



# Strengthening the Support:

## How to Talk about Elder Abuse

A FrameWorks MessageMemo

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# Introduction

Words have power to drive social change. Movements to end violence and abuse have shown this time and again. When advocates against sexual violence, for example, shifted their language from victims of abuse to survivors of it, survivors felt empowered and less stigmatized; friends and family members could better appreciate what their loved ones had endured; and members of the public could better understand why sexual violence occurs and how to prevent it.<sup>1</sup> Advocates have also realized that words like “predator” or “perpetrator” are unproductive and even, at times, counterproductive. They reinforce beliefs that sexual violence is confined to the dyadic relationship between the “abuser” and the “abused,” which exonerates the cultural contexts in which these violent acts take place and precludes public thinking about prevention. And, through the political action of highly organized social movements that included significant attention to the role of language, advocates who work to end sexual violence have made significant gains. They have brought greater public awareness to the prevalence of sexual violence. They have introduced new ways of understanding the societal enablers of sexual violence by introducing terms like “rape culture” into popular discourse. And they have introduced new policy solutions across the country, particularly on college and university campuses. Experts and advocates working to address elder abuse must similarly evaluate how they talk about and frame their issues to best encourage public engagement.

Discussions of violence and abuse against specific social groups, such as women and children, have entered the public conversation in unprecedented ways in recent decades. But elder abuse has not been part of that discussion. People are largely unfamiliar with the term or the problem it represents; are unclear about the extent to which it occurs; do not know why it happens; and, as a result, lack the tools needed to consider and evaluate appropriate solutions. So it is no surprise that elder abuse does not hold a prominent position on the national political agenda. In short, advocates working to end elder abuse face a communications problem.

As our population continues to age, and as demographic change accelerates, advocates against elder abuse find themselves at a critical communications juncture. They must raise public awareness of their issue. But the history of anti-violence movements demonstrates that *how* advocates increase awareness—how they define the problem, the explanations they introduce, and the way they present solutions—will have lasting impacts on levels of public understanding and engagement. The frames that advocates advance will shape how this issue moves forward, and whether Americans understand elder abuse as a private problem that can only be addressed through individual action, or if they understand it as a preventable public health issue. Advocates and experts can use the empirically tested narrative strategy presented in this report to convince people of the latter.

The communications strategy laid out below helps experts and advocates (1) introduce the topic of elder abuse as a matter of collective concern; (2) tell stories that situate instances of abuse in larger social contexts; and (3) advance policies and systems-level solutions that prevent abuse from occurring in the first place and address it when it does happen. The research presented here, sponsored by the Archstone

Foundation, the John A. Hartford Foundation, and Grantmakers in Aging, and in partnership with the National Center on Elder Abuse at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, used social science to arrive at recommendations for reframing this important social issue. This project also encompasses research conducted for leading national aging organizations and forward-thinking funders<sup>2</sup> that set out to find a way to drive a productive narrative on aging issues in general, including how to talk about ageism and how to inspire more positive associations with the aging process. (Figure 1 describes the base of research that underlies these recommendations.)

This MessageMemo outlines communications recommendations and details the research that supports them. The MessageMemo unfolds in four parts:

- **Challenges in Public Thinking** describes Americans' patterned way of thinking about elder abuse and pinpoints where these patterns of thinking are likely to block efforts to advance public understanding and policy change on elder abuse.
- **Redirections** outlines a series of empirically tested communications tools and techniques for reframing elder abuse.
- **Communications Traps** cautions communicators against reframing strategies that seem plausible but that are likely to have unintended negative consequences.
- **Moving Forward** provides concluding thoughts and a call to action.

## Figure 1: What does a field need to reframe an issue?

### What does the research say?

To discern and distill the expert consensus on elder abuse, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews from February to April, 2015, with 10 leading experts in the fields of research, service delivery, policy, and law.

### How does the public think?

To document the cultural models that Americans draw on to make sense of elder abuse, FrameWorks conducted in-depth interviews with members of the public and analyzed transcripts to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structure opinion. Researchers conducted 20 interviews in March and April, 2015, in Philadelphia, San Jose, Phoenix, Lancaster, Calif., and Frederick, Md.

### What does the public discourse say?

Researchers analyzed 416 news articles to uncover dominant frames on aging issues, including elder abuse in the US news media. They also reviewed 176 advocacy materials to uncover narratives and frames in use by organizations working on aging and elder abuse.

### What frames shift thinking?

To identify effective ways to talk about elder abuse, researchers developed and systematically tested alternative messages. There were two interrelated streams of prescriptive research: one on aging and older adults more generally, and one specifically on elder abuse. We include both streams of research below, as they were drawn on to inform the recommendations that follow. Researchers used the following three methods to explore, winnow, and refine possible reframes:

- On-the-street interviews, which involve rapid, face-to-face testing of frame elements for their ability to prompt productive and robust understandings of key issues around elder abuse. Two sets of interviews—a total of 85—were conducted in 2015 and 2016. Some of the interviews covered issues of elder abuse and processes of aging more generally.
- A series of experimental surveys, involving a representative sample of 10,300 respondents, were conducted to test the effects of exposure to a variety of frames on public understanding, attitudes, and support for programs and policies.
- A series of qualitative tests probed the effectiveness of some frame elements with the public (n=60).

All told, more than 10,400 people from across the United States were included in this research on elder abuse and aging.

# Challenges in Public Thinking

Before designing communications on a complex social issue like elder abuse, it is helpful to appreciate the specific ways in which public understanding complicates the communications process. In this section, we discuss the most prevalent “cultural models”—or deeply held cognitive shortcuts used to make sense of new information<sup>3</sup>—that ordinary Americans rely on when asked to think about elder abuse. When people don’t know much about how an issue works, advocates need framing strategies to build conceptual understanding quickly and accurately. When strong conceptual models *do* exist, but are at odds with research and evidence, advocates need 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 the expert consensus is therefore key 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 expert and public understanding of elder abuse. (For more detail on the gaps between and overlaps in public and expert perspectives on elder abuse, see [“You Only Pray Someone Will Step In’: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Elder Abuse in America.”](#))

## How salient is elder abuse?

### Priority problem vs. off the radar

While experts view elder abuse as a priority social issue and a significant problem facing older people, the public does not. Elder abuse is not on the public’s radar. Despite the prevalence of elder abuse (roughly 10 percent of older people are estimated to experience it at some point), the public is largely unaware of its scope or significance. Elder abuse rarely comes to mind when members of the public think about the challenges that older people face. When pushed, people *are* able to think and talk about elder abuse. They do so by drawing on and bringing together well-established understandings of “older people” and “abuse.” FrameWorks refers to this way of thinking as the *Elder + Abuse* model.

The *Elder + Abuse* model provides a useful, but challenging, starting point for effective communications about elder abuse. On one hand, communicators can quickly boost the salience of the issue and generate public concern. Drawing on familiar understandings of “abuse,” people readily identify physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect and, to a lesser extent, financial exploitation as types of elder abuse, and—most importantly—quickly condemn such behaviors. These understandings align with experts’ perspectives.

On the other hand, other assumptions about “older people” and “abuse” that people draw on to think about elder abuse pose problems for communicators and prevent people from accessing aspects of the expert view. When people think of older people as victims of abuse, this reinforces their assumption that older people are vulnerable and helpless, which ultimately fuels fatalistic attitudes. We discuss this fatalism in greater detail below, as it is a primary challenge in communicating about elder abuse. In addition, people assume that sexual abuse has to do with sexual desire and, because they think of older

people as nonsexual, they have difficulty thinking about this type of elder abuse. As a result, members of the public do not think of sexual abuse as a form of elder abuse. In these ways, the *Elder + Abuse* model poses challenges for communicators.

## Why does elder abuse happen?

### Societal structures vs. individual moral deficits

While experts recognize the role of individual behaviors, they focus equal, if not more, attention on a set of structural causes of elder abuse. From this expert perspective, elder abuse is a *social* problem; it is the result of how our society structures interactions and provides resources and supports. Experts emphasize the ways in which our social system puts people in positions to commit abuse and leaves others susceptible to experiencing it. Experts also contend that if we understand and systematically study where our social supports and policies fall short, we can adjust and supplement them to prevent elder abuse.

The public does not think about the structural causes of elder abuse and instead employs highly individualized ways of thinking about why elder abuse occurs. FrameWorks researchers call this the *Spotlight on Individuals* model. When members of the public think about the causes of elder abuse, they focus almost exclusively on character and personality traits of either the person who commits elder abuse or the person who has experienced it. People reason that elder abuse is the result of moral failures of the person who has committed abuse. They are assumed to be selfish, greedy, or, in the case of elder sexual abuse, “sickos.” These types of explanations make it difficult for people to recognize how mental health or substance use issues may increase the likelihood of abuse. Furthermore, when people focus on individual characteristics, traits, and intentions to explain elder abuse, they border on victim-blaming by assuming that older people can be frustrating to deal with and difficult to manage. Or they reason that abuse is a form of intergenerational “payback”—a way for children to take revenge against parents who abused or mistreated them when they were young. This way of thinking—the narrow focus on individual traits and morals—obscures the role that environmental and systemic factors play in causing elder abuse. A major challenge for communicators is thus to broaden people’s view of elder abuse beyond the people who are immediately involved and help people understand the social contexts in which elder abuse is more or less likely to occur.

The public *does* have access to one particular way of understanding structural forces related to elder abuse, but this way of thinking has mixed implications. At times, the public draws on the *Modern Life Is the Problem* model, which attributes elder abuse to deep shifts that have occurred in American life over the past few generations. Pointing to cultural changes in family life and work, the public believes that our society today pushes people who care for older adults to their emotional limits and understands how social stressors might contribute to elder abuse. According to this way of thinking, nursing homes are an unfortunate necessity of modern life, where everyone works and family members no longer live in close proximity to one another. People assume that nursing home staff care less than family members about older people and are thus more likely to abuse them. In addition, there are times when members of the public see elder abuse as a result of larger cultural shifts that have led to a general devaluation of older people.

These ways of thinking provide a more contextual, societal view of elder abuse and better align with expert thinking about both caregiver stress as experienced by families and the cultural devaluation of older people. These models nevertheless lead to fatalistic attitudes. According to this line of thinking, if elder abuse is a feature of modern life, there is little that can be done to prevent or address it; after all, we can't go back in time. The challenge for communicators is to find ways to build on the social dimensions of this way of thinking while countering its strong senses of fatalism.

## How should older people be engaged and addressed?

### Subjects to empower vs. objects of care

As FrameWorks has found in its broader research on aging,<sup>4</sup> the public has both “ideal” and “real” models of aging. People are capable of aspirational views of aging and think about it as a process of gaining wisdom and attaining greater freedom and fulfillment. Yet more frequently, people view aging as a process of deterioration, decline, and increasing dependency. The topic of elder abuse strongly cues this negative *Deterioration* model of aging. While experts acknowledge that older age can include distinctive vulnerabilities, they emphasize that aging is different for different people and is influenced by a wide variety of social factors. Moreover, they do not equate aging with decline.

The assumption that people who experience elder abuse are deteriorating, dependent, and helpless activates the related model of *Paternalism*. While the public believes that elder abuse is not right and should be combatted, people consistently treat older people as objects to be cared for and protected rather than as subjects to be empowered and engaged. These paternalistic attitudes produce patronizing views of older people and lead to a collective inability to hear, much less amplify, the voices of older people. *Paternalism* makes it difficult for the public to understand the importance of engaging older adults as full participants in their communities and of building rich and supportive relationships with them—core principles of the expert consensus of how to address elder abuse. This way of thinking limits public consideration of a range of solutions to prevent and address elder abuse.

Although *Paternalism* is a dominant model, members of the public *are* capable of thinking of older adults as people whose voices must be heard and who must be consulted about their situation and care. While clearly not as strong or dominant a way of thinking, advocates must activate and expand this *Elders as Agents* model to help people recognize that combatting elder abuse requires treating older people as equal subjects in society rather than as objects of care.

## Who is responsible for dealing with elder abuse?

### Society vs. everyone/no one

Experts and the public superficially agree that we are *all* responsible for preventing elder abuse. Yet beneath this superficial agreement lies a deeper gap. Experts argue that society is collectively responsible for preventing and responding to elder abuse through our social institutions. When members of the public say that “everyone” is responsible, they mean that all individuals are responsible for doing



something about elder abuse *if it comes up in their lives*. According to the *Everyone's Responsible/No One's Responsible* model, responsibility is limited to taking steps when we see elder abuse happen. Responsibility is not assigned to “we the people” but to each of us individually. No one is assigned responsibility for fixing the problem within society as a whole. This leaves a vacuum of responsibility at the societal level and places collective solutions out of view.

## Can anything be done about elder abuse?

### Meaningful solutions vs. nothing much

Experts point to a range of specific solutions to address elder abuse, such as funding and reform of Adult Protective Services departments, strengthening community supports and human services, instituting multidisciplinary teams to address elder abuse, funding research into elder abuse, and more. By contrast, the public assumes that little can be done to prevent elder abuse, which is fueled by the *Deterioration* model and the assumption that vulnerability to abuse is part and parcel of the aging process. Furthermore, the *Everyone's Responsible/No One's Responsible* model leaves people unable to identify an agent responsible for and capable of fixing the problem. Finally, the *Modern Life Is the Problem* model roots elder abuse in inevitable aspects of modern life. When coupled with Americans' general assumption that the government is incompetent and unable to solve difficult social problems,<sup>5</sup> these cultural models fuel a deep sense that nothing can be done to stop elder abuse in American society.

## What should be done about elder abuse?

### Systemic solutions vs. individual solutions

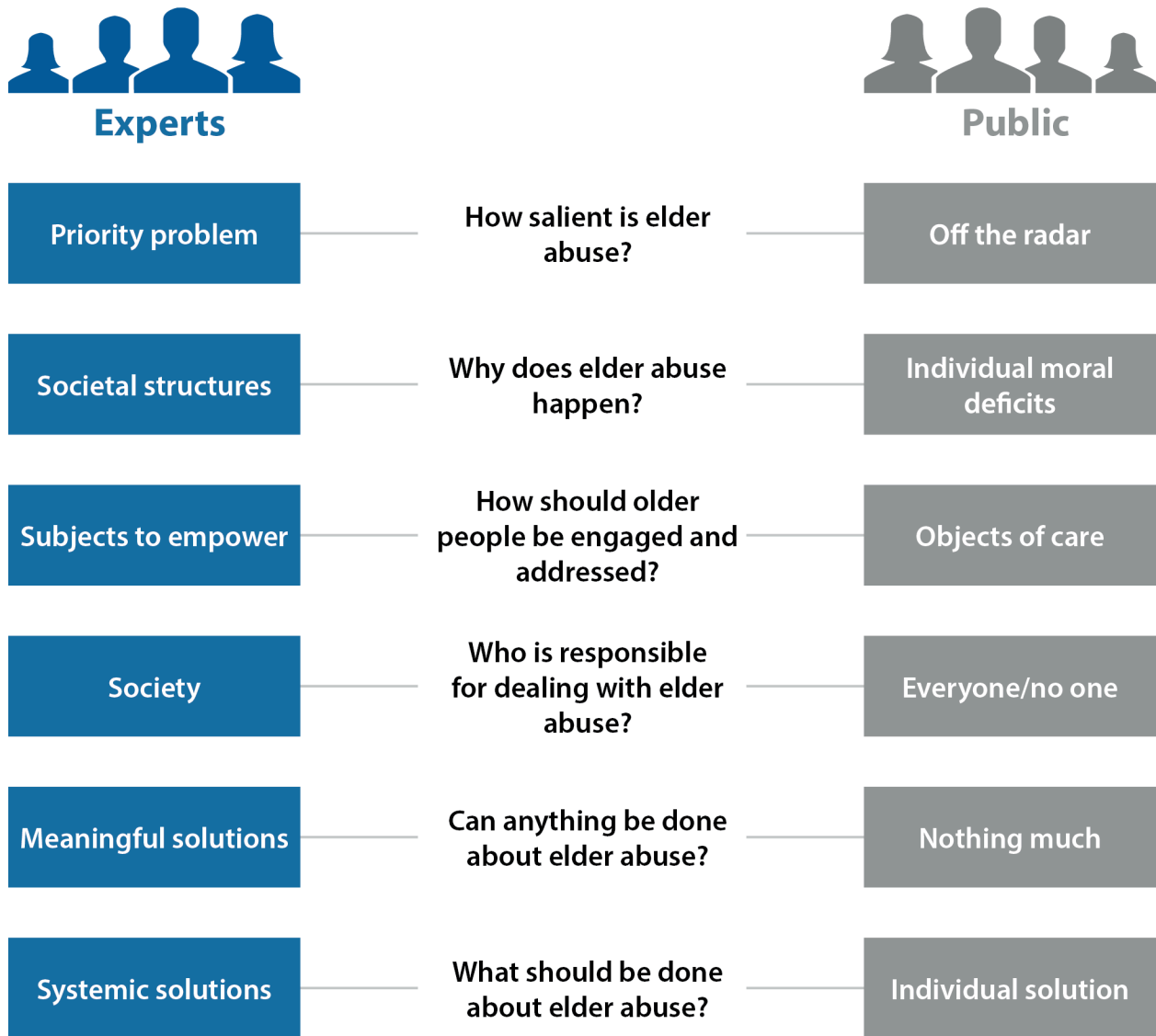
While the public is fatalistic about the possibility of reducing elder abuse in American society, people *do* want to take some steps to address the problem. Influenced by the *Paternalism* model (the idea that older adults are helpless), members of the public believe that the best response to elder abuse is better surveillance. When asked how to address the problem, people recommend screening people employed to care for older adults, using technology to monitor people who care for older adults, and encouraging friends and neighbors to check in on older people. The public also believes that education and public awareness campaigns might help to change behavior among people who commit abuse and prevent abuse.

The solutions that the public can see are thus highly individual and unable to address the larger issue. They are Band-Aid solutions to a deep social problem. They center on the actions that well-positioned individuals (such as nursing home directors or neighbors) can take rather than on collective remedies. The public's inability to see the broader picture and the systemic context within which elder abuse occurs limits their ability to recognize and support systems-level changes. A reframing strategy must, then, bring systems into view and connect them to acts of abuse. This will enable people to see that wide-scale institutional change is essential to addressing elder abuse.

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

Figure 2:

# Mapping the Gaps



## Redirections

To elevate the issue of elder abuse, communicators need framing strategies that can dislodge unproductive cultural models and open up new, more productive ways of thinking. Given the challenges posed by public understandings of elder abuse, and the role of policy in addressing it, reframing this issue will require multiple communications strategies and frame elements that can be deployed for specific purposes.

The power of narrative can be harnessed to amplify the effects of discrete frame elements. An effective social issue narrative doesn't select the beginning, middle, and end on a whim, or for a pleasing literary effect. Rather, it fills in the chapters strategically and based on evidence. An effective, evidence-based story builds on knowledge of where people get stuck when they attempt to follow experts' logic, where they are likely to dismiss or misinterpret evidence, and where they are missing concepts necessary to develop informed positions on the issue. FrameWorks calls this type of overarching meta-narrative 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—and what's going wrong? What should we do to move forward?* By filling in these blanks systematically and consistently, and looking to evidence about what works and what does not, a field can advance public understanding of an issue. To arrive at a *Core Story of Elder Abuse* 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. (See the text below for more detail on research design and methods.)

### Research Methods

Which frame “works”? That’s an empirical question. To answer it, FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments that tested the effects of different frame elements on communicating expert perspectives on elder abuse. The frame elements included different ways of using values, explanatory metaphors, narratives, and solutions. To determine the effects of alternative frames, researchers first created short messages (illustrated below) that incorporated one or more frame elements. From a large, nationally representative sample of Americans, a survey experiment randomly assigned participants to different message conditions and then asked them to complete a survey probing their knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences about elder abuse.

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

A frame “works” when it leads to a desired communications outcome. To determine the effects of different frame elements, researchers tested alternative frames head to head and looked to see which messages shifted attitudes in positive directions and increased support for target policies.

Scales	Sample Questions
Prevalence & Priority	How much of a priority should it be to reduce elder abuse in the United States? ( <i>Not a priority, a low priority, a medium priority, a high priority, a very high priority</i> ).
Collective Efficacy	As a society, how realistic is it that we can prevent elder abuse? ( <i>Not at all realistic, slightly realistic, somewhat realistic, moderately realistic, highly realistic</i> ).
Policy Support	Policies should be changed to provide much greater support for those who care for older people. ( <i>Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree</i> ).
Connection between Cause and Solution	<p>Providing community-based care during the day that allows an older person to continue living at home would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reduce elder abuse by providing assistance to family caregivers and decreasing their stress.</li> <li>b. Increase elder abuse by exposing older people to hired personnel who might abuse them.</li> <li>c. Have no effect on rates of elder abuse.</li> </ul>

**What frame works?**

*Use the Structure of Justice narrative as the overarching story*

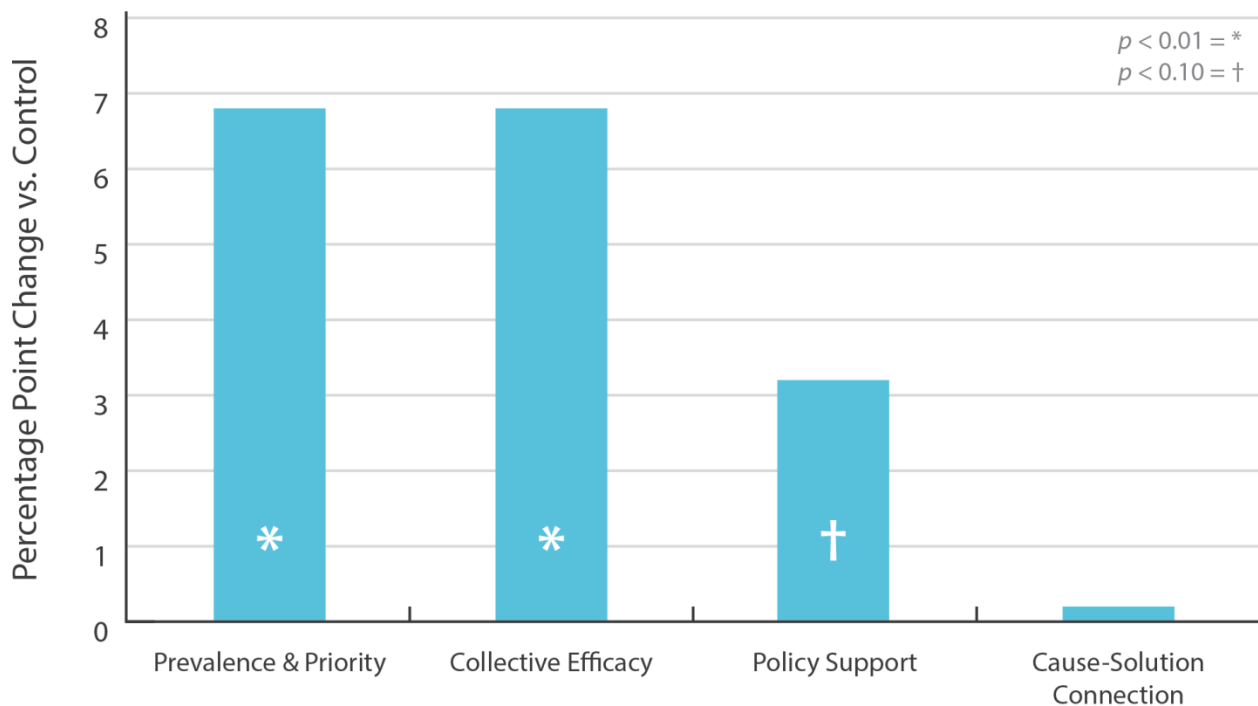
FrameWorks research yields a clear, overarching recommendation for effectively communicating about elder abuse to improve public understanding of this issue and generate public will to address it. Communicators should adopt a narrative strategy that frames elder abuse as a social justice issue, explains how our current social structure allows elder abuse to happen, and demonstrates how we can restructure our communities to more effectively prevent and address elder abuse. The *Structure of Justice* narrative comprises specific components—a value, an explanatory metaphor, an individual case, and a solutions explanation—that are highly effective in generating a deeper understanding of elder abuse and cultivating support for policy solutions.

As Figure 4 shows, the *Structure of Justice* narrative is highly effective in shifting public attitudes, building understanding, and increasing policy support. The narrative is also highly effective in generating a sense of

collective efficacy—the belief that society *can* effectively prevent and address elder abuse by taking the right steps. This narrative increases efficacy by 6.9 percentage points relative to the control narrative, a large effect for a study of this type. It is important to note that differences in survey responses of this magnitude signify a big effect.

Participants were exposed to messages for a brief period of time, but those messages produced major differences in how people understand elder abuse and their willingness to support policy change. Furthermore, all effects were statistically significant, meaning that the relationship was not caused by random chance. This finding is also very important given the public’s fatalistic attitudes about elder abuse. The narrative also generates large increases in accurate understandings of the prevalence of elder abuse and in judgments about its priority as a social issue. It also builds support for key policies related to elder abuse.

**Figure 4: Effects of the Structure of Justice Narrative**



The narrative did *not* increase understanding of the connection between the causes of, and solutions to, elder abuse. However, it is important to note that Figure 4 shows the results of an abridged version of the *Structure of Justice* narrative, which offered a very brief explanation of the structural causes and systemic solutions that can prevent and address this problem. As we discuss below, when these parts of the narrative are elaborated on, the message substantially increases understanding of the connections between causes and solutions.

Figure 5 summarizes the order and elements of the *Structure of Justice* narrative. Below, we review each element and discuss its contribution to the overall narrative strategy.

**Figure 5: Elements of the Structure of Justice Narrative**

## I. What is at stake?

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### **Justice**

Use the value of *Justice* to promote collective responsibility for preventing and addressing elder abuse.

## II. How does it work?

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### **Social Structures**

Use the *Social Structure* explanatory metaphor to explain how social supports prevent elder abuse.

## III. How to include individual cases of abuse?

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### **Structure of Justice**

Embed individual cases within the *Structure of Justice* narrative.

## IV. What should we do?

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### **Explanatory Chains**

Use *explanatory chains* to illustrate how to prevent and address elder abuse.

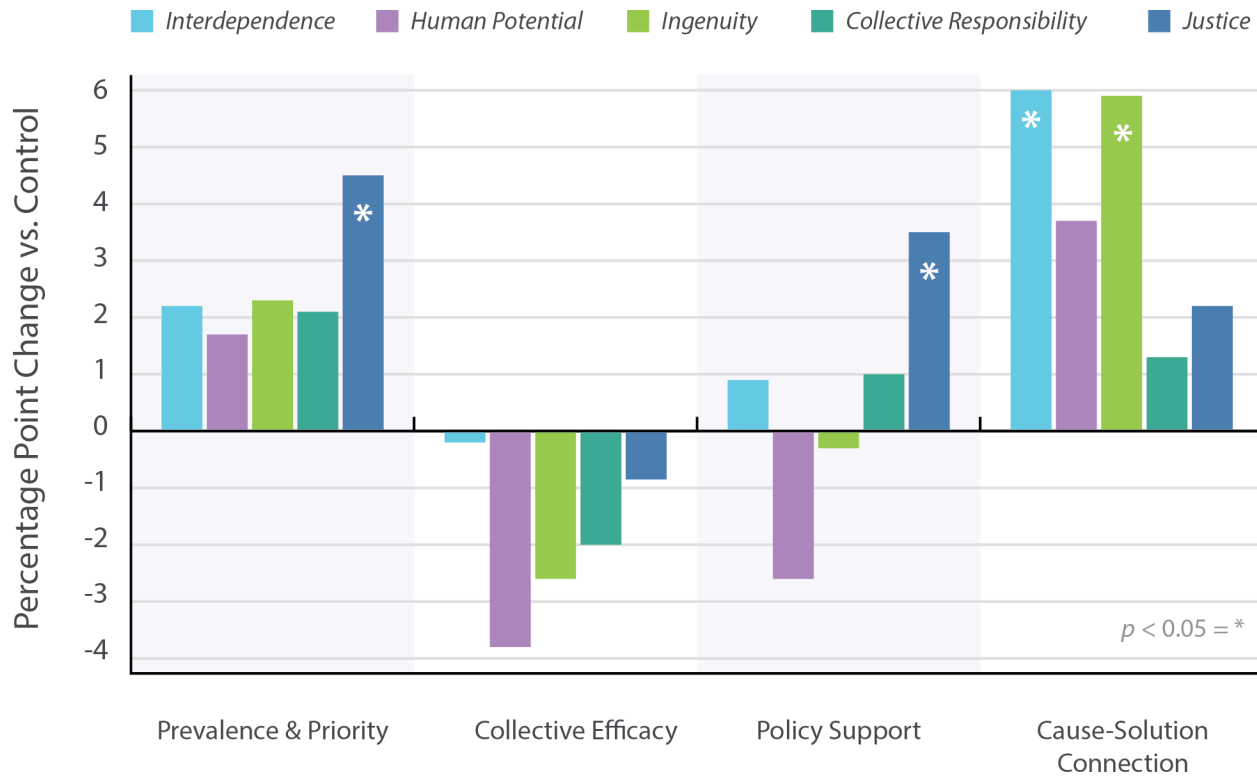
## What is at stake?

Use the value of *Justice* to promote a sense of collective responsibility for addressing and preventing elder abuse.

Values are enduring beliefs that orient individuals' attitudes and behavior to a social problem. Effective values are the basis for appeals that pull audiences' reactions in desirable directions.<sup>6</sup> In the *Structure of Justice* narrative, appealing to specific values establishes the collective stakes of failing to address elder abuse.

In controlled testing, the value of *Justice* proved effective in shifting people's perceptions about elder abuse, generating more accurate assessments of the prevalence of elder abuse and its priority as a social issue, and increased support for policies designed to address it. Of the five values tested (*Interdependence*, *Human Potential*, *Ingenuity*, *Collective Responsibility*, and *Justice*) *Justice* produced the broadest gains, yielding large, statistically significant increases on two of four outcome scales (see Figure 6).<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 6: Effects of Values**



Given these results, we recommend that communicators consistently emphasize the value of *Justice*. The value appeals to the American principle that “all people are created equal.” It argues that when our communities place older people at higher risk for abuse, we are not living up to those ideals. Framing elder abuse as a social justice issue means asserting the fundamental equality of older adults. By stressing that older adults are equal members of our society, this value inoculates against the *Paternalism* cultural model, which prevents the public from recognizing the importance of engaging older adults as full participants in society. It situates older people as equal, active, and important participants in communities, which makes people more receptive to solutions designed to prevent social isolation through greater integration into their communities. A sample iteration of the value follows:

“Creating a just society includes treating older people as equal members and making sure we are all connected to our communities as we age, so that we can prevent and address elder abuse.”

Communicators should emphasize the following key components when using the *Justice* value:

1. **Refer to our shared belief in justice and equal treatment for all people, regardless of age, and inoculate against the tendency to see older people as “others.”** *We believe in a just society that recognizes that all people are equal. No matter how old we are, we are entitled to be treated as full members of our communities.*
2. **Demonstrate that current policies do not treat older people as equal members of our communities, which increase the risk of elder abuse.** *We need policies that connect people to our communities at all stages of life. But our current policies increase social isolation. This puts older people at greater risk of neglect and abuse. It means all members of our society are not truly equal.*
3. **Connect initiatives to prevent and address elder abuse to the ability to fulfill our commitment to a just and equal society.** *Our communities should be set up to prevent and immediately address elder abuse. This is what justice looks like.*

## How does it work?

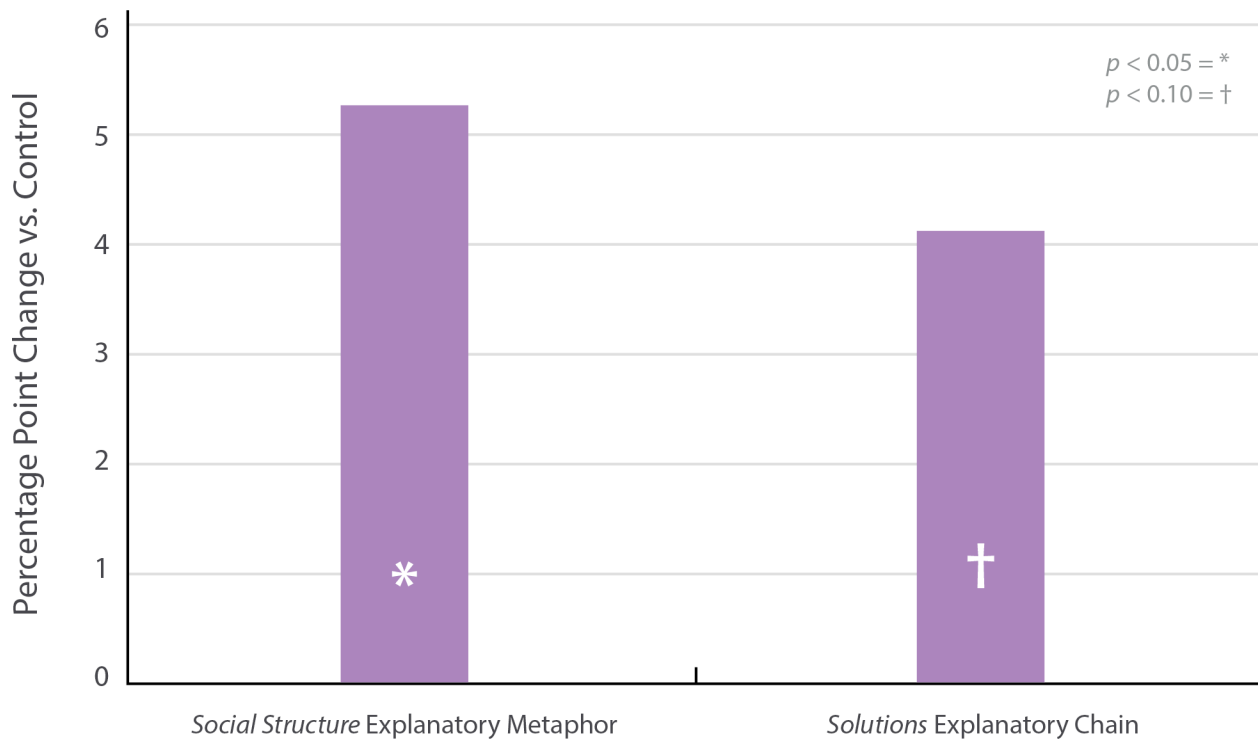
Use the *Social Structure* explanatory metaphor and use explanatory chains to explain how social supports and relationships prevent elder abuse.

As noted previously, Americans understand the causes of, solutions to, and responsibility for elder abuse in highly individualistic terms. FrameWorks investigated whether it was possible to generate a more systemic understanding of causes, solutions, and responsibility through the use of explanatory metaphors—linguistic devices that help people think and talk about a complex concept in new ways. By comparing an abstract or unfamiliar idea to something concrete and familiar, explanatory metaphors make information easier to understand. In short, they change how the public understands social issues. Explanatory chains, meanwhile, clarify the causal links between elements, helping people connect the dots from problem to solution.

Our experimental survey (see Figure 7) demonstrated that metaphors and explanatory chains play an important role in reframing elder abuse. The *Social Structure* metaphor is highly effective in building a more systemic understanding of elder abuse and helping people see how a network of interconnected services and supports can prevent elder abuse and address it quickly and decisively when it happens.



**Figure 7: Effect of the Social Structure Explanatory Metaphor and Explanatory Chain on Connection between Cause and Solution Scale**



At its core, the *Social Structure* metaphor communicates that a building will collapse if its foundation is weak and if it lacks reinforcing supports. In the same way, we need to build a social structure that includes integrated services and programs so older people do not experience elder abuse. This metaphor is sticky (easy to say and memorable) and understandable at a basic level. As such, it is a powerful way to frame explanations of social services and supports, which are often difficult for the public to see, especially when they relate to elder abuse.

The following example uses the metaphor in its most general form:

“Our society is like a building: It needs strong supports and secure beams to remain strong. We need solid “social” beams in our society so that we can all participate fully in our communities as we age and live free from abuse.”

Be sure to emphasize the following points when using this metaphor:

1. **Preventing and addressing elder abuse requires an integrated team of professionals.** *A social structure needs support beams that are interconnected, securely joined, and frequently maintained. If one beam is weak or missing, the structure won't stand.*
2. **Family members cannot be entirely responsible for preventing elder abuse.** *One beam alone cannot support a strong building; likewise, individuals can't single-handedly prevent abuse. We need a broader social structure to support families and others who care about and for older adults. An individual beam is important, but a strong building needs a lot of strong beams.*
3. **Services and supports must be continually improved.** *Many support beams are already in place. We can add new beams to the existing structure to strengthen it. For the best results, we need to tighten the bolts and replace weakened beams.*
4. **Elder abuse is a difficult problem that affects us all—but solutions are available.** *Elder abuse impacts everyone, so we should all work to build and remodel systems to prevent it.*

Use this metaphor as a starting point for discussions about social supports and policy initiatives that prevent and address elder abuse. Qualitative research shows that it helps people see how services like health care, public transportation, volunteer services, community centers, and law enforcement are important support beams in our social structure. It reinforces the idea that preventing and addressing elder abuse requires an integrated team approach—an approach that is practical, actionable, and necessary. Within the fuller narrative, the *Social Structure* metaphor allows people to think about elder abuse as a problem we can solve through coordinated, collective action. For further guidance about how to use this metaphor in more specific contexts, please see the [Elder Abuse Toolkit](#) that accompanies this MessageMemo.

## How to include individual cases of abuse?

**Embed them within the *Structure of Justice* narrative.**

Advocates understand the need to raise public awareness about elder abuse. The research presented here confirms the importance of this communications task. This issue is a “cognitive hole” in the public mind; most people don't know what it is or what it means. Without introduction and priming, people are generally unaware of the prevalence and scope of the problem. One of the strategies that advocates in the field are already using to increase public concern about elder abuse is to profile older people who have been abused.

To investigate how to best use individual instances of abuse in an overall communications strategy, FrameWorks tested two types of messages: (1) a story that profiled the experiences of Maria, an older woman who was neglected by her relatives; and (2) the same story embedded into the overall *Structure of Justice* narrative.

As Figure 8 illustrates, a narrative that incorporates an individual case to illustrate a broader systemic story is highly effective in shifting people’s sense of the prevalence and salience of the problem. One critical note: Advocates must *not* use individual cases on their own, as substitutes for the overall systemic story. When Maria’s story was embedded in the *Structure of Justice* narrative, it increased the public’s sense of efficacy about addressing elder abuse by almost 7 points—which is, again, a large effect—and increased support for policy solutions as well. On its own, however, Maria’s story did not achieve these goals.

### **From Frame to Message: An Example of How to Tell the Structure of Justice Narrative**

In our country, we believe in justice for all. Yet we fail to live up to this promise, especially for older people. We can, however, work together to build a just society. But we should approach it as we might plan to construct a building.

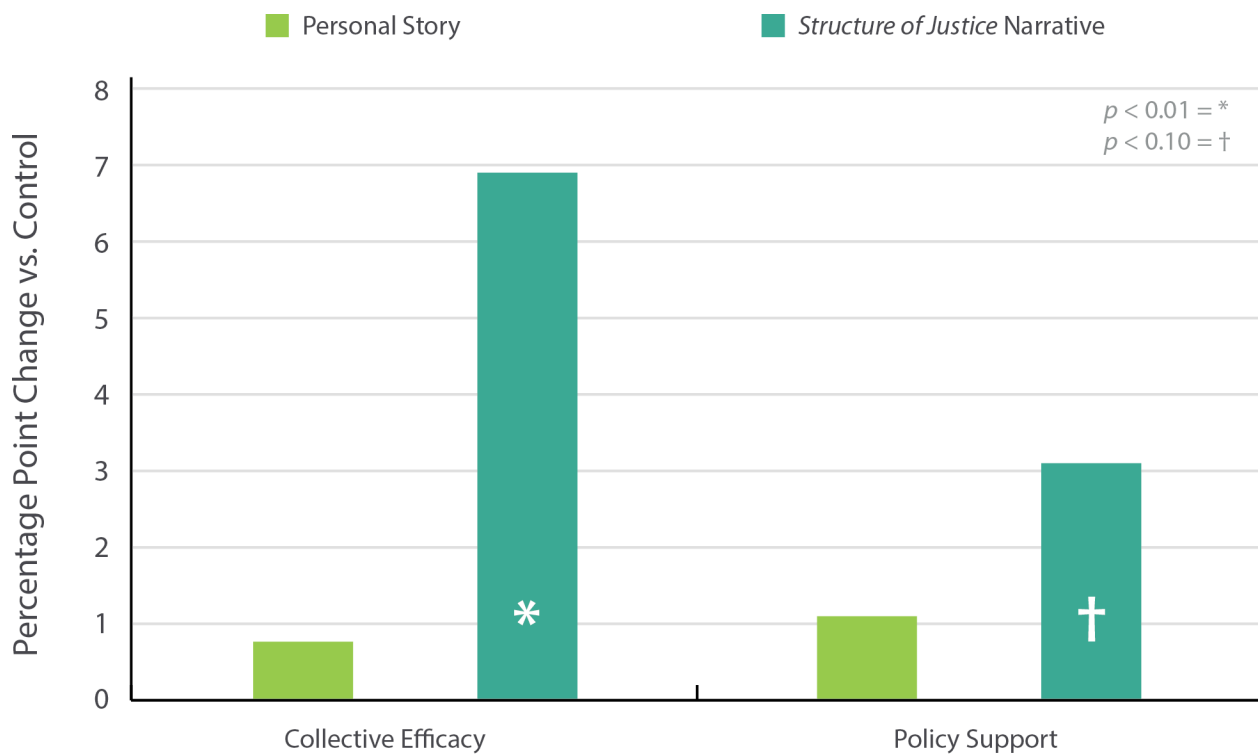
The first step is to put in place load-bearing beams to support its structure and safeguard its inhabitants. To create a just society, we need beams like services and programs that integrate older people into our communities. If these beams are in place and continually maintained, older people will have more opportunities to stay connected. But if we don’t have these kinds of beams, or if they are weak, older people will likely experience social isolation, which increases the likelihood of abuse and neglect.

Maria, 77, reminds us why we need strong support beams for older people. Maria has lived alone in her apartment ever since her husband died three years ago. Her local community center closed last year, so she rarely has opportunities to interact with other people. Sometimes, she goes days on end without speaking to anyone. Her son, who lives an hour away, used to stop by twice a week to help with household chores and bring groceries. As his work responsibilities have increased, however, he has not been able to visit regularly. On the rare occasions when he does visit, he is overwhelmed by his responsibility as his mother’s sole social support, and he becomes frustrated with her. Maria lacks regular and positive social interactions with a variety of people; as a result, her living conditions and health have deteriorated, and she is becoming malnourished. She is not alone. Millions of older people in our country are socially isolated and at greater risk of neglect and abuse.

The good news is we can better support people like Maria and reduce stress on family caregivers. Senior centers, community institutions, and friendly visitor programs, for example, connect older people with others and help them participate in community life. If we build a stronger social structure around older people, we can reduce social isolation and overcome elder abuse and neglect. We can create a more just society for Maria and for all older people across our country. We can live up to our national promise of justice for all.

Alone, the individual story encourages people to ask, “What can we do about Maria?” When Maria’s story is embedded in the *Structure of Justice* narrative, however, it leads to questions like: “How do we change our society so that this situation doesn’t occur to Maria—or other similarly situated older people?” What is the difference between these two approaches? First, embedding the individual case in the *Structure of Justice* narrative explains the causal factors that create higher risks for neglect. Without discussing social context, people will likely demonize Maria’s relatives rather than encouraging a collective sense of responsibility for addressing the problem. Second, embedding the case in a larger narrative helps people see systems-level solutions; the case by itself makes it hard for people to see these kinds of actions. Moreover, it leaves people ill-equipped to think about solutions that go beyond threat of punitive action.

**Figure 8: Effects of Messages with Stories about Individual Cases**



Individual stories contribute to an effective narrative, but their power does not derive from vivid and tragic details. (We address the potential pitfalls of this approach in the *Communications Traps* section below.) They work in this context because they crystallize the societal risk factors that leave older adults more vulnerable to abuse as well as the systems-level solutions that address the problem. If individual cases are not embedded in a larger social story, the public will likely see elder abuse as a private rather than a public problem, dismiss the importance of preventative approaches, or simply fail to imagine collective solutions. The type of solutions that are put forward, as well as explanations of them, are critical, which brings us to the final dimension of the narrative strategy: explanation.

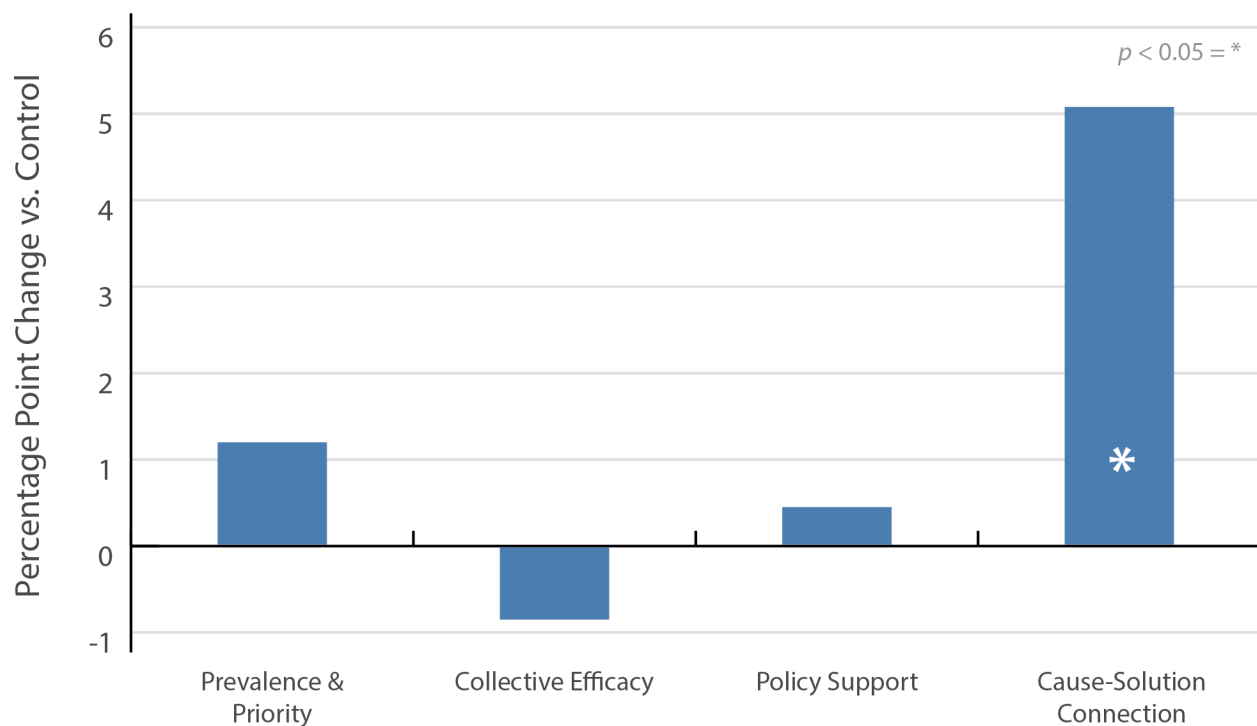
## What should we do?

Use explanatory chains to illustrate how to prevent and address elder abuse.

The public is very concerned about elder abuse when it is brought to their attention. People nevertheless struggle to identify people outside of the immediate family who they think should be responsible for addressing abuse. They also struggle to think about how we as a society can collectively take action. People are likely to become fatalistic about the possibility of decreasing rates of elder abuse. More specifically, people have difficulty seeing *how* the services that help address elder abuse actually work. Without this knowledge, the public is likely to default to unproductive patterns of thinking about this issue.

To spark more productive conversations, communicators should spell out the details of elder abuse, how it works, and how it can be addressed. Explanatory chains cement the power of the narrative; they give people a concrete understanding of what preventive services and supports do, how they work, and how they can prevent and quickly address elder abuse. Figure 9 shows how explanatory chains change public perceptions regarding elder abuse. Communicators can use them to help the public connect problems to solutions and to increase people's sense that realistic solutions exist to combat elder abuse. The public, for example, recognizes that *social isolation* is a problem that increases the risk of elder abuse. But people don't understand how public transportation, community centers, and other resources can address this problem.

**Figure 9: Effects of Explanatory Chain**



Explanatory chains are effective at making these links because they:

- **Connect underlying causes and visible problems.** *When older people are socially isolated, the risk of elder abuse increases because no one is around to detect it or assist if it occurs.*
- **Start a few steps back from the problem the communicator wishes to highlight.** *Social supports can help. For example, when public transportation is easily accessible, older people can get to places like grocery stores, community centers, and doctors' offices. When older people can access these resources, they're able to socialize with people, run errands, and get the services they need.*
- **Explain systems-level causes.** *When these supports are not in place, it is less likely that someone will notice if an older person is being abused or that survivors will be connected to health care providers or other professionals.*
- **Highlight collective solutions that are driven by structural changes.** *Safe and reliable public transportation reduces social isolation and helps prevent elder abuse.*

Social isolation is something the public understands but does not know how to solve. Explaining how it results from a lack of resources such as adequate public transportation enables the public to see how large-scale, well-run services keep us connected as we get older. But don't simply *tell* the public that these services exist; *explain* how they prevent problems like social isolation and, in turn, neglect and abuse. This explanatory chain illustrates societal-level risk factors for neglect—a form of elder abuse that the public doesn't easily understand.

## Communications Traps

Some frames ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. Strategic Frame Analysis® helps us identify—and circumvent—these traps. Communicators often fall into them because they are common and even logical. But our research shows they have negative cognitive effects on the public mind. For more detail on the research behind this analysis, see [“Aging, Agency, and Attribution of Responsibility: Shifting Public Discourse about Older Adults.”](#)

**The Tragic Story Trap.** To raise awareness of elder abuse, advocates might be tempted to tell vivid and tragic stories of older people who have been severely abused. On the face of it, this seems like an effective strategy to pull the public’s attention to the problem and galvanize people to address the issue. But watch out for this trap. While experts and advocates look to larger social and cultural patterns to explain why elder abuse occurs, the public sees the problem as resting within the minds, hearts, and actions of individuals. They don’t understand how elder abuse is shaped by larger social systems. Stories about individuals that do not incorporate social context deepen the public’s propensity to hold specific individuals—rather than social systems—responsible for the problem. Advocates must situate cases within a broader systemic narrative and explain how it connects to broader social contexts. This will enable people to see it not as an isolated event but as an illustration of a broader phenomenon in need of collective solutions.

**The Sympathy Trap.** Advocates tend to focus overwhelmingly on the problem, hew to crisis language and imagery, and exclude robust discussions of programs and policies that create more optimal outcomes for older Americans.<sup>8</sup> Advocates also rely on sympathy stories that depict older people in paternalistic ways: as vulnerable people who need to be guarded. Advocates must remember that sympathy does not necessarily or automatically lead to public support for policy change. These stories also fail to breakdown *Us vs. Them* thinking because older people are portrayed as a population apart from the rest of us—rather than as fully incorporated members of the community. As such, advocates must *explain* elder abuse and point to concrete solutions that prevent and address it while, at the same time, avoiding paternalistic language.

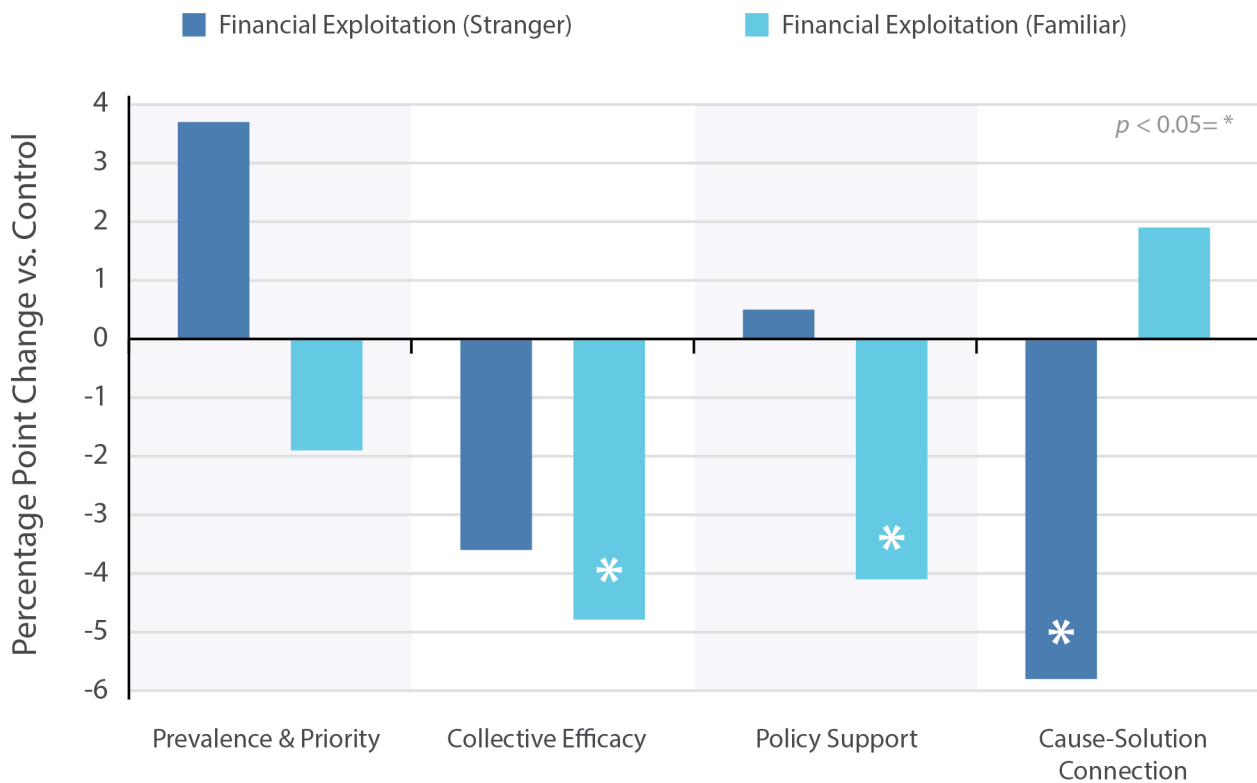
**The Financial Exploitation Trap.** Advocates against elder abuse often lead with a discussion about financial exploitation of older people. They do this to communicate that elder abuse comes in many forms and affects many different types of people. Because this subject is common in advocacy communications, FrameWorks investigated how it impacts public thinking and understanding. We tested two messages in a controlled experiment, one focusing on financial exploitation by strangers and another on financial exploitation by family members. These messages described financial exploitation as an example of elder abuse, explained why it happens, and presented arguments about what to do about it.

Figure 10 shows that the message involving strangers *decreased* public understanding of causes of, and solutions to, elder abuse. The message using family members fared even worse; it decreased people’s sense of collective efficacy in addressing elder abuse *and* their support for policies designed to prevent and

address it. Our qualitative research offers some possible explanations. First, people typically do not equate elder abuse with financial exploitation; as such, they likely struggle to move from financial exploitation to other types of elder abuse. Focusing on financial exploitation may in fact sideline other types of elder abuse. Second, people tend to see financial exploitation as the result of an individual's natural propensity toward greed, which is viewed as an unfortunate but unchangeable aspect of human nature. This kind of thinking leads to fatalism (indeed, how can we fix greed?), which explains why this example might decrease people's sense of collective efficacy.

Advocates and experts should, of course, talk about financial exploitation of older people. But we recommend leading with examples of neglect, or physical or emotional abuse when possible. People are more likely to understand these issues as examples of abuse and are more likely to think productively about it. If advocates and experts must talk about financial exploitation, they should embed this topic within the *Structure of Justice* narrative.

**Figure 10: Effects of Financial Exploitation Messages**





## Moving Forward

Americans simply don't think about elder abuse as a policy issue. This reality reveals both a risk and an opportunity. The risk is policy inertia: Unless advocates against elder abuse cultivate a more visible, more informed conversation about this issue, they will struggle to advance the systemic solutions they are seeking. They also have an opportunity: the rare chance to introduce an unfamiliar topic to the public and define it in a way that shapes the public discourse. Advocates already have their work cut out for them. They are working to implement policies to prevent and address elder abuse and ensuring that social supports are in place to support older people, family caregivers, and others. But advocates also recognize there is more to do. They understand the need to adopt a shared, strategic, and empirically based communications strategy. We offer this research as an important step toward that goal.



## 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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## Appendix A

The following research reports have been published by FrameWorks Institute (Washington, DC) as part of this inquiry.

**Aging, Agency, and Attribution of Responsibility: Shifting Public Discourse about Older Adults (2015) (PDF).** What stories do people have access to when they think about aging? This *Media Content and Field Frame Analysis* compares media and advocacy organizations' narratives about aging and older adults. It identifies six narratives that are regularly disseminated: the *Throwaway Generation*, *Vibrant Seniors*, *Independent Seniors*, *Aging Workers*, *Demographic Crisis*, and *Government Actions*. It compares differences in how advocates and media professionals tell each of these narratives and assesses the impacts each has on public thinking about aging. A central finding is that most information about aging in both media and advocacy is not organized as complete narratives, making these stories less likely to deepen public understanding. The report also addresses how to fill holes in promising narratives and avoid those that undermine understanding.

**"You Only Pray that Somebody Would Step In": Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Elder Abuse in America (2016).** This report represents the first step in a larger effort to reframe public understanding of elder abuse. Analyzing qualitative interview data, the report examines patterns of public thinking and compares the public's deep cultural understandings with the views of issue experts. Through this analysis, we find that the public struggles to see elder abuse as a societal problem that can and must be solved through collective action and public policy. The report concludes with initial recommendations for addressing this and other communication challenges.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Young, Stacy L., and Katheryn C. Maguire. "Talking about sexual violence." *Women and Language* 26, no. 2 (2003): 40.

<sup>2</sup> This work was funded by AARP, the American Federation for Aging Research, the American Geriatrics Society, the American Society on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, Grantmakers in Aging, the National Council on Aging, and the National Hispanic Council on Aging.

<sup>3</sup> Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). *Culture and cognition*. In D. Holland & N. Quinn, (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 3-40).

<sup>4</sup> Volmert, A., & Lindland, E. "You only pray that somebody would step in": *Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of elder abuse in America*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel and Susan Bales (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The Separate and Sketchy Worlds of Budgets and Taxes*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Rokeach, M. (1973). *The Nature of Human Values*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

<sup>7</sup> Two other values were effective in cultivating understanding of causes and solutions. We do not recommend these values because of their lack of effectiveness in helping people understand how and why elder abuse matters—the key task for a value. As we discuss above, the other elements of the narrative do not accomplish this task. It is vital that the value is effective on the scales that measure priority and support, as *Social Justice* is.

<sup>8</sup> O'Neil, M. & Haydon, A. (2015). *Aging, agency and attribution of responsibility: Shifting public discourse about older adults*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.