening up a very different kind of conversation on the topic. We hope that the examples cited in the User's Guide, as well as the principles and Traps discussed in the research brief, will help communicators adopt a new perspective themselves, and that this can be the beginning of a change in the national conversation on health and disparities.